

The Digital Buddhism: Modern Decisive Moment in Sri Lankan Popular Buddhism

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Abstract:

Culture is a rich and comprehensive term that is dynamic and always developing rather than stagnant. Religion, a fundamental component of culture, includes beliefs, rituals, values, and a higher power that control human conduct and society's purpose. This paper attends to interpret the transformation of Sri Lankan Buddhism through the impact of digitalization. The study's fundamental research question is how to create a complete Digital Buddhism manifestation from popular Buddhism in a cultural anthropological background, and the main research objective is to provide a new definition for the modern popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka, impacted by digitization. As a qualitative exploratory research based on qualitative data, the interpretive paradigm was utilized by the researchers with a phenomenological research design. As a theoretical foundation, the first principle of digital anthropology (dialectic nature of digital culture) proposed by Daniel Miller and Heather Horst in 2012 was applied. Key cases from digital platforms pertaining to digital Vesak celebrations were purposively selected and critically analyzed to achieve the research objectives. According to the key findings of this research we concluded that the modern popular Buddhism of Sri Lanka promptly changing due to the impact of digitization and the existing cultural change can be examined through the principles of digital anthropology. As a conclusion of the research, we identified the prominent academic gap in contributing new knowledge in modern Sri Lankan Buddhism. This study paves the path for numerous new research subjects in humanities, social sciences, and etc.

Keywords: Buddhism, Dialectic, Digital, Popular Buddhism, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Religion and culture are two components of human civilization that are inextricably linked, with each influencing and developing the other in intricate and multidimensional ways. While religion and culture are independent ideas, their connection is such that they frequently merge to generate a collective identity, beliefs, and practices that characterize a certain community or group.

Buddhism, a significant global religion founded in ancient India has had a profound and long-lasting impact on the spiritual, cultural, and intellectual landscapes of Asia and beyond. Buddhism in Sri Lanka, also known as Theravāda Buddhism, is important and profoundly ingrained in the country's religious, cultural, and social material. The history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka may be traced back to the 3rd century BCE, when Emperor Ashoka's son, Arahant Mahinda, is thought to have introduced Buddhism to the island, leading to its widespread adoption. The island has a rich Buddhist legacy, including a distinct kind of monasticism and a sophisticated system of rites and ceremonies. The Pāli Canon, the fundamental scripture of Theravāda Buddhism, was preserved and written down in Sri Lanka, cementing the country's place in Buddhist literature history. Monasteries, stupas, and temples point the landscape, functioning as sites of religious practice and instruction. Buddhism's impact goes beyond religious borders, influencing Sri Lankan art, architecture, literature, and social norms. Buddhism is a strong political and cultural force in modern Sri Lanka, with Buddhism officially acknowledged as the state religion.

Religion and culture have always been inextricably linked parts of human civilization, profoundly impacting individuals and societies. Digitization and the fast expansion of technology have had a tremendous influence on both religion and culture in recent years, affecting the dynamics of how they interact and evolve.

Digitization has transformed religious practices and experiences in several ways. Online platforms and social media have become new spaces for religious communities to gather, share information, and engage in discussions. Religious organizations use websites and apps to stream services, deliver sermons, and provide resources for worship, study, and meditation. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of digital technology in maintaining religious

connections, as many faith communities turned to virtual platforms to conduct religious services when physical gatherings were restricted. Moreover, digital technology has made religious texts and teachings more accessible than ever, allowing individuals to explore different belief systems and engage in interfaith dialogue. This increased accessibility has contributed to a more informed and interconnected global religious landscape.

The study's key research topic is how to develop a complete Digital Buddhism manifestation from popular Buddhism in a cultural anthropological milieu. The general objective of the study is to give a new description for current popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka as it has been influenced by digitalization. To accomplish these objectives and find answers to the research question, we applied the theoretical aspects from digital anthropology. Digital Vesak celebrations were applied to analyze the applicability of the respective principle.

Dialectic is a key idea introduced by Fredrich Hegel throughout the nineteenth century. It is more of a set of principles than a technique. We can detect three inconsistencies using dialectic thinking: The phases of development are as follows:

- i. Thesis
- ii. Antithesis
- iii. Synthesis

A thesis causes its response to expand; an antithesis denies the thesis; and the friction between the two is governed by a synthesis. This dialectic thinking, according to Horst and Miller, may be seen in digital culture. Digital has the potential to improve the rational form of culture. We argue that the following dialectic nature in popular Buddhism may be identified through digital platforms.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative exploratory research based on qualitative data. We utilized interpretive paradigm and as a theoretical base, the first principle of digital anthropology, proposed by Miller and Horst (2012) was applied. Both primary

and secondary data were used and through purposively selected cases from digital platforms, we obtained primary data.

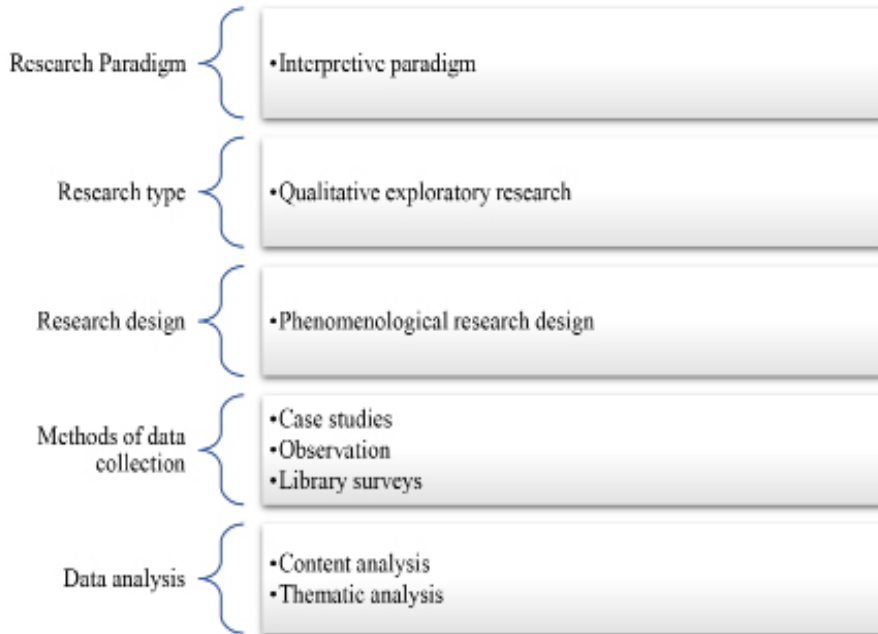


Figure 1: Methodological flow of the research

The first digital anthropological principle, which highlights the dialectic aspect of digital culture, emphasizes the dynamic and interactive link between digital technologies and the communities and cultures in which they are entrenched. This theory recognizes that digital culture is not a one-way, monolithic imposition of technology on society, but rather a dynamic interplay between the two, with one affecting and developing the other. Digital technologies reflect and build cultural values, norms, and practices in this dialectic connection.

Results and Discussions

Sri Lanka is a predominantly Buddhist country, and therefore, Buddhist festivals hold significant cultural and religious importance. These festivals and ceremonies in Sri Lanka play a vital role in the religious and cultural life of the country. They provide opportunities for Buddhists to express their devotion, engage in religious practices, and come together as a community. Walpola Rahula

(1956), Lynn de Silva (1974), Gananath Obeyesekere (1988) are some prominent scholars that studied about the Buddhist religious festivals through social scientific perspectives.

In this case we considered Vesak, the most important Buddhist festival in Sri Lanka, commemorating the birth, enlightenment, and parinirvāṇa of Gautama Buddha. Not only is Sri Lanka, Vesak the most holy day of utmost significance to Buddhists throughout the world. Therefore, Vesak commemorates, not only a physical birth, but also a spiritual birth, and a spiritual attainment, which every Buddhist must aspire to. Since the ancient periods, Vesak is celebrated in Sri Lanka on a large scale with great festivity. In May 1956 it received an added impetus when the 2500th anniversary of Buddhism (The Buddha Jayanti) was celebrated on a world-wide scale (Silva 1974, p. 159). According to Amarasekara (2019), these kinds of acts caused directly for the establishment of popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

A special feature of the festival is the erection of pandals (Torāṇa). Pandals in Vesak Day Sri Lanka serve as a visual representation of the life and teachings of the Buddha, allowing devotees and the public to connect with the essence of Buddhism. Pandals are to be found paintings depicting scenes from the life of Buddha? These pandals have an educative value and are a source of great inspiration to the Buddhist devotees. On traditional Vesak day of Sri Lanka, thousands go by foot, cart, bus or car from dusk to dawn witnessing these pandals and other decorative attractions (Silva 1974, p. 160). Dansalas, or free food stalls, are set up by individuals, community groups, and organizations during Vesak. These stalls offer free meals and refreshments to anyone who visits them. It is a way of practicing generosity and spreading goodwill among people. Sil or Sila campaigns are organized during Vesak, where devotees observe Sil, which refers to the practice of observing precepts and living a virtuous life for a specified period. Many Buddhists spend the day in meditation, reflecting on the teachings of the Buddha and striving to cultivate mindfulness and compassion. Buddhists flock to temples across the country to participate in religious ceremonies, offer prayers, and make offerings of flowers, incense, and lights. Temples are beautifully decorated, and devotees engage in chanting, meditation, and listening to sermons.

The Easter Sunday attacks, which occurred on April 21, 2019, in Sri Lanka, targeting churches and luxury hotels, had a profound impact on various aspects of society, including the celebration of Vesak. In the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks, the government and security forces implemented heightened security measures across the country. This included increased police presence, security checkpoints, and surveillance to ensure the safety of the public during religious festivities such as Vesak. The tightened security measures aimed to restore confidence and prevent any potential threats during the celebrations. The Easter Sunday attacks led to concerns about large public gatherings, including Vesak processions, pandals, and other communal activities. The tragic events prompted authorities to implement strict regulations and security protocols to ensure the safety of participants.

Although, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on various aspects of religious and cultural festivals worldwide, including Vesak. In Sri Lanka, the celebration of Vesak has been affected by the pandemic in various ways. The traditional festivities and practices have been altered or adapted to adhere to health guidelines and ensure public safety. The government has implemented restrictions on public gatherings and events, including Vesak processions, pandals, and communal activities. Large gatherings have been prohibited or limited to a small number of participants to prevent the spread of the virus. This has impacted the communal and festive atmosphere that is typically associated with Vesak. As a result of these socio-cultural changes in Sri Lanka, the real-world Vesak celebrations were evolved into digital space.

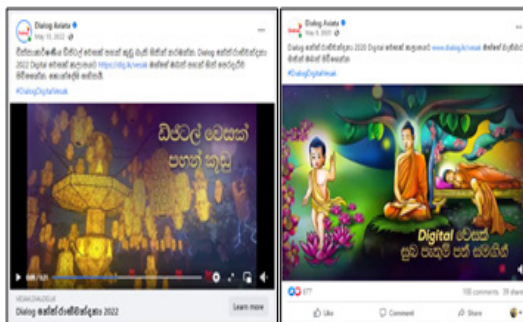


Figure 2: Dialog digital Vesak zones

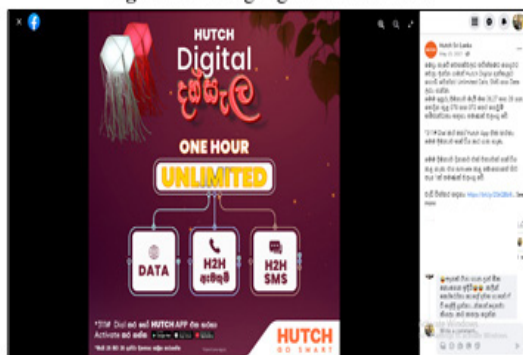


Figure 3: Hutch digital dansalas

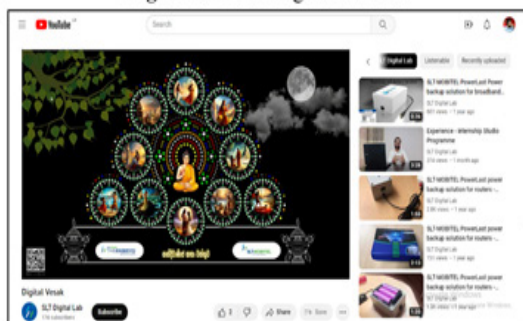


Figure 4: SLT digital Vesak pandal

Above mentioned cases were purposively utilized from digital platforms to analyze the 1st principle of digital anthropology. Vesak celebrations in Sri Lanka have taken different forms at different times. The cultural value of this tradition is changing in recent times with the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). The relationship between the 4IR and digital technology is significant and interconnected. Cultures are not fixed or unchanging but evolve and transform in response to various internal and external factors. Cultural change can occur through processes such as assimilation, acculturation, globalization, migration, and

the exchange of ideas. New ideas, technologies, and practices are integrated into existing cultural frameworks, leading to the emergence of hybrid or synthesized forms of culture. The impact of digitalization to the Vesak festive has been there for a long time in Sri Lanka, nonetheless the previously mentioned Easter attack and the COVID-19 situation intensified this aspect of the contribution. The Easter attack and the COVID-19 epidemic are two events that led to many social and cultural changes in Sri Lanka. The following flow chart can be used in investigating these phenomena with the first principle.

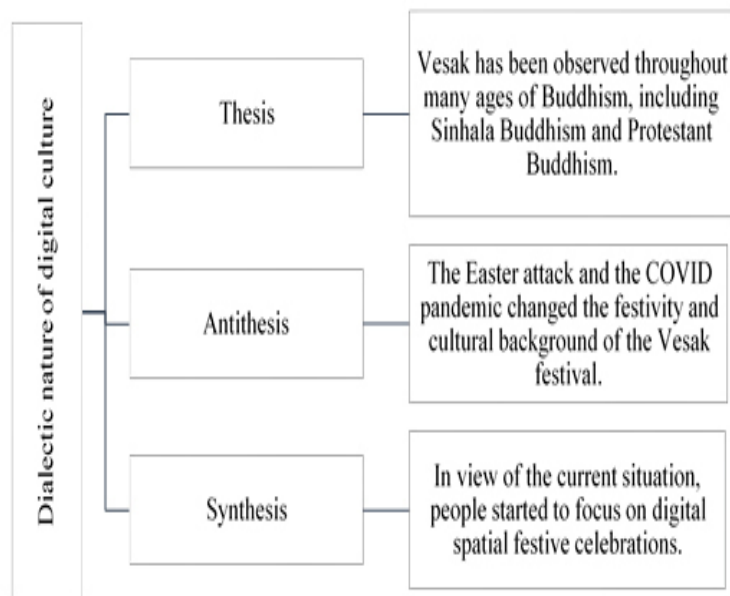


Figure 5: Dialectic nature of digital Vesak celebrations

The culture is dynamic. Digital has the ability to intensify the dynamic nature of culture. When considering the Vesak celebrations and its digital influence, there are some prominent characteristics that we can identify.

Digitized Vesak allow people to participate in the festivities from anywhere in the world through online platforms. Individuals can engage in virtual activities, share their experiences, and connect with others, irrespective of physical location or travel constraints. This online participation expands the reach and accessibility

of Vesak celebrations. Digital Vesak celebrations allow people to participate in the festivities from anywhere in the world through online platforms. Individuals can engage in virtual activities, share their experiences, and connect with others, irrespective of physical location or travel constraints. This online participation expands the reach and accessibility of Vesak celebrations. Digital platforms enable the live streaming of Vesak ceremonies and events, allowing individuals to witness and engage in real-time or recorded religious rituals and teachings. People can access these live streams through websites, social media, or dedicated applications, bridging geographical barriers and facilitating remote participation.

These practices provide opportunities for online Dhamma talks, discourses, and spiritual guidance. Buddhist organizations and temples offer virtual sessions where individuals can listen to teachings, learn about Buddhist principles, and seek guidance from revered monks or spiritual leaders. Digital platforms enable virtual Vesak exhibitions and art displays, showcasing Buddhist art, artifacts, and cultural elements. Through virtual tours or interactive galleries, individuals can explore and appreciate Vesak-related artworks, historical pieces, and cultural displays. This digital medium promotes cultural preservation, education, and engagement. Digitized Vesak leverage the power of social media platforms for engagement and sharing. People can post pictures, videos, and thoughts related to their Vesak celebrations, lantern designs, and cultural activities. Social media encourages virtual connections, interactions, and the formation of online communities centered on Vesak. It offer virtual workshops, demonstrations, and activities related to Vesak traditions and crafts. Participants can engage in activities such as lantern making, Vesak card designing, or flower arrangements through video tutorials or live sessions. These online workshops foster creativity, learning, and the preservation of cultural practices. These celebrations promote global interconnectedness and unity among Buddhists around the world. People from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and countries can come together through digital platforms to celebrate Vesak, share their customs, and exchange cultural experiences. This interconnectedness fosters a sense of global Buddhist community and understanding. The dialectic nature of digital Vesak celebrations lies in the symbiotic relationship between tradition and technology. Digitized Vesak celebrations aim to preserve and promote traditional Vesak practices in a digital format. While embracing digital technologies, the core

values, rituals, and teachings of Vesak are upheld. This dialectic nature ensures that the essence of Vesak is retained and transmitted to a wider audience.

Traditional Vesak celebrations have taken different forms in different eras of Sri Lanka. Vesak celebrations seem to be positioned more strongly in the digital space nowadays due to various factors that have led to socio-cultural changes. Digital Vesak celebrations involve the adaptation and innovation of traditional practices to suit the digital medium. While maintaining the core elements, new digital tools and platforms are utilized to enhance accessibility, engagement, and interactivity.

The traditional Vesak celebration here has been affected by socio-cultural changes such as the Easter Sunday attack and the COVID-19 pandemic situation. The Easter Sunday attacks created a sense of fear, grief, and uncertainty among the Sri Lankan community. This emotional impact affected the collective spirit and enthusiasm associated with traditional Vesak celebrations. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the suspension of many public events, cultural performances, and exhibitions associated with Vesak. To curb the spread of the virus and ensure public safety, the Sri Lankan government-imposed restrictions on public gatherings and implemented social distancing measures. These restrictions had a direct impact on traditional Vesak celebrations, as large-scale gatherings, processions, and crowded events were either canceled or limited in scope.

A digital Vesak pandal involves the replication of a traditional Vesak pandal in a digital or virtual environment. Using computer graphics, virtual reality, or augmented reality technologies, the intricate designs, colors, and details of a physical pandal are recreated digitally. Digital Vesak pandals often offer interactive features that allow users to engage with the virtual environment. Users may have the option to customize the appearance of the pandal, change lighting effects, or explore different angles and perspectives. This interactivity provides a personalized experience and encourages active engagement. Here the aforementioned dialectical nature is well represented.

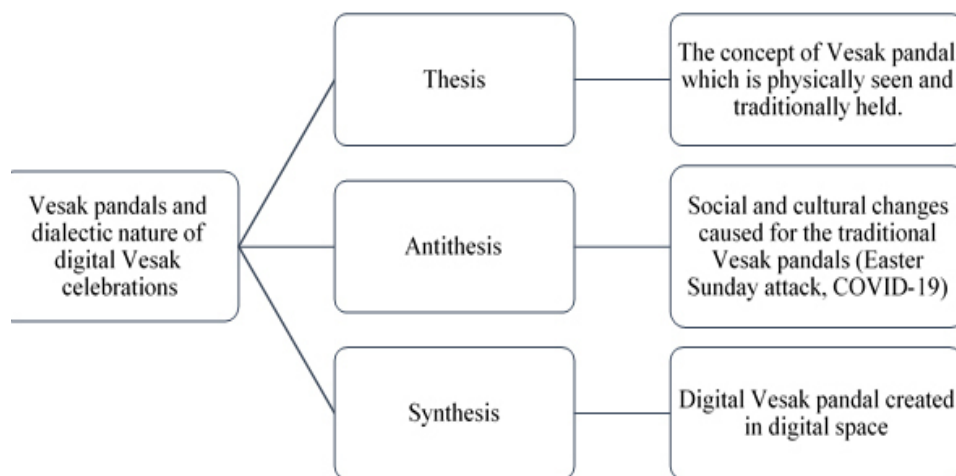


Figure 6: Dialectic nature of digital Vesak pandals

Conclusion

Popular Buddhism is a prominent concept based with Sri Lankan culture. This research was an investigation of modern Buddhism in Sri Lanka from a digital anthropological standpoint, with the goal of examining developments in the context of the current digital era. The researchers claimed the dialectic character of digital culture, one of the central ideas of digital anthropology as articulated by Daniel Miller and Heather Horst. Accordingly this research proposing the term ‘Digital Buddhism’ as a novel concept for the modern Sri Lankan popular Buddhism and it is a cultural element based on dialectic nature. By emphasizing the dialectical qualities through the selected cases of digital platforms, we were able to prove the fundamental premise of digital anthropology. As a result, it may be stated that current popular Buddhism can be studied from a digital anthropological standpoint. It may be defined as a new type of knowledge and an examination of a notion such as religion from an anthropological standpoint. One of the primary implications is that there is a larger tendency for concept synthesis in modern Buddhism's digital conduct. As a result, we recommend that this model be used to investigate other areas of Buddhism as well.

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