

Religious Symbol's Importance for Motivation, Emotions and Mental-wellbeing of Pakistani Shia Adults

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Abstract

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Religious symbols have their own meaning in every religion and culture. They are used to arouse emotions and create motivation among the masses. There are both positive and negative effects of religious symbols on the brain. It is important to explore the importance of religious symbols in the development of personality as religions drive the person in times of grief and happiness. Religiosity played a vital role in giving peace of mind and in the mental wellbeing of people. This study focuses on the importance of religious symbols among the Shia Muslims of Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan in creating motivation, emotions, and mental well-being. Eight adult Shia Muslims (age range 25-30) graduates were taken purposefully. Focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted and sessions were audio/videotaped. Before the FGD sessions protocol was established to conduct FGD. Three questions were asked from the respondents which are, *how religious symbols are important for them? How do these symbols motivate them? What is the role of the symbols in mental well-being?* The answers were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis with the help of Nvivo12. The findings of this study have that religious symbols are of high importance in the lives of people as people distinguish themselves from these and have a high emotional attachment to religious symbols and are important for the Shia adult's mental well-being.

Keywords: *Religious symbols, Motivation, Emotions, Mental well-being, Shia Muslims*

Introduction and Literature Review

In recent decades, the academicians started studying about the relationship between human mental health and religion. Various disciplines such as psychology, social behavior and cultural studies have studied the role of religion in reacting towards several aspects of life and understanding the mean of living. The researches have argued that the religious affiliations can cater the positive impacts on the well-being of individuals (Lun & Bond, 2013). The devotees of any religion are seen to connect themselves with various religious symbols and provides their specific meaning. However, there is little evidence that how these visual symbols and their meanings cause any significant effect on the people's perception.

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In past, the effect of (either positive or negative content) religious symbols on brain has never been studied (Johnson et al., 2014; Geary & Shinde, 2021). Various religious symbols tend to have different neurophysiological effect on person's perception related to religion (Rim et al., 2019). These several religious symbols are considered to represent different doctrines, schemas, ideas and concepts which are linked with any particular religion. A plethora of studies have discussed about the influence of symbols on the human psyche. Whereas they have also pointed out the basic theological meaning of religious symbols and their importance for any individual (Allport & Ross 1967; Van & Geertz, 2021). The religious belief is inherited and unique part of human nature which is defined as the pursuit to answer the questions related to existence (Al-Kire et al., 2022). The belief systems of human beings, either it be religious or not, sought to shape the perceptions about the world and attitude towards the life following the sense of cognition, decision and attention (Angel & Seitz 2016; Saad & Medeiros 2021).

Our several mental processes are influenced by the religious beliefs, for example, the orientation linked with specific religion shows the bias attention towards the various visual stimuli. In older adults, the perspective related to the future and belief of world have predicted a long-time survival tendency (Alotaibi et al., 2017). Although, there is a unique feature of religious beliefs in terms of emotions which proposes that religious symbols might interact with the brain as main factor to process the negative or positive symbols differently (Naseri & Tamam 2012).

Proponents of activation spreading theory suggest that the behavioral responses can be associated with the cues from the environments (Dhruvarajan, 1990). Research in this area suggests that when people are presented with a concept, other concepts (nodes) closely related to the first become activated in the mind (Barrett, 1998). The religious institutions subsequently employ such symbols which influence the attitude of their devotees and effects their lifestyles by reminding them about the religious associations. The religious symbols such as "Holy Cross" are seen to play an important role in the daily functioning of society and it is considered as an instrument for transferring the values and meaning from generations to generations. In research by Dotson and Hyatt (2000), it is explored that the impact of these religious symbols on the human psyche is very strong that even advertisements showing various religious symbols are also perceived as affective, morally correct and sacred by the devotees (Muralidharan et al., 2018; Souiden & Rani 2015).

If we take a look on the Asian religions, past research has indicated that Hindus, in general, are religious and they are often exposed to religious symbols on a daily basis as Hindu gods and goddesses are often pictured in comic books, wall paintings, and household calendars (Newell, 2011). Consequently, the Hindu religious symbols are deep-rooted in the Indian psyche and visual notion of these symbols plays an influential role in advertisement and common attitudes, emotions and perceptions of individuals (Muralidharan et al., 2018; Hennelly et al., 2019). Through the religious symbols, conceptual characteristics of any specific religion have been conceived and designed in history. These religious symbols have a metaphoric importance, it helps an individual to understand and practice the meaningful spiritual and religious teachings (Van Cappellen & Saroglou 2012). The studies in social sciences have also provided preliminary evidence to the fact that the religious symbols help in fostering the positive attitudes within the people. For example, the symbol of goddess Durga in Hindu religious shows the visual cue of increasing the intention of violence and aggressive notions (Nandrajog, 2010).

On the other hand, the current study is designed to explore the aesthetic perception of religious symbols and their relationship with the positive attitudes. In religion Islam, a number of religious beliefs are linked with the embodiment of beauty of heart, humanity and nobleness. Even the Buddhist symbols are also connected with the medium of communicating the cognitive responses of aesthetic pleasures of cognition (Song & Qin, 2019; Wawrytko, 2013).

The theoretical relationship between religions and subjective well-being can be traced to Durkheim's (2002) seminal research on how religious involvement can influence the rates of suicide. Many studies have proposed that happiness and life satisfaction are meant to enhance people's mental health as a universal goal, which means that individual health status is not only related to the physical illness but also the mental and psychological health (Unterrainer et al., 2012). The social function of religions, in this context, is relevant to improving the mental status by a positive attitude toward life.

Rationale of the Study

This study aims to see the importance and role of religious symbols for the mental well-being and emotions of Shia Muslims. As the body of knowledge lacks enough literature in the Pakistani context which can explain the importance of religious symbols in the life of Shia Muslims in Pakistan and current study will bridge this gap and will be highly useful.

Objectives of the study

1. To explore the importance of religious symbols in mental well-being.
2. To explore the role of religious symbols in arousing emotions and motivation.

Research Questions

1. How religious symbols are important for them?
2. How do these symbols motivate them?
3. What is the role of the symbols in mental well-being?

Method

Research Design

This study used a qualitative approach to see the importance of religious symbols. Focus Group Discussions were conducted for data collection as this provides the in-depth views of people regarding religious symbols.

Study Participant and Recruitment

In total, eight graduate Shia adult Muslim were taken through purposive sampling from Bahawalpur City. Only one session was conducted and responses were audio/video taped. This Study doesn't bifurcate between *Asna Ashari* and *shash e Imami* Shia Muslims.

Ethical Considerations

The written consent was obtained from the participants of research by providing them the consent form comprising of information about the purpose of research and risk/benefits associated with it. The participants were also educated about their rights of participating in the research and formal permission was also taken for recording the FGDs. Participants were also ensured about the confidentiality and privacy of their identities and the information they provided.

Data Transcription

The obtained data were transcribed by NVivo (12). As this study is qualitative in nature so Thematic Analysis technique will be used to analyze the data. The transcription was done carefully by consulting the transcription manual (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The group of veteran researchers with five years of research experience transcribed the given data. The Back-translation method was adopted given by Squires (2009) to translate the data obtained in other languages. In the back translation method first, the data obtained in the source language is translated to the target language in the first step. Then in the second step translated data is again translated back to the source language to verify the translation and to remove inaccuracies (Chen & Boore, 2009). To evaluate the translation of the data the criteria given by Squires (2009) was followed.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted while following the steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were read and re-read to get the familiarity, and rough notes were drawn. These rough notes presented the early impressions taken from the data. After that initial

codes were made and many were found overlapping with each other, after identification, the broader and dominant preliminary themes were obtained. These themes were descriptive in nature and they described that relevant data to research questions. The codes which were linked with more than one themes were again reviewed and modified to get the clarity of their relationship with the research questions. The codes were then included in the most suitable theme.

Findings and Discussion

Emerging Themes

The themes which were emerged after the thematic analysis are:

- i. Motivation
- ii. Security
- iii. Emotional attachment
- iv. Sacrifice
- v. Peace of mind and calmness
- vi. Happiness
- vii. Help
- viii. Satisfaction

i. Motivation

The respondents of the study said that the symbols like “*Alam pak*” and “*matam*” give them motivation as they show the struggle of Hazrat Imam Hussain against the forces of evil with few companions. One of the respondents said that, “*The event of Karbala and sacrifice of Hazrat Imam Hussain teaches us the feelings of sacrifice and gives the motivation to stand against hardships*” (R3: M). Another one responded that “*Whenever I got depressed and hopeless, I go to Imam Bargah and pray, it gives me hope and motivation*” (R1: M). Jung (1964) argues that conscious awareness of a religious symbol is not necessary for it to exert an influence. Similarly, religious symbols influence motivational states both consciously and unconsciously during motivated performance situations (Blascovich et al., 2000).

ii. Security

Religious symbols like ‘*Imam zamin*’ provided a sense of security as responded by the respondents of the study. One respondent said that “*Wearing Imam Zamin gives me a sense of security that I am protected which gives me satisfaction and peace of mind*” (R4: F). Another respondent responded that “*Black clothes and Imam Zamin gives me a sense of security and distinguishes*” (R5: F).

iii. Emotional Attachment

The history of emotions has contributed to the study of religion. At the same time, religion had a privileged place as a crucible for theoretical development in the history of emotions. Emotions were at the center of bhakti religiosity which at the same time reclassified them and used them to challenge social conventions. Religion hence shaped numerous aspects of emotions’ social importance including emotional standards, taxonomies of feeling, and appropriate emotional display. Emotional attachment to religion and religious symbols is something which is considered natural and this was responded as, “*We have an emotional attachment with Muharram processions. This teaches us to sacrifice and gives us motivation*” (R6: M).

iv. Sacrifice

From a psychological perspective, religious sacrifice may produce benefits for the individual by creating a sense of transcendent connection to God (Dollahite et al., 2009) that provides peace in the face of jarring circumstances (Park et al., 2015). Religious sacrifice builds an emotionally supportive bond with one’s religious community (Dollahite et al., 2009), which may help explain why religious attendance buffers the impact of negative life events on life satisfaction (Lechner & Leopold, 2015). Mariam Farhat, the epitome of the Palestinian

sacrificial mother, expressed her joy that she was able to raise sons who would sacrifice themselves for Palestine and God, stating that “I encouraged all my sons to die a martyr’s death, and I wish this even for myself” (Israeli, 2004). This concept of religious sacrifice was responded as, “*The martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain with his family and companions teaches us to sacrifice and motivation*” (R6: M).

v. Peace of Mind and Calmness

Religious symbols and spirituality give peace of mind. Religious beliefs can give rise to hope, optimism, and peace of mind in otherwise damaging circumstances. Consistent with these ideas regarding the influence of religious symbols, Carl Jung (1964) argued that symbolic religious images manifested in real life are likely to reflect enduring and unconscious collective representations. As responded, “*Going to Imam Bargah and praying in front of Alam gives me motivation, satisfaction, and peace of mind*” (R7: F).

vi. Happiness

Scholars argue that religious affiliations can positively predict the indicators of subjective well-being, such as happiness and life satisfaction, to maintain human mental health. Among these, Buddhism has been considered as a distinctive resource for people to interpret and respond to life suffering. One of the respondents reported, “*Whenever I am depressed, I go to Imam Bargah and pray, this gives me satisfaction and happiness*” (R1:M).

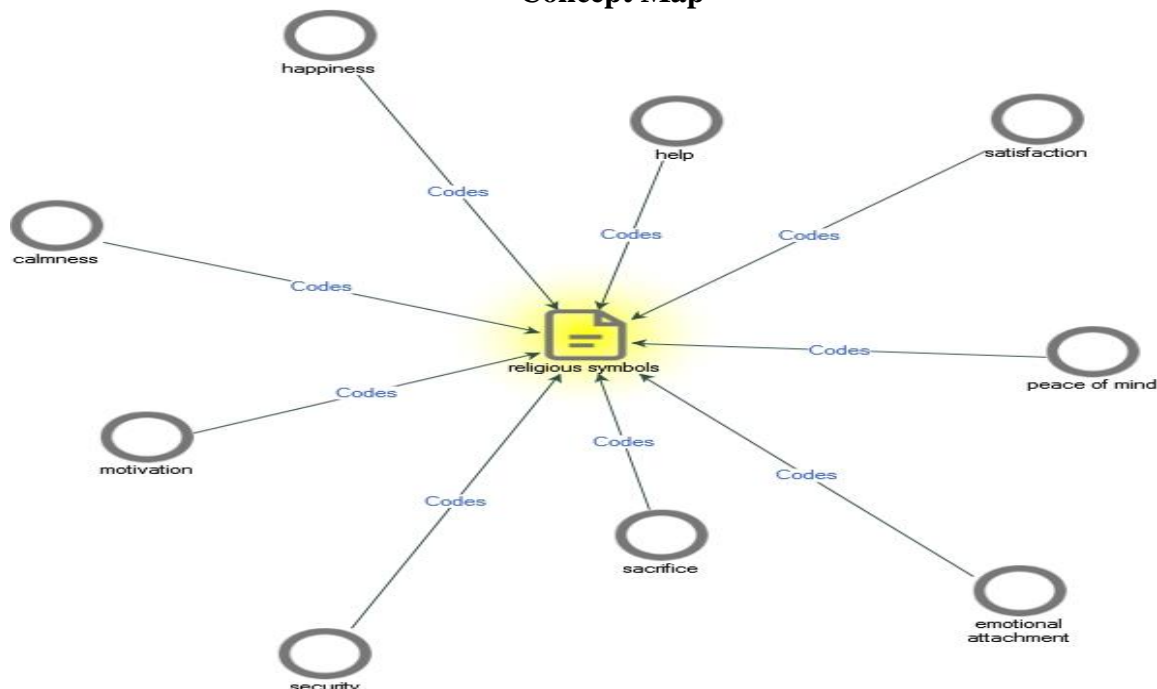
vii. Help

People’s religious commitments and beliefs influence feelings and attitudes towards life. It motivates people to do things for others, which is consistent with the view of well-being (Riva et al., 2017). The respondent of our study responded that, “*The events of Muharram procession and Karbala motivates us to help and sacrifice your happiness for others*” (R2: F).

viii. Satisfaction

Religious symbols are great source of satisfaction as responded, “*Going for Ziaraat and to Imam Bargah is a source of great strength and satisfaction*” (R8: F). This satisfaction has been believed to enhance people’s mental health as a universal goal, which means that individual health status is not merely the absence of physical discomfort, such as illness. Here the social function of religions is highly relevant to improving the mental status by a positive attitude towards life (Dudley & Kosinski 1990).

Concept Map



Conclusion

Conclusively, the findings of this study have supported that religious symbols are of high importance in the lives of people, as people distinguish themselves from these and have a high emotional attachment to them. And the religious symbols are important and peaceful for the people. The Shia Muslim population globally in general and in Pakistan, are emotionally attached and have sacrificed their lives for practicing them. These religious symbols enhance the life satisfaction and mental well-being of Shia adults. The religious symbols develop and maintain the motivation, emotions, happiness, peace, and life satisfaction, and that maintain the mental health Shia adults.

Limitations and Suggestions

Some limitations of the present study are that the scope of this study was to cover a particular area which is Bahawalpur city, other cities of Pakistan are not included in data collection. Extensive country-wise studies can be conducted for more generalized results. The study was restricted to Shia adults, but the Shia adolescence was excluded.

Implications

The organizations private and public sector as well as educational institutions can utilize this study for a smooth, peaceful, and bias-free working environment. The results revealed that religious symbols are important for motivation, emotions, life satisfaction, and the mental wellbeing of Shia adults. Religious symbols have a high impact on the mental health and the life of Shia adults.

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