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## YOUNG SIKHS' RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT ONLINE

**Dr Jasjit Singh, University of Leeds**

**Tip:** If possible, try to engage with individuals / groups offline before engaging with them online. If they have met you in person or have seen you speak they may be more likely to respond to your research

**Tip:** Build a web presence which highlights your role as a professional researcher who is linked to an established research institution. This creates a level of trust for respondents and can also provide further information about the research to potential participants.

**Tip:** When designing online surveys, ensure that you provide enough space for respondents to answer to questions. Do not miss out on useful data due to survey design.

To date, few scholars have examined the religious lives of young Sikh adults even though the British Sikh population is currently skewed towards youth. Indeed, according to the 2011 census of the 423,158 Sikhs currently living in England and Wales 105,985 (25%) are between the ages of 15-29 further highlighting the necessity to understand the lives of young British Sikh adults. Although there have been many studies of the relationship between religion and the Internet (Campbell 2011: 232), to date few of these have examined the online presence of Sikhism. Those that have, have focused on the impact of Internet forums on traditional authority structures (Jakobsh 2006), the response of Sikh discussion groups to the events of partition and 1984 (Barrier 2006), the impact of Sikh dating websites (Maclaran et al.: 2008), the representation of Khalistan and of Sikh martyrs on the Internet (Axel 2005; Sokol 2007), a comparison of discussion forums used by European Sikhs (Singh S 2012), and the role of the Internet in contemporary identity construction within global Sikhism (Jakobsh 2012). In this chapter I firstly outline the evolution of Sikhism online before describing how I examined the role of the Internet in the religious lives of young British Sikhs. I then present some findings followed by a discussion of ethical issues when researching online.

The beginnings of the public online presence of Sikhism are to be found among the Usenet newsgroups which developed in the early 1990s (e.g. Sandhu H.S. 1990). As an undergraduate studying computer science at the University of

Manchester from 1990-1993 I remember being so amazed at being able to access articles about Sikh history and Sikh issues on the 'soc.culture.indian' newsgroup (Sandhu, H. S. 1990) that I would print these out and take them home to show my parents. At the time there were no publically accessible Sikhism newsgroups, forums or websites with international computer based communication being a novel and somewhat exciting experience. Although a relatively 'late entry' into the world of online religion given that Jewish and Christian discussion groups have existed since the mid 1980s (Campbell 2010: 22) the online presence of Sikhism has developed exponentially since the 1990s with a Google search of "Sikhism" on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2011 producing 4,520,000 hits. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, much has happened in the interim with Sikhism firmly establishing itself online in a number of different forms.

The world's first web site on Sikhism, Sikhs.org, appeared online in December 1994.<sup>1</sup> Sikhs.org appears to have quickly become a point of reference for information about Sikhism for Sikhs and non-Sikhs, with Microsoft including it as an 'Editor's choice' in their 1997 Encarta encyclopaedia (Sikhs.org, n.d.). As well as a few websites, the mid 1990s also saw the formation of a growing number of specifically Sikhism focused discussion forums, many of which broke away from the earlier culture based forums such as the 'soc.culture.indian' newsgroup. The first of these Sikhism focused discussion groups was the 'soc.religion.sikhism' bulletin board which had arrived online on 4 July 1995 and which was moderated by a group of young educated American Sikhs (soc.religion.sikhism 1995), including Sandeep Singh Brar, the founder of Sikhs.org, and Rajwinder Singh from Boston University (Bonine 1995).

Although a historical mapping of the emergence of every Sikh website is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to understand that a wide variety of Sikh / Sikhism related websites have appeared online since the early 2000s including websites for Sikh organisations, Sikh camps, gurdwaras, Sikh history, kirtan portals and merchandise. As well as providing information about Sikhism, many of the early websites also hosted discussion forums. These were usually

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<sup>1</sup> Sikhs.org claims to be the world's first website on Sikhism (Sikhs.org, n.d.). From its registration date and from the fact that Sundeep Singh Brar was involved in other online Sikh interactions at this time, this claim is most likely true.

either hosted on Sikh 'portals' such as the Waheguroo network (kirtan.net) which offered visitors a variety of services including kirtan downloads, Sikh related screensavers and articles about Sikhism or on organisation specific websites such as the website run by the Tapoban gurdwara in Toronto (tapoban.org).

The website based discussion groups such as Sikhsangat.com and Sikhawareness.com (Singh S 2012) preceded the appearance of website free discussion groups following the launch of Yahoo groups and Google groups. As Hock explains, the distinction between these new discussion groups and previous discussion groups was that for the former "you went to a Web site or a newsgroup reader to read and send messages. For the latter, messages came to you via email" (Hock 2005: 88). A number of discussion groups were created at this time although many are no longer active. The emergence of blogging in the late 1990s (Campbell 2010: 24) added a further type of online religious presence with individuals being able to write web logs, or 'blogs' about their own personal religious journeys.

To fully appreciate how young British Sikhs currently engage with Sikhism online it is necessary to examine some of the important and relevant developments which have occurred online since 2000, beginning with the launch of Wikipedia in 2001 (Jeffery et al. 2009). The format of Wikipedia, as an online encyclopaedia on which articles are written by anyone with access to the site, has subsequently been used to generate a number of specialised 'wikis' dedicated to specific subjects<sup>2</sup> including Sikhiwiki (<http://www.sikhiwiki.org>) a Sikhism focused wiki which arrived online in 2005, and which currently boasts 5821 articles on Sikhism (Sikhiwiki.org n.d.). Although Facebook only opened itself up to the public in 2006, in January 2011 it passed Google to become the most popular website in the world (Kiss 2011). As well as wikis and social networking sites, the emergence of video hosting websites such as Youtube which arrived online in 2005 (Jeffery et al. 2009) has been an important development in the online presence of religion. The fact that videos of events held all over the world are now easily available and accessible has increased the amount of material available to young Sikhs allowing for lectures and talks that might previously have been missed to be readily available online.

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<sup>2</sup> As of July 2012, religion and spirituality focused wikis include Theopedia – an encyclopaedia of Christianity ([http://www.theopedia.com/Main\\_Page](http://www.theopedia.com/Main_Page)), IslamWiki – a pro-Islamic wiki ([http://islam.wikia.com/wiki/Islam\\_Wikia](http://islam.wikia.com/wiki/Islam_Wikia)), WikiIslam – a wiki critical of Islam ([http://www.wikiislam.net/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://www.wikiislam.net/wiki/Main_Page)).

## Methodology

Having understood how Sikhism has manifested itself online, I will now focus on the research methods used to understand the role of the Internet as a means of religious transmission using a mixed methods approach in order to gather the views of a number of young British Sikhs and in order to be able to note patterns among a large cohort of respondents. As I wished to understand how young Sikhs learn about Sikhism from the point of view of young British Sikhs themselves, a largely qualitative methodological approach was chosen within a mixed methods approach. Although qualitative research is sometimes criticised for being anecdotal and for being presented casually and unsystematically, one of its main advantages is the contextual detail which it provides (Mason 2002: 1). As researchers can “improve their confidence in the accuracy of findings through the use of different methods to investigate the same subject” (Denscombe 2007: 109) data was gathered using a number of different methods. This mixed methods approach can check against bias, allow for the development of research instruments, and also allow the researcher to “exploit the strengths of a particular method without leaving him/herself vulnerable to criticism in connection with that method’s weakness” (Denscombe 2007: 111) as well as increasing the accuracy of findings and validating the findings of one method against another.

For instance although using semi-structured interviews allow a researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the motivations of a particular group of people, the small numbers of interviews which can usually be conducted during a research project leave the researcher open to criticism that the data are not representative. Using a mixed methods approach and combining interviews with a survey allows data to be gathered from a larger number of individuals across a wider geographical area. As this research focuses on the transmission of Sikhism among young British Sikhs, I decided to carry out semi-structured interviews with this group using a ‘multiple exploratory’ case study approach which allows the researcher to study relationships and processes as they naturally occur (Denscombe 2007: 37). The case study approach also encourages the use of multiple methods, allowing the researcher to validate the data gathered through triangulation. As explained, I decided to use a number of methods in conjunction with the interviews in order to gather different perspectives on the research questions. Of the various methods used, in this chapter I will focus on semi-structured Interviews to understand religious

transmission from the actor's point of view and the online survey to gather a large amount of responses in order to be able to identify patterns and trends.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

As qualitative research seeks to understand behaviour from the actor's point of view, interviews were used as one of the main methods of research. Choosing interviewees depends on a "conscious and deliberate choice about which case to select from among a large number of possibilities" (Denscombe 2007: 37-39). As cases are selected on the basis of known attributes it is important that the criteria used for the selection of these cases are justified as part of the methodology (Denscombe 2007: 39). Given the constraints of time and researcher resources, it was decided to interview those young British Sikhs who:

- a) Deliver / have delivered lectures and talks at events held for young British Sikhs and/or
- b) Organise / have organised events held for young British Sikhs and/or
- c) Attend / have attended events held for young British Sikhs

Although this categorisation is open to critique as it limits potential interviewees to those young Sikhs who are already engaging with their tradition, I am arguing that this selection is justified as these individuals would be able to offer experience and insights relating to the role of the 'new arenas' of religious transmission in particular. The problem with this approach however, is that it assumes the usefulness of these 'new arenas'. As one of the main aims was to understand how young Sikhs learn about religion, it was also necessary to gather data from young Sikhs who may not attend or engage with any of the events described above, an issue addressed by the use of the online survey.

### **Online Survey**

As trust in the sponsor of an internet survey has a positive impact on response rates (Fang et. al. 2009) I decided to design and build a project website ([www.leeds.ac.uk/sikhs](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/sikhs)) which would allow interested respondents to find out more about the research project whilst highlighting that the research was legitimate and

being carried out under the banner of the AHRC/ESRC 'Religion and Society programme'.<sup>3</sup> Once built the website was used to host the online survey to facilitate the gathering of data from young Sikhs across the UK who do and do not attend events organised for young Sikhs.

Using an online survey to collect data had a number of advantages, especially in a research project of this size. Firstly it facilitated the collection of data from a large variety of respondents in a short time without having to negotiate gatekeepers. Secondly, the online survey was relatively cheap to implement, certainly compared to paper surveys as there was no cost to distribute the survey (Couper 2000) and as the survey software was freely available. Thirdly, it was felt that the online survey would reduce or substantially eliminate any interviewer bias as there would be no need for any physical interaction between the researcher and the respondent.

As online surveys are best used in situations where a particular group of individuals is targeted especially those that share a common interest (O'Lear 1996: 210), designing and building an online survey for this group made sense, particularly as young British Sikhs would be technologically very comfortable with the online environment. In order to gain some experience of carrying out online surveys I undertook a small pilot survey using Bristol Online Survey software, with eight members of the Leeds University Sikh society in October 2008 to ensure that the survey performed correctly (Pearrow 2000) and that respondents were clear as to the meaning of the questions asked. This small pilot test was useful in ensuring that questions worked as required providing confidence in the success of the survey once it had been implemented on a larger scale.<sup>4</sup>

Following the pilot, the full online survey was implemented on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2009. Having been advised that responses would be more likely if respondents were presented with a clickable hyperlink as opposed to having to type in a survey hyperlink, I initially sent out emails to every young Sikh I knew and asked them to

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<sup>3</sup> For further details about the Religion and Society programme, see <http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> According to Nielsen (1993) having five users test a website will reveal 85% of its usability problems.

pass this on to other qualifying individuals.<sup>5</sup> Following this, I contacted the administrators of British based Facebook groups belonging to Sikh youth groups, university Sikh societies, Sikh camps and / or gurdwaras and other Sikh groups including hockey, bhangra and gatka related groups. These emails were personalised according to the group in question, which led many of the administrators to forward these emails on to the members of their groups.

As well as targeting relevant Facebook groups, I sent emails to relevant Sikh Yahoo groups and Google groups, posted messages to Sikh related forums and also wrote about my research on Sikhism related websites.<sup>6</sup> These advertising methods produced excellent results with the survey gathering 645 responses in total having run from Nov 2009 up until July 2011. To try and minimise false responses I followed Nosek et al's (2002) advice to have a couple of questions with definite answers repeated in the survey, and to provide questions specifically designed to catch malicious participants. In addition, of the 645 respondents, 407 stated that they would be willing to be contacted regarding future research, and supplied contact details. It is argued that the fact that so many respondents were willing to supply their personal details goes some way to addressing Couper's (2000) concern that it is not always possible to know for certain who is participating in an online survey and Nosek et al's. (2002) concern that participants may answer questions falsely or submit their responses multiple times. Given the fact that the survey was relatively

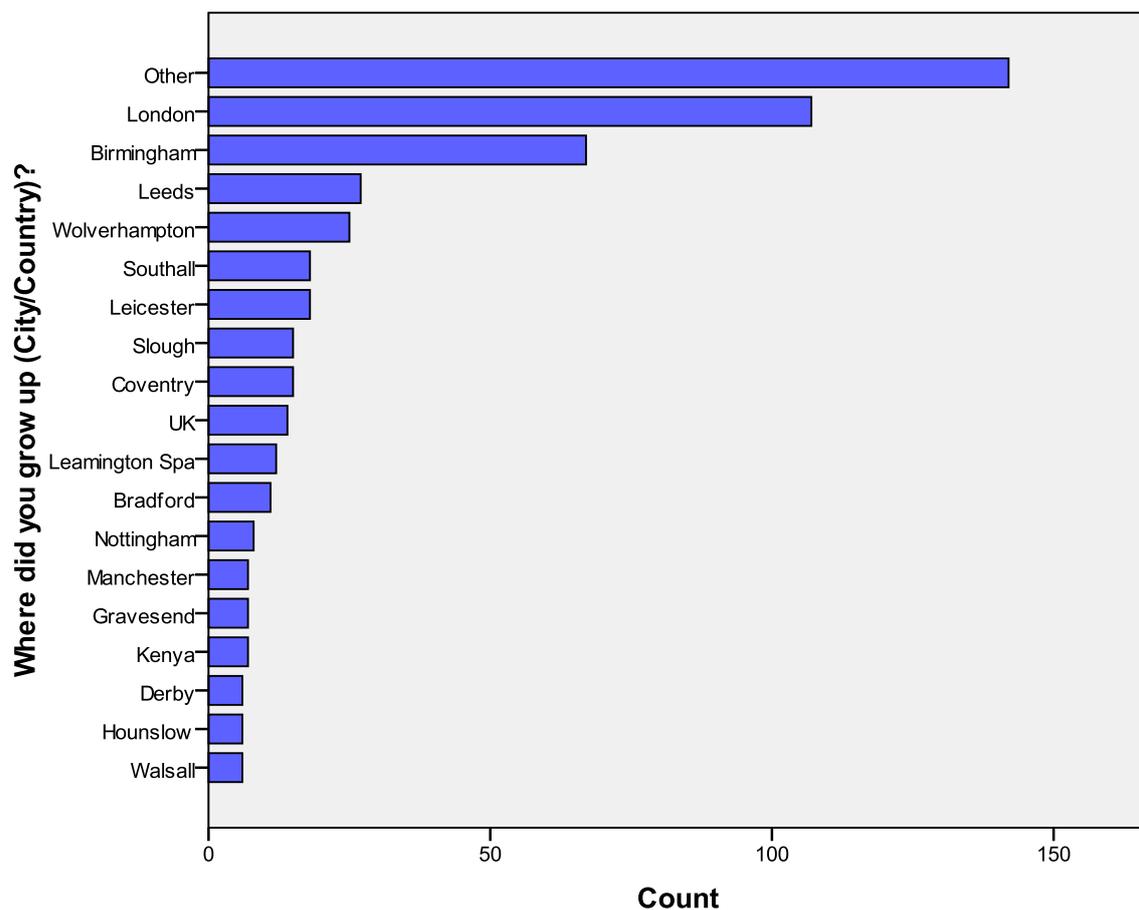
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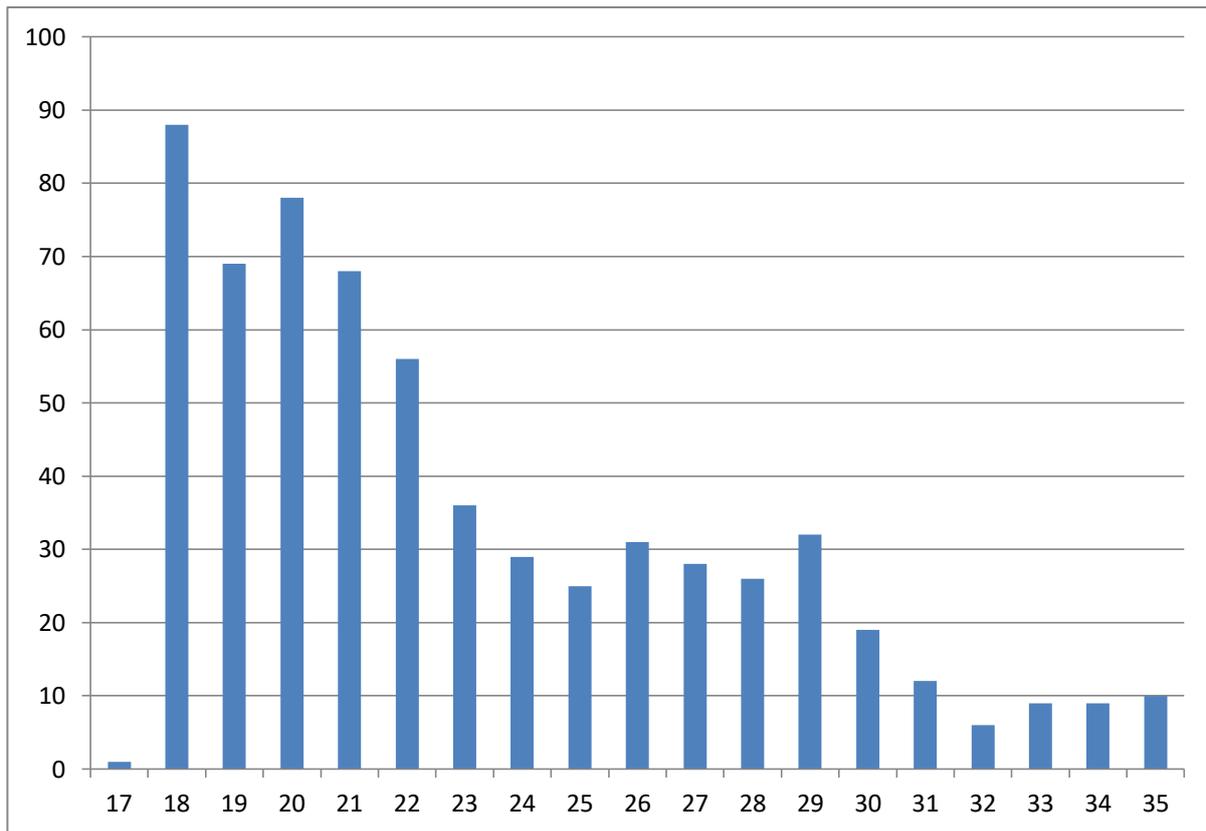
<sup>5</sup> Advice on how to advertise the survey was obtained from the members of the "Religion, Sexuality and Youth" project who had also implemented an online survey. I was a member of the Advisory Board for this project. For further details see <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/sociology/rys/index.aspx> [Accessed 9 December 2009]

<sup>6</sup> Facebook groups included those belonging to university Sikh societies, Sikh camps, gurdwaras and local Sikh youth groups. Yahoo/google groups included the 'learning-zone' and 'leeds-bradfordsikhs'. I also posted details about my research on a number of websites, for example Sikhnet: <http://www.sikhnet.com/news/phd-research-british-sikhs-18-30-currently-underway> [Accessed 24 November 2009] and Sikh discussion forums including Sikhsangat: <http://www.sikhsangat.com/index.php?topic/48145-phd-research-into-british-sikhs-18-30/page hl %2Bphd+%2Bresearch+%2Byoung+%2Bbritish+%2Bsikhs fromsea rch 1> [Accessed 1 December 2009] as well as posting on Bhangra forums: <http://simplybhangra.com/forum/5-general-chat/271-phd-research-into-british-sikhs-18-30/> [Accessed 1 December 2009] and Punjabi discussion forums including: <http://punjab2000.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=MixedForum&action=display&thead=15001> [Accessed 1 December 2009].

long and required a reasonable amount of effort to complete it is argued that the risk of false or multiple submissions is somewhat diminished.

The survey asked both quantitative and qualitative questions. Following Warren (2007) who notes that there is increasing potential to use internet surveys for qualitative research, and Williams (2003: 50) who argues that as surveys usually only present a limited range of responses, standardized questions may miss important aspects of the research, many questions allowed respondents the space to respond beyond the quantitative questions asked. This strategy worked well, with respondents appearing to be very comfortable in writing at length online (Warren 2007) providing long textual responses to a variety of questions which were rich in qualitative content. Warren (2007) concludes that although textual survey data cannot fill the place of conventional ethnographic techniques it should be taken seriously, particularly when using internet surveys as one source of qualitative data. In summary, the online survey presented both quantitative and qualitative data from a wide variety of respondents, as follows:



**Figure 1:** Locality of Online Survey Respondents**Figure 2:** Age Profile of Online Survey Respondents

As a method of gathering data to ensure the accuracy of themes and trends therefore, the online survey was a success. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS, with the qualitative answers being analysed and coded using NVivo, along with the interview transcriptions and focus group data.

### Summary Findings

Having understood how data was gathered through the online survey I will now briefly outline how the findings highlight how young Sikhs engage with their tradition online.<sup>7</sup> Campbell (2010: 26) identifies five different ways in which users employ the internet to 'fulfil certain spiritually motivated goals' may be more useful. First is the 'spiritual network', where the Internet facilitates the formation of social networks which support spiritual activities (Campbell 2005: 54). Secondly, the Internet can be used as a 'worship space', set aside for religious ritual where online

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<sup>7</sup> More detailed findings are available in my recent article Singh (2014a)

activities become part of a person's spiritual life. Thirdly users might view the Internet as a 'missionary tool', used to promote a specific religion or set of beliefs. Fourthly, the Internet can be used as an 'affirmation tool', where users can cement their religious identity and practice by connecting into a global, networked community of believers and finally, the Internet is used as a 'functional technology' to support the social practices of a particular religious community.

All of these narratives can be found in the online encounters which young British Sikhs described in the online survey data. A high percentage of those who 'strongly disagreed' that they learnt most about Sikhism from the internet were amritdhari (43.5%), came from 'religious' or 'very religious' families (82.6%) and prayed more than once per day (41.3%) as compared to the other categories, possibility indicating that those who responded in this way had other sources from where they could learn about the Sikh tradition. An analysis of the survey responses to questions about Sikhism related internet usage reveals that young Sikhs go online in order to:

1. Discuss taboo subjects
2. Obtain answers to questions about the Sikh tradition
3. Explore differing practices within the Sikh tradition
4. Access repositories of kirtan and katha
5. Examine English translations of Sikh scriptures
6. Obtain hukamnamas
7. Find out about Sikh events
8. Access event archives, recordings, and instructional videos
9. Purchase Sikh resources including books, photographs, and clothing
10. Understand the legal position of Sikh articles of faith

### **1. Discuss taboo subjects**

Many of the survey respondents stated that the internet allowed them to discuss issues which they felt that they would not be able to discuss with their parents and peers, or which they did not feel their immediate contacts would be knowledgeable about with an 18 year old male from Leeds stating that the internet had "helped me learn about things that i would have found difficult to ask say a person at the gurdwara or my parents."

## **2. Obtain answers to questions about the Sikh tradition**

Young Sikhs are also able to find answers to questions which are not satisfactorily answered by parents or traditional authority figures. For a 30 year old male from Manchester, the internet “helped very much in asking the simplest questions. I.e. Why do we tie up our hair?, why do we shower every morning?, what effect does the daily bani’s have on our psyche?”. Female respondents also stated that the Internet had allowed them to find out historical information about Sikh women, with a 26 year old female from Southall explaining that the Internet had “offered stories about strong Sikh women that i don’t hear from other Sikh men who ‘preach’ or tell stories.”

## **3. Explore differing practices within the Sikh tradition**

One of the most striking ways in which the Internet has impacted young Sikhs is the way in which young Sikhs are now able to research aspects of Sikhism which they might not have previously been aware of. Whereas young Sikhs might not have encountered much diversity growing up, they can now easily access a host of diverse views. A 26 year old female from London explained that she hadn’t realised “how many american white people have come into sikhi which is inspirational. If they can make the effort to learn about sikhi why can’t we (the ones that are born in sikh families) ... we need to learn by their examples.” It can be concluded that thanks to the internet, young Sikhs are much more aware of the diversity within Sikhism than previous generations may have been and are, according to a 31 year old female from Birmingham, able to “explore religion relatively 'safely' in a non committal way.” However, the survey responses also highlighted that this accessibility to a number of viewpoints can also become confusing. A 28 year old female from Kent explained that “if i have a specific question its hard ot find coherant answers too many sects with different maryadas and random ideas to get the true meaning of sikhi.”

## **4. Access repositories of kirtan and katha**

The internet also allows young Sikhs to easily download kirtan (music) and katha (discourse) from a variety of sources. As has been discussed, kirtan is an important aspect of Sikh worship with particular groups having their own particular styles of kirtan (Khabra 2010). Through mp3 downloads and Youtube it is now possible to listen to kirtan recordings in any style of choosing. Indeed, as of October 2011 the Sikhnet ‘Gurbani Media Center’ one of the largest repositories of kirtan

online lists over 14000 tracks sung by 544 different artists.<sup>8</sup> Although, the Internet may not be acting as a 'worship space' in this context, the fact that kirtan can be downloaded means that the choice of listening to a wide choice of kirtan at any time is now available to young Sikhs. As with kirtan, a variety of types of katha are available, primarily by professional kathakaars usually trained in Damdami Taksal, or in the various Sikh Missionary colleges. The increasing availability of kirtan and katha indicates the functional usage of the internet as a distribution mechanism of religious music and discourse.

## **5. Examine English Translations of Sikh scriptures**

Given that the Sikhithemax translation software first found a home online, it is not surprising that many young Sikhs mentioned the ability to examine English translations of the Guru Granth Sahib and other Sikh scriptures as being an important use of the Internet. As a 25 year old female from Slough explained, "direct english translations from the Guru Granth Sahib have enabled me to interpret the Guru's teachings for myself" with a 28 year old female from High Wycombe explaining that "before the websites, i would sing without fully knowing the meaning of the shabads i was singing."

## **6. Obtain hukamnamas**

The increased access to translations has allowed Sikhs all over the world to receive a hukamnama or 'order' from the Guru Granth Sahib as and when required. Indeed, it could be argued that the taking of an online hukamnama is one of the few examples of Sikhs undertaking online religion. Whereas Sikhs would previously have had to visit their local gurdwara to hear the daily hukamnama or to obtain a personal hukamnama, it is the hukamnama from the Golden Temple, Amritsar which is usually presented on websites and emailed and texted all over the world. Sikhnet not only offers a daily English translation but also offers daily audio explanations in English of the hukamnama. Sikhs are also now encouraged to take a "Cyber Hukamnama" for on the spot guidance from the Guru Granth Sahib. Many respondents stated that they read a hukamnama daily and noted the importance of the hukamnama in providing "an idea of how to face the day" and to "help stay connected". I am arguing that the increased accessibility of hukamnamas has

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<sup>8</sup> This has been derived from the fact that there are 25 tracks per page and 572 pages of kirtan listings at <http://www.sikhnet.com/songs?page=571>

allowed many Sikhs to experience a more personal relationship with the Guru Granth Sahib as those Sikhs who might not visit the gurdwara on a daily basis can still consult their Guru as an easily accessible provider of immediate advice.

## **7. Find out about Sikh events**

An important offline impact of the internet is that it allows the advertising of events to interested people. Whereas previously events might have been advertised through telephone calls and/or advertisements in the Punjabi press, the evolution of discussion groups and in recent years, Facebook have made it much easier for young Sikhs to find out what is going on where. Anyone with membership of the right Facebook groups, or in contact with the right friends will now be automatically notified about a whole host of Sikhism related events happening in the next day, week or month. Given that many young Sikhs have spoken about the importance of sangat, the fact that they are now made aware of events such as rainsbhais, lectures and kirtans taking place all over the country means that they are now regularly able to meet other like minded Sikhs at these events through these online ‘spiritual networks’.

## **8. Access event archives, recordings and instructional videos**

As well as current events, the evolution of video hosting websites has meant that recordings of talks given at camps and Sikh societies are now available, meaning that even if a particular event is missed, it is still possible to listen to the lecture given. Videos of important events from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards are also now available online including the speeches of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (Youtube 2010a), and news footage of the events of 1984. In addition, the advent of these sites has allowed for instructional information, such as turban tying videos to be viewed on Youtube (Youtube 2011a) by young Sikhs who have no easily accessible family members to teach them.

## **9. Purchase Sikh resources including books, photographs and clothing**

The Internet has made it much easier to find and purchase previously difficult to locate items. A 28 year old male from Birmingham noted that “amazon – got me the books i need, emails got me the photos i needed of old granths” whereas another stated that the internet had “greatly eased access to rare recordings by great Sikhs, access to old granths, made it possible to read gurbani anywhere.” Many websites

now offer Sikh music and clothes for sale, including Sikhism related hoodies, T-shirts, posters, books and DVDs (see G5 Sikh Media, n.d.).

## **10. Understand the legal position of Sikh articles of faith**

The internet has also allowed young Sikhs easy access to information about the legal position of Sikh articles of faith, especially the kirpan. Saldef, the Sikh coalition and United Sikhs have all published legal guidance relating to the wearing of turbans and the 5Ks and have provided legal assistance to those experiencing difficulties with wearing these articles of faith.

### **Reflexivity and Researcher Standpoint**

According to Denscombe, “one of the characteristic features of ethnography is the significance it attaches to the role of the researcher’s ‘self’ in the process of research” (2007: 69). As any account of a particular lifestyle or set of beliefs is a construction based on the researcher’s interpretation of events, it is necessary to consider the background of the researcher (Bryman 2004: 500) during any research project. Denscombe (2007: 67) offers a useful list of factors which could be included in an outline of the researcher’s self:

- Personal beliefs relating to the topic (politics, values, standpoint)
- Personal interests in the area of investigation (vested interest, history of events)
- Personal experience linked to the research topic (incidents affecting self or others close to researchers)
- Personal expertise in relation to the topic (qualification, experience)

The wish to undertake this research is clearly informed by the fact that I am a British born Sikh, albeit one who has now passed beyond the phase of emerging adulthood, who has engaged with the Sikh community in West Yorkshire throughout my life. Having grown up with religiously active parents, with my father regularly being involved in the local gurdwara committee, I have been involved with events held in gurdwaras from a young age although neither myself nor my family ally with any Sikh groups or individuals.

## Ethics

This research followed the guidelines outlined by Diener and Crandall (1978) which state that when gathering data for any research, it must be ensured that participants will not be harmed in any way, that participants have consented to take part in the research, that the privacy of participants will not be invaded and finally that participants will not be deceived in any way (Bryman 2004: 509). The welfare and privacy of the participants was of paramount importance throughout the data gathering process with participants being as informed about the research project as possible before taking part. The online survey respondents had to agree to a series of ethical statements in order to be able to complete the survey as follows:

1. Please select 'Yes' to indicate that you agree with the following statements:
  - 1.a. I am over 18 and I voluntarily agree to take part in this survey.
  - 1.b. I give the researcher (Jasjit Singh) permission to use the results of my participation in this survey once any data which may identify me has been removed.
  - 1.c. I understand that any information about me recorded during this survey will be stored in a secure database. No data which may identify me will be transferred outside this survey. Data will be kept for seven years after the results of this survey have been published.
  - 1.d. I understand that I can ask for further instructions or information at any time by contacting the researcher (Jasjit Singh)
  - 1.e. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time, without having to give a reason for withdrawal
  - 1.f. I understand that I do not have to answer every question

As those taking part were generally highly technologically literate, they were welcome to contact me in case of any further questions which they could easily do through the project website: [arts.leeds.ac.uk/jasjitsingh](https://arts.leeds.ac.uk/jasjitsingh). All participants were advised that any information given was to be treated in strict confidence and that the raw data including transcripts would not be made available to any other persons or for any other purpose. In terms of consenting to take part, survey respondents were informed that by completing the survey, they were consenting. Again, no personal details were used in the thesis itself with age and location being used as an identifying characteristic. Given that many respondents provided full, long answers to

some of the survey questions (which were often up to 1000 words long) some of which contained personal information, I had to ensure that any quotations from these respondents did not identify the respondent.

## **Reflections**

The above discussion demonstrates how I ensured that this research is both reliable and valid (Mason 2002: 188). Reliability is concerned with demonstrating that the data generation and analysis has been appropriate to the research question, and carried out in a “thorough, careful, honest and accurate” (ibid: 188) manner. Validity asks if the project measures or explains what it claims to (ibid: 188). In terms of reliability, the data generation methods used all provided relevant data to examine the main research question(s). In terms of validity, the interviews and online survey generated the most detailed data. Allowing survey respondents to express themselves also worked very well, again leading to less likelihood of bias. Coding the interviews and survey responses also made it simpler to identify where common responses were being given, and proved that the results were drawn from actual responses. On the whole, I feel that the conclusions drawn will do justice to the study, and can be seen as being valid, having been derived from a number of research methods.

The biggest challenge was to ensure that users would be engaged with the research and that the online survey would gather responses. Given the huge number of choices that are available to users when they go online, the survey had to be structured and presented in a way that would appeal to users. As explained, the building of the project website certainly worked to reassure respondents that the research was being undertaken as part of a respectable research programme. Physically visiting young Sikh activists to inform them about the survey also proved useful as they informed their friends and peers about the survey through word of mouth. This also ensured that I was relatively up to date with the latest online innovations which young Sikhs would tell me about through these visits. In researching religion online it is imperative that scholars researching religion keep up to date with technological innovations online in order to understand the new ways in which religion may be manifesting itself in the online environment and to also understand how the usage of previously popular types of online interactions may be changing. On March 28<sup>th</sup> 2012, Jagraj Singh posted a series of videos on his

youtube channel.<sup>9</sup> Since then Jagraj Singh has released over 14000 videos, and has appeared on Sikh television stations and on the BBC. The religious environment online is extremely fluid with social media including Facebook and Twitter being a key tool in allowing researchers to keep up to date with the latest developments.

Regarding their online interactions, it has been shown that young Sikhs go online for a number of reasons, with a useful distinction being made between whether or not the user is looking for religious knowledge e.g. about taboo subjects or about the diversity of Sikh ideologies verses looking for religious engagement e.g. with the Guru Granth Sahib or with an event being broadcast online. This distinction between seeking knowledge verses engagement puts the onus about the type of online interaction on the individual user. In terms of community, I found that the discussion forums and social media do not constitute communities in the offline sense, as these online communities play much less of a 'regulatory' role. Unlike offline communities which it is usually only possible to leave following a physical re-location, online communities can be joined and left at any time. In this regard online communities only appear to be relevant if they relate to an offline equivalent, echoing Dawson and Cowan's view that "the Internet is not a reality separate from "the real world," but an electronic extension of it" (2004: 12).

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined the methodology and research methods used to examine how young British Sikhs learn about Sikhism, why they organise events to teach Sikhism, and the impact of new technologies including translation software and the Internet impacting on their religious learning. The rationale for using a mixed method approach has been explained as has the practical implementation of each of the research methods used. The development of the online survey in particular has been shown to be the method through which most of the data was gathered, with the online presence being an important way in which many young Sikhs learnt about and became engaged with the research. The online survey worked in the case of my research primarily because my target age group was Internet savvy and comfortable with online engagement, emphasising that a research strategy and methods must be tailored towards the particular group being researched.

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<sup>9</sup> The 'Basics of Sikhi' youtube channel is available at:  
<http://www.youtube.com/user/basicsofsikhi/>

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