Young social media users less committed to single religion, research shows

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WACO—Young people who use social media are more likely to develop a "pick-and-choose" approach to customize their faith—regardless what their religious tradition teaches—than those who do not use social media, a Baylor University study revealed.

"On Facebook, there is no expectation that one's 'likes' be logically consistent and hidebound by tradition," said Baylor sociology researcher Paul K. McClure. "Religion, as a result, does not consist of timeless truths. … Instead, the Facebook effect is that all spiritual options become commodities and resources that individuals can tailor to meet their needs."

Social media users also are more likely to see it as acceptable for others of their faith tradition to practice other religions, said McClure, a doctoral candidate at Baylor. However, the so-called "spiritual tinkerers" are not necessarily more likely to believe all religions are true.

Social networking site users are between 50 to 80 percent more likely to be flexible about varied religious beliefs and practices, according to McClure's findings. The study—"Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age: The Effects of Social Networking Sites on the Religious Beliefs of Emerging Adults"—is published in the journal Sociological Perspectives.

Findings are based on an analysis of data from the National Study of Youth and Religion. McClure used three waves of telephone surveys with youths and their parents from 2002 to 2013. The first wave surveyed 3,290 English and Spanish-speaking youths between the ages of 13 and 17 and followed

them until they were ages 22 to 29.

More than 89 percent of young adults report using social network sites with some frequency, according to previous research.

Survey respondents answered three questions about their faith:

- Which statement comes closest to your views of religion? (1) Only one religion is true; (2) Many religions may be true; (3) There is very little truth in any religion.
- Do you agree or disagree with this statement? "Some people think that it is OK to pick and choose religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of their religious faith as a whole."
- Do you think it is OK for someone of your religion to also practice other religions, or should people only practice one?

Respondents and their parents also were asked how often they attended religious services in the past year, not including weddings, baptisms and funerals. Their choices were never, a few times a year, many times a year, once a month, two to three times a month, once a week or more than once a week.

The research took into account age, race, gender, income, religious affiliations and religious attendance.

Other findings:

- Women are more inclined to believe all religions are true, as opposed to believing only one is true or there is very little truth to religion.
- Religious attendance—and the religious attendance of one's parents—matters. Those who attend regularly are less likely to accept the idea all religions are true compared to only one religion, but the likelihood of "picking and choosing" increases with more

time spent with social media.

- Married people are less likely to accept the notion of many religions being true when compared with only one.
- Increases in one's level of education are associated with increased odds of picking and choosing one's religious beliefs.

"What this study suggests is that social technologies have an effect on how we think of religious beliefs and traditional institutions," McClure said.

"In particular, those who spend time on social networking sites like Facebook are more likely to think it's perfectly acceptable to experiment with other religions and claim they do not need to remain committed to the teachings of a singular tradition. In this way, emerging adults may distinguish themselves from older generations not only in their use of technology, but in how they think of religion.

"The fact that these two phenomena may be related is striking and deserves further research at the intersection of religion and technology."