

Virtual Sacred Architecture and Digital Religion: Ambiance Perception of Light And Spiritual Experience

The recent and unceasing development of new media platforms have facilitated the burgeoning of a new form of spirituality channeled through a myriad of digital outlets. Scholars from different disciplines, mainly social sciences and humanities, have carried out studies about virtual spirituality; however up to date, there are no concrete results of an empirical study assessing the extent of spirituality experienced by the user. Furthermore, prior studies focused on the textual narrative of digital spirituality rather than the visual narrative. Thus, this study focuses on the expression of virtual sacred architecture and its effect on the spiritual experience. Moreover, it proposes a quantitative method to test the spiritual experience as emotions relating to the graphical representation of virtual sacred architecture. An inter-relationship has been established between three major elements: (a) faith/religion, (b) sacred architecture, and (c) digital media. The three intersect and create the spiritual experience. Since light has one of the most dramatic effects in creating that experience, the investigation demonstrates the effect of light on worshipers' emotions while using virtual sacred spaces (e.g. churches in Second Life). Three variables were identified for this investigation: light, sacred architecture, and spiritual experience expressed as emotions. The correlation between light and sacred architecture is mutual as light impacts the way architecture is perceived, while architecture alters the light penetration into the space. This relationship shapes the interior ambiance of the space, in itself affecting the spiritual experience.

Furthermore, there is an inter-relationship between context and identity. Architecture plays a role in creating the context people relate to and identify with, hence yielding the identity. Identity is perceived here as the extent to which the audience members involve themselves in the visual representation of the space. In my assessment of the spiritual experience in a virtual sacred space, identity

was addressed with questions about emotions. The participants were exposed to two walkthrough videos of the interior of a Gothic church in which the light intensity penetrating the space was manipulated to create different interior ambiances. The results show a significance of the light effect on the spiritual experience. Some findings, for example, show an effect between context and light on the awe emotion. The more light penetrating the space, the more awe was felt. There was also significance between light and positive emotions (joy, and content). An ANOVA test also suggests an effect of the context on fear. Darker ambiance experienced individually (not in a group) increases the emotion of fear compare to a brighter space.

This relation of media, religion, and architecture, draws upon a multidisciplinary scholarly research in diverse disciplines such as communication and media studies, sacred architecture, religious studies, psychology, and computer graphics. This study utilizes an experimental methodology to bridge between these disciplines and offer an outlet for a new facet of studying media and religion as related to graphical spatial representations. Moreover, this empirical method evaluates identity through emotions creating a spiritual experience in a virtual setting.