



A Digital Anthropological Examination of the Behaviour of Sri Lankan Buddhism in the Fourth Industrial Revolution

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ABSTRACT

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is a way of depicting the obscurity of boundaries between the physical, digital, and natural worlds. Among various divisions of 4IR, the concept of 'digital' plays one of the prominent roles as it tends to affect various areas in the modern world. Digital anthropology examines the impact and the relationship between digitalization and human cultural aspects. Religion is a key factor of culture that emphasizes the unique characteristics of human social behaviour. Modern-day Buddhism in Sri Lanka is known as "Popular Buddhism" as it is reshaped with contemporary social and cultural practices and influence. "Dialectic nature of digital culture" is a key principle in digital anthropology which explains the aspects of digitalization and culture. As a theoretical analysis, based on existing literature this paper attempts to describe the validity of applying this principle to the modern popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka to understand the behaviour and the appearance of itself in digital space. Dialectic is one of the key concepts established by Fredrich Hegel during the 19th century. There are three contradictions in dialectic as thesis, antithesis and synthesis. A thesis gives growth to its reaction; an antithesis negates the thesis; and the conflict between the two is determined through a synthesis. When considering Facebook and YouTube posts based on modern popular Buddhism and their comments, a particular dialectic nature can be identified very clearly, as the relevant audience engaged with under thesis, antithesis, and synthesis comments. We suggest analyzing the comments of the relevant posts on social media under the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis categories to emphasize the changes of the modern popular Buddhism. We also propose to extend the studies based on Buddhism in the digital world through the novel digital anthropological perspective as it directly underlines the relationship between the human and digital world.

KEYWORDS: Digital Buddhism, Culture, Popular Buddhism, Dialectic, Anthropology

1 INTRODUCTION

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is a manner of describing the distortion of barriers among the physical, digital, and biological worlds. It is a collective strength behind many of the products and services that are essential to the contemporary life of humans. Considering the basis of 4IR the concept of “Digital” plays one of the noticeable roles and it describes the technology based on electronics that produces, stores, and processes data considering both positive and negative (binary numbers). Positive is denoted by number 1 and negative is denoted by 0. Digital technology is primarily used with new physical communication media such as satellites and fiber optic transmission. Digitization today seems to have had a profound effect not only on material cultures but also on non-material cultures. This paper seeks to explain the impact of digitalization on religion, a distinctive part of a culture, through a digital anthropological theoretical perspective.

The main research problem of this study is whether we can apply digital anthropological theoretical aspects to understand the behaviour of the modern Sri Lankan popular Buddhism context. Our main objective is to elucidate how Sri Lankan modern popular Buddhism can be identified in the face of digitization in 4IR with the provision of digital anthropology. This article consists of several key sections. Firstly, it studies digitization and its nature from a digital anthropological perspective, using the principle of the “dialectical nature of digital culture” that comes under the field of digital anthropology. Then the above principle is confirmed by the digital spatial examples in the present Sri Lankan social mechanism. Although popular Buddhism has been studied in the Sri Lankan social context in the past, there has been no digital anthropological study of how it has changed in the face of digitization. This qualitative research was conducted to fill the existing research gap. Secondary data were used mainly for this study and theoretical ideas

were collected from the literature of Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller (2012) on digital anthropology.

The literature review of this study took place under several basic aspects. The literature, regarding the study were examined in the fields of culture, religion, Buddhism, and popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka, digitalization and digital anthropology.

1.1 Religion as a prominent element of culture

Culture is one of the key elements in anthropology and anthropologists pay unique attention to this concept in their studies of society as a whole. Considering the early studies of the concept of culture, Edward Burnett Tylor makes one of the prominent contributions and according to Tylor (1871) culture is a complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. According to Clifford Geertz (1974), culture is the primary guide for human beings to their acts and experiences. It is something that occurs and spreads among living people. Kroeber’s ideas (1948) underline the superorganic nature of culture. A pattern of human behaviour reflects the culture he or she inherits. According to Ralph Linton (1931) culture is a thing that carries from generation to generation. Melville J. Herskovits (1950) proposed several features of culture: it is a learned thing; it can be divided into several aspects, structural and its probability of transformation. Anthropology endorses the principle of cultural relativism which emphasizes that each culture has its guidelines for understanding (Eller 2007).

Religion is commonly accepted as a vital component of culture and the study of religion has been fundamental to anthropology. Tylor’s definition of “belief in spiritual beings” is considered as a leading idea of religious studies (Tylor 1871). According to Frazer (1958), religion is a conciliation of power which has a

straight impact on mankind. It directs and controls the course of nature and human life. Émile Durkheim's ideas on religion are considered foremost in both sociology and anthropology. He defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" (Durkheim 1965, p. 62). Geertz's (1974) ideas on religion underline a few key elements as given below. According to Eller (2007), this definition is considered the most commonly quoted definition of religion as it underlines significant aspects of religion which can be easily identified. Religion,

- is a system of symbols,
- establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men
- formulates conceptions of a general order of existence

According to Saroglou and Cohen (2011), religion is a part of the culture and it constitutes, shapes and interacts with culture. Religion is influenced by culture. Religion, as a socially sustained system of transmitted beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and practices, can be conceived as itself constituting culture that is, a form of culture in the same way that ethnicity, region, and socioeconomic status define distinct cultural systems, each with its own beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and practices (Cohen 2009). The culture constantly changes. Physical culture changes rapidly compared to immaterial culture. Religion as a cultural element also has these physical and immaterial qualities. So as culture changes, the religion it contains also changes with time and space.

1.2 Buddhism and Popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka

Present Buddhism is divided into three distinct traditions as (1) the Theravada tradition, (2) the Mahayana tradition, and (3) the Tibetan/Vajrayana tradition. The Theravada tradition which is also known as 'southern' Buddhism can be identified in Sri Lanka while the Mahayana tradition is established in China,

Korea, Japan. The Tibetan tradition is sometimes referred to as 'northern Buddhism'. All three of these traditions look back to ancient Buddhism and the land of India (Gethin 1998). According to Walpola Rahula Thero (1959), man's position according to Buddhism, is supreme. Man is his own master, and no higher being or power sits in judgment over his destiny. He argues that (Rahula 1959) the freedom of thought allowed by the Buddha is unheard of elsewhere in the history of religions. According to the Buddha's statements such as *Kālāma*, emphasizing the freedom of thought in Buddhism.

The arrival of Arahant Mahinda in the 3rd Century BC initiated a new socio and cultural phenomenon in Sri Lankan society. Popular Buddhism is one of the prominent concepts in Sri Lankan society as it represents the transformation of early Buddhism. Gananath Obeyesekere, Richard Gombrich, Kithsiri Malalgoda are some prominent scholars who studied the novel traditions, changes and trends of Buddhism during the early colonial era in Sri Lanka. They argued that complex social and cultural behaviour straightly caused several evolutionary factors in early Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Protestant Buddhism is one of the prominent concepts proposed by Obeyesekere and Gombrich (1988). It elucidates the influence of Christianity on Buddhism during the early colonial period of Sri Lanka which arises due to complex social and cultural changes. Obeyesekere, Gombrich (1988), and Malalgoda (1976) argue that the arrival of Henry Steel Olcott is one of the prominent incidents causing the Sri Lankan Buddhist cultural phenomenon. Obeyesekere pointed out that this novel tradition of Buddhism emerged from the behaviour of the urban Buddhist community. Defining Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion is characterized as a feature of protestant Buddhism by Obeyesekere. Anagarika Dharmapala was interested in the innovations of Olcott. The Buddhist flag, Buddhist catechism, Vesak cards, Buddhist devotional

songs were some major characteristics of Olcott's innovations. Obeyesekere and Gombrich stated that besides exposing Christian style to Buddhism, Olcott initiated organizations that had a more solid impact on Buddhism. (Obeyesekere & Gombrich 1988, p. 205).

Popular Buddhism is a concept inspired by popular culture. Amarasekara (2019) argues that due to the novel system of beliefs, rituals reshape traditional Buddhism into a whole new dimension, which can be identified as popular Buddhism. One of the key reasons for the popularization of Buddhism is the impact of political culture. Rahula Thero states that (1962) Buddhism changed into a priestly organization after becoming the state religion. According to the investigation, the term 'popular Buddhism' was first coined by Gananath Obeyesekere. Although the term 'popular religion' was used by various scholars, it was found that Obeyesekere used the term 'popular Buddhism' in various places. His article "The Buddha in Sri Lanka: Histories and Stories (2018)" entitled "Colonel Olcott: Buddhist modernism in the Theosophical movement" states:

- "Olcott's condemnation of **popular religion** is carried over into the Catechism" (p. 259)
- "Perhaps the most interesting part is where he justifies **popular Buddhist** ideas pertaining Buddha rays and the power of arahants (arahats)..." (p. 261)
- "A large part of Dharmapala's corpus is entirely devoted to the **popularization of doctrinal Buddhism.**" (p. 263)
- One fundamental feature of **popular Buddhist** belief everywhere is that the Buddha is present in his relics and his.... (p. 269)

1.3 Fourth Industrial Revolution and Digital Anthropology

Contemporary "Industry 4.0" (also known as the 4th Industrial Revolution, and 4IR)

elucidates the digital transformation in industries and the value creation process. Systems that generate and process binary data are referred to as digital. Computers are fundamentally digital machines because they process data encoded as binary values, either positive (represented as 1) or negative (represented as 0). These values, known as bits, are grouped into bytes, which serve as the foundation for all computer systems (Lasi et al. 2014). Horst and Miller (2012) define 'the digital' as everything that has been developed by or can be reduced to the binary, that is, bits consisting of 0s and 1s. They proposed six key principles related to the cultural dogma of digital. Defining dialectic through digital is the first of them (Miller & Horst 2012, p. 4). Industry 4.0 has been defined as a name for the current trend of automation and data sharing in manufacturing technologies, including cyber-physical systems, the Internet of Things, cloud and cognitive computing, and the creation of smart factories.

Digital anthropology is a modern field of study that emerged with the work of Miller and Horst (2012). In digital anthropology, we focused on the relationship between culture and digital. Present society is changing rapidly due to digitalization and the impact of digital concepts directly caused the transformation in cultural context. Abhayasundere, Jayaweera and Wijayarathna (2021) argue that digital anthropological knowledge can be applied to understand Sri Lankan present social context considering Buddhism as a key example.

1.4 Digital and Buddhism

According to Campbell and Evolvi (2019), digital religious studies provide a better understanding of the digital media's impact upon culture within a broader context. When pondering the early work of digital and religions like Buddhism, Grieve and Veidlinger (2015) studied the cultural change and the influence of digital media, digital devices on Buddhism. Loonlawan and others (2018) proposed a method and process for establishing

a centre for the production of Buddhist digital communication era 4.0 through the cooperation of a group network in Chiang Rai province in Thailand. Shakya (2019) studied the impact of digital technology on Buddhist education considering India, Thailand, Korea. He emphasized the positive and negative impact of technology on Buddhist education. One of the key positive impacts of digital Buddhist education is online classes. As distant learning and online education became an internal part of education in Buddhist Universities, online classes made a huge impact on Buddhist education globally. According to Collins and Halverson (2009) one of the prominent negative impacts of digitized Buddhist education is that the teachers do feel that their expertise in the field has become redundant or limited due to the students having free access to an unlimited amount of information. Abhayasundere, Jayaweera and Wijayarathna (2021) studied the role of Buddhism in social media in the Sri Lankan context considering the religious posts and the feedback of the respective audience. Although there is a significant gap considering the studies based on digital, Buddhism, and the transformation of religion in Sri Lankan social context. This paper attends to fulfil the particular gap across the content based on existing literature.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY / MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper was based on one prominent academic foundation, as the first principle of digital anthropology (dialectic nature of digital culture) which was proposed by Daniel Miller and Heather A. Horst. To examine these theoretical phenomena, we randomly used significant cases from social media via YouTube and Facebook which engaged with a high amount of audience. All the cases that were poised are publicly uploaded to the relevant social media platforms and this research was conducted with a proper ethical background. With an interpretive paradigm, we utilized the naturalist methodology for this study considering theoretical analysis. The

relevant cases were analyzed with the applicability of digital anthropological principle: dialectic nature of digital culture.

3 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Buddhism of Sri Lankans is non-other than the foundation of the culture in Sri Lankan society. Digitalization straightly affects present society in many ways. One of the key incidents is the Covid 19 pandemic. During the pandemic, Sri Lankan society had to get used to the new normalization along with digitalization and its impact. The health sector, education, and communication divisions were digitized promptly as there are no other solutions for the daily basis of the country. Therefore there is no doubt to state that the concept of digital is a prominent element that affects the socio-cultural phenomenon of a country.

The ‘five great debates’ or Pancha Maha Vāda which were held in 1865, 1866, 1871, 1873, and 1899 can be stated as the main factor persuading the reinstatement of the diminishing Sri Lankan Buddhist identity. In comparison to the arrival of Arahant Mahinda, Henry Steele Olcott's arrival on February 17, 1880 is the second watershed moment in Sri Lankan Buddhism. With the formation of the Theosophical Buddhist Society, Blavatsky's knowledge of the supernatural forces she possessed, and administrative and legal knowledge through Olcott's military leadership contributed to the creation of a broad religious force. Critics pronounce that Olcott succeeded in carrying out a symbolic revolution in the Sri Lankan Buddhist way of life through the Theosophical Buddhist Association. In particular, the creation of the Buddhist flag, the creation of Buddhist posters, the transformation of Vesak into a public holiday, the creation of Vesak hymns (Bhakti Geetha) in keeping with the format of Christmas carols, and the introduction of Vesak greeting cards in line with Christmas greeting cards can be elucidated as the prominent symbolic values which obtained by the influence of Olcott and others. They initiated a new form of Buddhism with its

applied aspect similar to the influence of Christianity. One of the main points made by the two authors here is that Olcott is merely a patron of Protestant Buddhism. The strongest follower here is Dharmapala.

When it comes to Buddhism and digitalization, Sri Lankan society plays a significant role. According to the existing literature, the nature of the Buddhism of Sri Lankan cultural aspect converted into distinctive dimensions. Many argue that there is no validity in defining that Buddhism was evolved, instead of Buddhist cultural practices. Although we suggest that due to digitalization and the development of technology in 4IR, the behaviour of modern popular Buddhism is immensely evolving and this phenomenon can be identified with the applicability of digital anthropological principles.

From a digital anthropological perspective, we can identify six principles as proposed by Daniel Miller and Heather A. Horst (2012) as follows.

1. The digital intensifies the dialectical nature of culture
2. Humanity is not one iota
3. The commitment to holism
4. Cultural relativism and the global nature
5. The ambiguity of digital culture
6. The materiality of digital worlds

The dialectic nature of digital culture is a key idea that can be applied to understand the behaviour of modern popular Buddhism. According to the objectives of this study, we analyze the applicability of this theory rather than other principles.

Dialectic is a concept developed by Hegel and Marx. Some state that it is the art or practice of arriving at the truth by the exchange of logical arguments. There are several categories of ideas based on dialectic before Hegel's dialectic such as Socratic and Platonic dialectic, Aristotelian dialectic, Stoical and Medieval dialectic, Hindu

dialectic, Daoist dialectic, Kantian dialectic, and Buddhist dialectic. Hegel's dialectic, which he usually presented in a threefold manner, comprises three dialectical stages of development: (1) a thesis, giving rise to its reaction, (2) an antithesis which contradicts or negates the thesis, and (3) the tension between the two being resolved to utilize a synthesis.

A thesis gives growth to its reaction; an antithesis negates the thesis, and the friction between the two is determined employing a synthesis. According to Horst and Miller (2012), this dialectic thinking can be identified in digital culture. Digital can increase the logical nature of culture. Industrialization, urbanization, and globalization brought our world into the face of digitalization, and modern Sri Lankan society experiences the positive and negative impacts of itself socially, culturally, economically, and politically. To understand, and compare the early and the present status of respective divisions, particular principles can be applied through a digital anthropological perspective.

Today we experience the modernization of Buddhist discourse via various digital platforms. Some of them are completely different from the Buddha's statements. Contemplating Facebook we acquired a few cases and the following case is an example that reflects the nature of modern popular Buddhism.



Figure 1: Facebook post titled 'is modern Buddhism weird?'

This post was publicly uploaded to both Facebook and YouTube in video format by Independent Television Network, one of the leading television channels in Sri Lanka. As the post was publicly uploaded with full access (react, comment and share) to the audience, we utilized it without any legal or ethical issues. The full video was uploaded to YouTube on 2021.07.15 by the ITN network. It represents one of the prominent modernized Buddhist institutions in Sri Lanka named “Umandawa” (aka Siri Sadaham Ashramaya’). Siri Samanthabhadra Thero is the leading figure who makes controversial statements that demonstrate the nature of modern popular Buddhism. Considering the Facebook engagement of the above-mentioned post, more than 75,000 people have watched it, 195 comments are given, and more than 2000 people have reacted to it. These statistical data emphasize the side of nature and the reaction of the community to modern Buddhism on digital platforms. The question that arises now is how to apply the selected principle based on the dialectic nature of digital culture in the field of digital anthropology to the existing post and identify.

Comments are one of the valuable sets of data that help to categorize the features of the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis nature of particular behaviour of modern Buddhism in digital stages. While some comments agree with the respective opinion, some express opposing views, and some identify how the existing system should be improved. Sorting the comments will open a novel door to the study and they will lead to identifying the dialectic nature of modern popular Buddhism in digital media. Considering the ratio of the particular divisions, we can argue that the engagement of the respective audience accepts or rejects the existing system.



Figure 2: Dialog Axiata digital Poson Aloka Pooja Experience 2019



Figure 3: Dialog Axiata digital Vesak Poya day celebration 2020

Above mentioned figures were selected from a leading telecommunication company of Sri Lanka, named Dialog Axiata. They signify the digitalization of the Sri Lankan most important religious festival, the Vesak day celebration. Olcott made the Vesak day celebration a vital cultural event in Sri Lanka as he persuaded the government to declare it as a public holiday. He encouraged Buddhists to celebrate it with songs modelled on Christmas carols. He further developed the custom of sending Vesak cards on the analogy of Christmas cards. Although in the 4IR period, many customs and practices of the Vesak celebrations were evolved with the influence of digitalization. People send their Vesak wishes via digital platforms. Social media performs one of the key roles during this occasion as it connects the people of the world through digital devices such as computers and mobile phones. Not only the lay community, but monks also utilize these devices in their Dhamma sermons and practices. During Covid

19 pandemic Sri Lankan people missed the Vesak celebration for three consecutive periods. Although their practices such as Dhamma sermons were conducted through digital platforms. Here in Sri Lanka, several Buddhist television channels spread the message of Buddha by broadcasting various

programs. Therefore, in the Vesak period, these channels and the other state and private television channels ~~led to~~ hold numerous programs to emphasize the importance of celebrating Vesak. This incident reflects the dialectic nature of digital culture, and it can be displayed as follows.

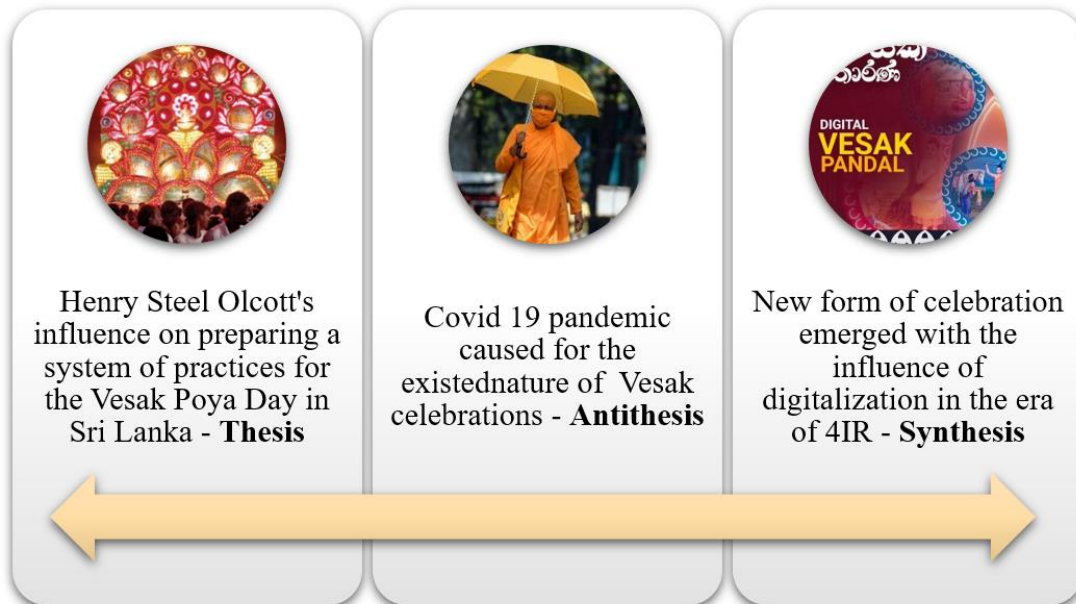


Figure 4: Dialectic nature of digital culture through the Covid period and Vesak celebrations

When contemplating the nature of present Sri Lankan Buddhism there is a considerable negative opinion regarding the behaviour of monks. One of the key factors that underline this mind is the politicization of Buddhism. This consequence was firstly mentioned by Walpola Rahula Thero in 1956 as he stated “from the time Buddhism became the state religion, it began to change” in his book *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*. With the influence of digitalization, various types of applications have emerged on several platforms like Apple Store and Google Play Store. TikTok has been one of the most popularized apps in the world and in Sri Lankan present context various incidents illustrated the utilization of this app by the community of monks. There is no prohibition of using this app for monks, although it underlines the diffusion of cultural elements around the globe via digital platforms in this digital age for the evolution of popular Buddhism in Sri Lankan socio-cultural phenomenon. Considering the opinions of the

Buddhist lay community regarding the behaviour of some Buddhist monks, previously elucidated dialectic nature can be identified easily through their statements.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Buddhism is the central factor in the core culture of Sri Lanka since the 3rd century BC. It has experienced various changes over time and space. Although there have been various studies on the behaviour and nature of Buddhism in the past, very few studies on the changes that have taken place in Sri Lankan Buddhism in the digital space in the face of modern industrial revolutions. Accordingly, through this study, we suggest that the behaviour of modern Sri Lankan Buddhism in the face of digitization can be examined from a digital anthropological perspective. To accomplish it, an in-depth academic discussion on digital anthropology should arise. We consider that the digital anthropological perspective on the Sri Lankan

social context can be used to study the digital cultural behaviour of global social contexts as well. The theoretical setting of digital anthropology can be applied to understand the modern behaviour of popular Sri Lankan Buddhism. Digital anthropological ideas and concepts have not been applied in the Sri Lankan religious context by academics as this field of study is a developing dimension in anthropology. Therefore, this paper stressed developing and redefining the concept of 'digital Buddhism' based on digitization with the background of digital anthropology. Digitization builds the modern background of Buddhism. It seems to take the traditional task of Buddhism in a different direction. The cultural role of Buddhism applies to the 'Great Tradition' as well as the 'Little Tradition'. A non-material culture changes slowly.

Focusing on the dialectical nature of culture, it is clear that the pace of that change has intensified in the face of digitization. This study highlights that the dialectical nature of culture has intensified in the face of digitization. In it, we bring up the behaviour of Buddhism in digital spaces such as social media. The most striking feature of this is that in the change of Buddhism, the sermon of the Buddha, as well as the popular culture, have undergone the same changes. The change in the teachings of the Buddha is largely due to the behaviour of the monks' community. New ideas, arguments based on Buddha's sayings, and ambiguities in Dhamma facts are found in modern sermons with the discourses of popular monks. The digital space contributes greatly to their expansion. Digitization is changing the new Buddhist cultural landscape created in Sri Lanka in the face of colonialism and in the face of modern socio-cultural changes. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis nature can be seen in the modern digital space.

As suggestions, we propose a few points. There is a vast lack of digital anthropological studies in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, there should be a novel academic colloquium in digital anthropology as it studies the prominent

characteristics of the relationship between human culture and digital which demonstrate the present social and cultural background. Secondly, we suggest increasing digital religious studies because today we currently face comprehensive alterations in every kind of religion in the digital space. Due to the traditional holistic approach of anthropology, this type of study is essential. This paper proposes that digital anthropological principles can be applied to other religions also to identify the dialectic nature of culture. We conclude that the 'Digital Buddhism' concept should be the next phase of modern Sri Lankan popular Buddhism.

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