



Religious (in)tolerance in digital narratives: A critical analysis of how
religious studies professionals can play a role in the responsible use of
digital narratives

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Abstract

This thesis was focused on the complex relationship between religion, tolerance, religious education, and narrative. The digital world is lending a steady stream of narratives toward humanity on a daily basis. Narratives are not just a mere form of entertainment but form part of the information received by humans. The thesis explored how narratives can potentially impact the human mind through narrative theories. Narrative theories showcase why narratives may help increase the effectiveness of fact-based learning. The constant availability of narratives leads to questions about the accuracy of the information found within the narratives. Narratives contain information on a myriad of topics and disciplines.

This thesis focused on religious people and phenomena as portrayed in narratives. Although not all narratives are concerned with religion, a large amount of information on religion can be found within narratives. This thesis was based on a quantitative literature review. The main concern was how the responsible use of narratives can be encouraged through religious education settings (non-confessional). The thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context but rather considers the use of digital narratives within religious education settings in a global technology and narrative-forward context. The thesis showcased why digital narratives and the information found therein are important.

As many different geographical spaces are becoming more multireligious, propagating tolerant multireligious societies is important. Narratives can have accurate and valuable information that people can learn from throughout their lives. This can partly be achieved through para-social interaction with narrative characters, building curiosity about phenomena found in narratives and practising a conscious retrospective reflection. However, many narratives have inaccurate, stereotypical, or dehumanising views on religious constructs and the people who adhere to them. These types of depictions can lead to an increase in intolerance if digital narrative users do not view the information critically. Therefore, there is a duality of (in)tolerance within the information found within digital narratives. As narratives may create or inhibit tolerance, it is of great importance for religious studies specialists to take note of the dualistic nature of narratives. Therefore, the large number of digital narratives within the public sphere has implications for religious education.

Key terms

Religion, tolerance, intolerance, religious education, narrative, humanisation, digital narrative

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Jacques Strydom. Without your love and motivation, this thesis would not have been possible. You have supported me not only in my academic pursuits but in the personal struggles that we faced during this time. Together, we will climb and explore the new mountains that await us.

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List of ANNEXURES

ANNEXURE A: Ethical clearance letter

Abbreviations

MQ	Main question
SQ	Sub question
RG	Research Goal
PC	Proposed contributions
eBook	Electronic book
11 September 2001	9/11
United Kingdom	UK
United States of America	USA

Chapter One: Introduction

In this Chapter, the (i) *Background*, (ii) *Problem statement*, (iii) *Objectives* ((iii.i) *Research questions*, (iii.ii) *Research goals*, (iii.iii) *Proposed contributions* (iii.iv) *Themes*), (iv) *Theoretical framework*, (v) *Methodology*, (vi) *Defining religion*, (vii) *Chapter outline and literature overview*, and (viii) the *Chapter themes* are given.

1.1 Background

Computers, in their many forms, give humans access to the digital world. However, these electronic devices do not have a long history with humanity. The first computers that did well on the market were calculators in the 1970s (Ceruzzi 2003:213). These computers were exceedingly large, could do little compared to today and were wildly expensive (Ceruzzi 2003:208). From 1985, personal computers were getting more complex and accessible to the average person (Ceruzzi 2003:217). Today, many people have access to digital devices. This notwithstanding that equal opportunity is not yet available for all of humanity when considering technology. This is known as digital inequality or is also described as the digital divide (Ünver 2017:1). Technology has come very far, considering the resources humanity has at the tips of their fingers through computers like laptops, cell phones, and tablets. So much can be done with this technology, from making calls (audio and/or video), sending text messages on multiple platforms, cameras, calculators, ordering supplies, tracking fitness, calendars, time zones, mobile banking, getting information at the touch of a button and the enjoyment of digital narratives. Users of these devices are almost just limited to their imagination.

While all the functions of digital technology are interesting, this study focuses on narratives that can be enjoyed through these technological advances. While digital technology does not have a long history with humanity, the same can not be said for narratives. Narrative can be seen throughout human history (Gottschall 2012:loc 63). However, digital technology has changed the sheer amount of narratives available to humans at any moment (Gottschall 2021:22; Sestir & Green 2010:273). Technology has now enabled humanity to have narratives at the touch of a button. Narrative creates meaning and can influence humanity's understanding of themselves and the world (McGrath 2019:9, 26; Gottschall 2021:12); this can be seen

through cultural, religious, personal and digital narratives (Plate 2021a:204). Plate (2021a:209) made the following observation:

Most obviously for early twenty-first-century life, the mass media embodies us through the internet, social media, television, video games, and news outlets, as well as linking us with war, enacted political ideologies, and global viral pandemics. Media technologies have reshaped our social structures and religious experiences and ultimately are reshaping our bodies in space and time.

The ease of accessibility and the sheer number of narratives available to humanity today is staggering (Gottschall 2021:22). Not all narratives are well-informed and trustworthy, and their impact depends on how they are used (Valentine 2012:viii). Narratives have the potential to propagate intolerance and strong us-versus-them concepts (Ford 2022:311). However, it is possible to benefit and learn from narratives (Gottschall 2021:20), thereby also increasing empathy and tolerance (Nussbaum 2012:145; Murrar & Brauer 2017:4). The dual nature of narrative to propagate both tolerance and intolerance lends the term of (in)tolerance to the title of the thesis. When the term (in)tolerance is used in the thesis, the dualistic nature should be understood rather than the term referring to tolerance or intolerance in isolation.

The type of narratives explored in this thesis is not overtly religious. The narratives rather contain religious-related concepts and simulations. These concepts include rituals, symbols, myths, spirituality and religious people, who are depicted either in a tolerant or intolerant manner. In other words, although many religions' holy literature contain narratives, these are not the narratives under investigation. Instead, the narratives explored in this thesis have not been constructed to be religious but contain religious concepts. If narratives from holy literature feature in a film, then it will be of consequence to this thesis. The narratives form part of the information humans receive and can affect their affective realism. The nature of the narratives referred to in the thesis is discussed in more detail in Chapter four under the heading *Religious narrative*.

The impact of the information in the digital world depends on who receives it and how they work with it. Humanity has not yet perfected the concept of multi-religious societies. Building religious tolerance and interreligious conversation is essential for cohabitation in multi-religious societies. Much semantics are found between terms such as religion studies and religious studies. For this study, religious studies and religion studies were seen as interchangeable terms for studying multiple religions in institutions such as universities in a non-confessional manner (definition in Chapter Three). The thesis was written with the concept of tertiary education in mind. In the thesis, the term classroom is encountered; this still refers

to tertiary education, although lectures and lecture halls may also be appropriate terms. The term classroom was used because some theories discussed within the thesis also directly apply to younger groups. Narrative and religious education can be valuable tools to use together from a young age. The concept of age groups is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three under the heading *age groups*. Regardless, teaching people to work critically with the information they receive while maintaining healthy constructs is very important.

It is important to note that the thesis is not a curriculum. The thesis is not overtly focused on a specific context. The problem of digital narratives and the evaluation of these narratives in pluralistic societies is a global problem (varying by context). Furthermore, digital narratives do not dwell in their place of origin but have a way of travelling globally. What is considered responsible content in one context is not necessarily responsible in another. Content creators are responsible for creating responsible content; this comes with pitfalls when considering globalisation. Content consumers are also responsible for evaluating and interpreting information received from narratives. This is especially important, considering the content receiver and creator may live in vastly different contexts. Furthermore, some narratives are created with the intention of propagating intolerance. Narrative consumers must thus guard against negative implications from such narratives.

The research hypothesis was that religious studies can be critical when teaching people how to work with information. Many religion studies courses are already practising and teaching the use of critical thinking. Critical thinking is one of the many concepts that can help promote tolerance in multireligious societies (Nussbaum 2012:3). One should consider that variation may occur in the amount of critical thinking being encouraged, as religious studies are not uniform in all institutions and countries. Furthermore, this does not mean that other disciplines do not practice and teach critical thinking abilities. Instead, this study is focused on religious studies, where critical thinking is mainly taught through traditional teaching methods (e.g. lectures, books, and articles). The researcher does not propose that the current systems fall away. The researcher proposes that religious studies should also utilise the vast amount of information found in digital narratives to help develop creative, critical thinking abilities. This is not to say that there is no trace of creative learning within religious studies or that some religious studies professionals do not already utilise the digital world. This study explores the benefits and pitfalls of narrative and its relevance for religious education. It will be helpful for educators who want to explore digital narratives as a teaching tool.

Whether or not religious studies take on this task, people will still be bombarded with information from the digital world. Religious studies can have a significant impact in helping humans navigate the vast amounts of information that they encounter daily. By utilising digital narratives in religious studies, one generates creative learning opportunities. This will cause people to be less susceptible to propaganda through critical thinking. This will enable people to use critical thinking to discern what information is beneficial, correct and valuable. Digital narratives can be a tool that will help build religious tolerance in multi-cultural societies. Narratives have been proven to influence the human mind and behaviour (Gottschall 2012:loc 1816). It is essential to be aware of the influence of narrative in one's daily life. Technology has made narrative readily available in ample amounts. Therefore, the responsible use of digital narratives is of great importance.

1.2 Problem statement

Technology has advanced rapidly over the last fifty years. How humans receive information has altered. The sheer quantity of information that humans have access to has changed. Within the digital world, there is a constant flow of information and narrative. The information humans receive through the digital world can be helpful or reckless. Countless types of information can be found in the digital world, including information on religion. This includes anything from digital religious ideologies, sharing religious information, fictional accounts of religions, and showcasing fragments of religions and propaganda (and everything in between). The different types of digital narratives were categorised into digital entertainment and internet narratives for this study. Digital narratives include tons of information regarding religion. Before the digital age, the religious information received by the average person was through one's community (family, friends, and place of worship). This is not to say that books and education on religious matters were not available, but rather that the thoughts of an average person would have been formed more by their immediate community. Although communities still significantly impact people's understanding of the world, much information is gathered from the digital world.

As narratives can be a source of information, digital narratives readily available to many people also act as a resource for information. As the information is much more varied than what humans would have previously found in their immediate community, care must be taken to interpret the information found within narratives. Globalisation and immigration patterns have already created a shift where multi-religious societies have become a reality. The construct of a physical and spiritual world is not too foreign within most human societies (although the

divide between the two worlds may look different in diverse societies). Through technological advances, humans now also have access to a digital world. The digital world can create online cultures, communities, and spaces for digital religious groups. The reality is that different digital narratives will inevitably meet. Through the digital world, humans are bombarded with information. The information can be helpful, neutral, or harmful. How each person interprets the information in their context can also vary widely. Lastly, consciously reflecting on the information narrative receivers gain from narratives is necessary.

Narratives have many complex responsibilities that balance between the content creator and content receiver or consumer. Narrative creators are responsible for relaying accurate information when creating content. The problem within a global society is responsible to whom? Conflicting opinions, groups and understanding of the world can significantly impact how information is interpreted. Furthermore, content receivers are responsible for working critically with information received from narratives. Large corporations that broadcast narratives, like streaming services and social media, are also responsible for ensuring that the content on their systems relays accurate information and does not spread intolerance. All these responsibilities compile a complex system that can become conflicting. Therefore, the evaluation of information received through narratives is critical.

The thesis sought to explain the importance of digital narratives in religious education settings. This study focused on the problem of how religious studies professionals can encourage the responsible use, creation and interpretation of information in the digital age in multi-religious societies¹. The ‘how’ in the previous statement may need some clarification. This thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context. Instead, the thesis explored the capacity of religious educators to play a role in encouraging the responsible use of narratives. The scope of the thesis did not allow for the creation of a curriculum. This problem would inevitably overlap with the concept of curriculum and the incorporation of narratives within curricula. One can create a curriculum that is focused on religion in digital narratives. However, narratives can be utilised in existing courses or courses that are being developed that are not overtly focused on digital narratives. The thesis sought to explore why narratives are important and what their influence may be, especially in propagating tolerance and intolerance.

¹ This is a reformulation of the main research question; please see section 1.3.1.

1.3 Objectives

This subsection discussed the *Research Questions* (main question (MQ) and Sub-questions (SQ)), *Research Goals* (RG), *Proposed contributions* (PC), and *themes*. The heading *Chapter themes* can be found throughout the thesis. Under these headings, the SQ, RG and PC met in that Chapter are given and discussed briefly.

1.3.1 Research questions

This section states the research questions that were considered throughout the thesis. The main question (MQ) the research explored was as follows:

- MQ1: How can religious studies professionals encourage the responsible use of information in a digital age in a multi-religious society?

As the MQ is very complex, Sub-questions (SQ) were needed to understand and answer it. The SQ included:

- SQ1: What factors of narrative need to be considered by educators when utilising narratives for educational purposes?
- SQ2: What ethical constructs can help the responsible use of digital narratives?
- SQ3: How can religious studies encourage content creators to work responsibly with the information they contribute to digital narratives?
- SQ4: What role can religious studies play in interpreting digital narratives?
- SQ5: How can digital narratives help with creative methods of teaching religion?
- SQ6: How can religious studies encourage people to employ critical thinking abilities in the digital world?
- SQ7: What means are there to promote religious tolerance in multi-religious societies in the digital world?
- SQ8: What role will the concept of post-secularism play within the analysis of the digital world?
- SQ9: What role can religious studies professionals play in creating responsible digital content?
- SQ10: What balance of responsibilities are found within the production and consumption of digital narratives?
- SQ11: What broad principles can educators follow when working with digital narratives and curricula.

1.3.2 Research Goals

The Research Goals (RG) were as follows:

- RG1: To make people conscious of the digital narrative they experience daily.
- RG2: To encourage responsible and ethical use of the information found and passed on through the digital world.
- RG3: To encourage critical thinking abilities when using information.
- RG4: To show how religious studies can help teach people to use information responsibly.
- RG5: To demonstrate how the digital world can be a resource for creative teaching within the science of religion classes.
- RG6: To encourage tolerance in a multi-cultural society through the informed use of electronic narratives.
- RG7: To encourage content creators in digital fields to relay information accurately and responsibly.
- RG8: To help identify essential factors educators must consider when working with narratives.
- RG9: To help identify digital narratives' implications for religious education.

1.3.3 Proposed contributions

The thesis's proposed contributions (PC) were toward digital humanities², digital religious narratives, tolerance theories and religious education. The main contribution of the thesis was toward how religious studies professionals can encourage the responsible use of information in a digital age in a multi-religious society. Sub-contributions were formulated to assist in directing the research:

- PC1: Showing that there are vast quantities of religious content within digital narratives.
- PC2: Showing that not all digital narratives are well-informed on religion, even when it does contain religious concepts.
- PC3: Demonstrating that some digital narratives can be very accurate and valuable when cultivating religious tolerance in a multi-cultural society.
- PC4: Emphasising the need for responsible use of information in the digital world.
- PC5: Emphasising critical thinking abilities when engaging with the digital world.
- PC6: Showing how religious studies can benefit from the digital world and creative teaching.
- PC7: Showing how digital narrative users can benefit from religious studies
- PC8: Promoting creative ways of learning about one's spirituality/religion.
- PC9: Promoting creative ways of learning about different religions and encouraging tolerance.
- PC10: The encouragement of creating accessible and accurate information.
- PC11: Encouraging the understanding of essential factors educators must consider when working with narratives.
- PC12: Providing a small catalogue of narratives with specific phenomena relevant to religion and (in)tolerance.

² Digital humanities, in this context, refers to the study of human behaviour regarding the digital world.

- PC13: Providing new definitions to add to the ongoing conversation of scholarly definitions.

1.3.4 Themes

The objectives were divided into themes and subthemes. The SQ, RG and PC reflect these broader themes. The four main themes included:

- Theme 1: To identify the religious studies professionals' roles in using digital narratives in education environments.
- Theme 2: To identify religious studies professionals' roles in encouraging the responsible creation of digital narratives.
- Theme 3: To identify how these professionals can play a role in interpreting digital narratives.
- Theme 4: To add to the overall conversation of scholarly definitions

The following subthemes were used for theme one:

- Factors to consider (SQ1; RG8; PC11)
- Digital narrative as a creative source (SQ5; RG5; PC6)
- How religious studies and media studies can benefit each other (RG4, PC7, PC8, PC9)
- The responsible and ethical use of narratives (SQ2, RG2)
- Critical thinking abilities and digital narratives (SQ6, RG3, PC5)
- Tolerance and the responsible use of digital narratives (SQ7, RG6, PC4)
- Post-secularism and digital narrative (SQ8)
- Narrative quantity in daily use (RG1, PC1)
- Implications for religious education and curriculum development (SQ11, RG9)

The following subthemes were used for theme two:

- Balance of responsibilities (SQ10)
- Content creators (SQ3, RG7)
- The creation of content (SQ9, PC10)

The following subthemes were used for theme three:

- Interpretation of narratives (SQ4)
- Well-informed or ill-informed digital narratives (PC2)
- Catalogues (PC12)

The following subthemes were used for theme four:

- Theme five does not have subthemes but focuses on PC13

4.1 Theoretical framework

The researcher used simulation, construction, affective realism, and intersectionality as part of the thesis's theoretical framework. These terms were used throughout the thesis, in the text, and especially in the formulation of definitions. A *Discussion and semantics* section gives some

prominent academic voices on the terms. The *Working definition* then clarifies what each term means within the thesis.

1.4.1 Discussion and semantics

Simulation and concepts are how humans tend to understand the world around them. As Barrett³ (2018:27) pointed out, human understanding of the world and language is simulated. Therefore, what is experienced and what is reality may differ depending on how a person experiences their simulation of the world (Clore et al. 2018:1). A human understanding of the world is also influenced by the constructs that were formed in the past (Barrett 2018:28; Shaked & Clore 2017:29). Constructs are a theoretical abstraction of perceived reality (Hitchcock 2020:180). Constructs are the abstractions studied by researchers (Miller 2023:10). Ford (2022:306) made the following statement:

The world is essentially too vast and complicated to understand everything in it individually from first principles. To aid our understanding, we produce models.

Although Ford did not use the words construct and simulation, the premise stands with using the word models. Ford (2022:307) used an example of how music is often constructed through particular tones that may differ in simulation by different traditions. Mar and Oatley (2008:174) used an example of how a watch simulates the human construct of hours as the earth passes around its axis and the sun. Understanding the constructs of the thesis is of great importance. As seen throughout this thesis, many scholars have dedicated much time and effort to understanding constructs and how they are simulated. Descola (2013:xvii) stated that:

For although it is commonly said, these days, that worlds are constructed, it is not known who are their architects and we still have very little idea about what materials are used in building them.

Every person has a unique simulation and construction of the world; therefore, a perfect definition is unlikely. One's concepts (understanding) and simulations (experience) will dictate what defines a word or construct. Concepts or constructions are used interchangeably in this thesis. Concepts are essential to human existence; they can become stagnant, leading to essentialism and fundamentalism (Barrett 2018:294). Furthermore, when exploring other definitions, one will find their writers' construction and simulation embedded. It is important to remember that when working with groups such as religion, those groups and individuals will have their construction and simulation of their religion. All the definitions designed as working definitions for the terms in this thesis have the concept of simulation and construction in mind.

³ Barrett works from a neurobiology point of view.

Affective realism was an essential term in this thesis. Affective realism is what human brains predict as truth and potential outcomes of situations (Fridman et al. 2019:3). Affective realism is influenced by biology and one's current experience (Barrett 2018:286; Wormwood et al. 2019:797). Affective realism is directly related to humans' biases, prejudices and the concept of good and evil (Fridman et al. 2019:5; Wormwood et al. 2019:789). Affective realism can be altered, primarily through new experiences and curiosity regarding why one has a specific emotion toward a particular situation (Barrett 2018:286). Social reality influences affective realism, such as upbringing, culture, religion, and other experiences (Barrett 2018:288). However, factors such as emotion and body budget (how much energy one has and how much needs to be spent to achieve a task) also have an influence on affective realism (Zadra & Clore 2011:7). This both helps and impedes the functionality of human societies (Barrett 2018:288-289). Ryan (2016:18) gave the following illustration:

[...] fish that lives its whole life in water has no idea and no picture of what the lake looks like from the mountains. The fish probably cannot even imagine what is not water. The fact that it lives all its life in water limits its understanding to 'water things' and it has no idea of what is 'outside water'. We humans are no different. We literally find it difficult to see 'beyond our noses'. We are limited because we can only 'see' with our ears, eyes, nose, tongue (to taste) and hand (to touch).

The statement given by Ryan illustrates the concept of affective realism. The picture of the fish is just an illustration and should not be taken as a reduction of the human intellect. Affective realism is linked to the concept of certainty. Barrett (2018:290) advised that scepticism may be an excellent way to combat these certainties. Too much scepticism is not always helpful, and the brain works with affective realism for a reason, a healthy balance is needed (Barrett 2018:290). People are influenced by their surroundings but are accountable for responsibly creating and maintaining their constructs (Barrett 2018:291). Therefore, people must ensure they have healthy constructs for their context (Barrett 2018:294). Each person is also responsible for those they influence (Barrett 2018:291). Responsibility regarding affective realism is fundamental because it dramatically influences decision-making (Wormwood et al. 2019:797). One must take caution not to understand affective realism as right or wrong. Affective realism can be either one or neutral. However, ensuring that one keeps learning and expanding one's affective realism to function responsibly in the society one is situated in is very important.

Lastly, this section discusses the term intersectionality. Crenshaw⁴ is credited with coining the term intersectionality, rooted in American women of colour feminism (Carastathis 2016:1; Carbado et al. 2013:303). Crenshaw (1991:1243-1244) made the following statement:

I consider how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalised within both.

Through her work, she clarifies the unique legal experiences women of colour have in the USA (Crenshaw 1991:1241, 1244-1245; Crenshaw 1989:139-140). These experiences are not entirely relatable by men of colour or Caucasian women, leading to "intersectional disempowerment" (Crenshaw 1991:1244-1245; Crenshaw 1989:140). Intersectionality is not a new identity theory but rather the acknowledgement that different parts of people's identities affect their lives (Crenshaw 1991:1244-1245). She included race, gender and class in this intersection (Crenshaw 1991:1245). Intersections have expanded to include sexuality, nationality, migrant status, disability, education level, religion, and any other factor that can intersect and potentially lead to discrimination (Townsend-Bell 2014:137-138; Kelly et al. 2021:1; De Vuyst et al. 2022:4; Sears 2012:546; Cho 2013:391; Banton 2011:1250).

Crenshaw's (1991:1252; 1989:140) work focused on the significant work of minorities, as the majority intersections are often considered within legal frameworks. Intersectionality has been criticised for only focusing on women of colour when it could expand (Carbado et al. 2013:304; Cho 2013:389, 392). Carastathis (2016:4) believed the term should not be separated from its origin for fear of diminishment. However, Crenshaw (1991:1252) acknowledged that all people have intersections. Furthermore, Cho (2013:385) stated that intersectionality can have "any limitless combination of identities". One needs to acknowledge the origin of terms and how they were used. However, this thesis is not focused on the same work as Crenshaw. This thesis focuses on religion, tolerance, narrative, and religious education. It is essential to acknowledge the origin of terms. Intersectionality has caused bridges to be built across multiple disciplines (Carbado et al. 2013:304). Carbado et al. (2013:305) made the following statement:

No particular application of intersectionality can, in a definitive sense, grasp the range of intersectional powers and problems that plague society. This work-in-progress understanding of intersectionality suggests that we should endeavor, on an ongoing basis, to move intersectionality to unexplored places.

⁴ Crenshaw is a law scholar.

This statement demonstrates the many uses for the term, and many might still be unexplored. However, many scholars have used the term intersectionality successfully in other fields, including, for example, psychology, medicine, sociology, history, developmental science, and digital media studies (Kelly et al. 2021:1-6; De Vuyst et al. 2022:1; Carbado et al. 2013:305; Sears 2012:545; Roy 2018:57). By using intersectionality in different fields, scholars showcase how multiple constructs of identity functions in their academic view (Cho 2013:385, 386) while considering that the intersections in people's lives may be individualised forms of identification (Sears 2012:545). Roy (2018:59) stated that:

[...] intersectionality positions the individual within multiple, interlocking systems.

As given by Roy, this statement can work as a definition for the basic concept of intersections. By acknowledging the term's origin and importance, transferring it to another context does not diminish its original purpose, therefore clarifying other intersectional constructs. The fact that all people have intersections catches the researchers' attention, as seen in Crenshaws's (1991:1252) work. Taking the point even further, all people have intersections; therefore, complex human phenomena such as religion also have intersections. For example, Roy (2018:62) stated that neighbourhoods could have intersections. Many human constructs are convoluted and hard to pin down in definitions. This is evident throughout this thesis. As complex constructs evolve and change, defining becomes even more constrained. However, one can always show where their constructs intersect. For instance, Beyers (2017b:184) stated: "Religion is interconnected to all aspects related to human behaviour". This quote shows the possibility of viewing complex constructs such as religion through intersectionality. Defining complex constructs in this way will, for some, be too vague. Defining it in this manner can keep phenomena from becoming stagnant. Definitions written this way can also be highly customisable to any study. Intersections should not become stagnant to only the intersection. Ryan (2016:27) made the following statement:

Theory of Relativity of Albert Einstein, basically the theory says that nothing exists in isolation but that everything depends on everything else. Notice how this differs greatly from the mechanical model where different parts are isolated and then analysed and examined.

Although Ryan did not use the word intersectionality, the statement does illustrate that constructs are not independent, and the current method of studying everything as if they can exist independently becomes problematic. Beyers (2017b:189) stated that:

Knowledge does not originate and exist in a vacuum. When studying religions, the context and interrelatedness of all things cannot be ignored. This implies that a particular choice is made in order to understand reality. Reality is connected [...]

Beyers (2014:2) further stated, "Knowledge originates within a network of contributing factors". The first statement points specifically to religion. This is of value for this thesis. However, the second statement points more toward knowledge as being interconnected. Giroux and Bosio (2021:11) similarly stated that:

[...] intellectuals have a responsibility to both reach across academic specialties and connect them at the same time.

Understanding constructs in relation to each other will lead to a greater understanding than isolating constructs (Ryan 2016:30). This will aid in understanding constructs within their simulations and how they affect affective realism. Although the mind works with constructs, simulations, affective realism, and intersections, this is not to say that everyone thinks similarly. For example, some people may be inclined toward visual thinking and others toward linguistic thinking (Mange et al. 2015:210). However, it is beyond the scope of the thesis to express these differences in detail. In the following subsection, the working definitions for this thesis are clarified.

1.4.2 Working definitions:

The definitions of construction, simulation and affective realism have been chosen from Barrett's (2018) work. These definitions were chosen because they are workable and expressive and correlate with the researcher's understanding of these terms. Barrett (2018:28) defined concepts in the following way:

Using your concepts, your brain groups some things together and separates others [...] Your concepts are a primary tool for your brain to guess the meaning of incoming sensory inputs.

Barrett (2018:27) expressed simulation as follows:

Scientific evidence shows that what we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell are largely simulations of the world, not reactions to it. Forward-looking thinkers speculate that simulation is a common mechanism not only for perception but also for understanding language, feeling empathy, remembering, imagining, dreaming, and many other psychological phenomena.

Barrett (2018:284) described affective realism as:

Affective realism, the phenomenon that you experience what you believe, is inevitable because of your wiring. The body-budgeting regions in your interoceptive network — your inner loudmouthed, mostly deaf scientist with a megaphone — are the most powerful predictors in your brain, and your primary sensory regions are eager listeners. Body-budget predictions laden with affect, not logic and reason, are the main drivers of your experience and behavior. We all think a food "is delicious" as if the flavor were embedded in the food, when flavor is a construction and the deliciousness is our own affect [...] Nobody can completely escape affective realism. Your own perceptions are not like a photograph of the world. They are not even a painting of photographic quality,

like a Vermeer. They are more like a Van Gogh or Monet. (Or on a very bad day, perhaps a Jackson Pollock).

The researcher constructed a definition for intersectionality. Existing definitions did not expand enough on what intersectionality meant as used within the thesis. Here, it is essential to note the format change. The definition is indented to showcase where it begins and ends, as it is an extensive definition (thereby showcasing the contours of the definition). All definitions constructed for this thesis are formatted in this manner. However, the definitions should not be confused with quotes, as quotes are formatted differently. The definition of intersectionality as created by the researcher now follows:

Intersectionality is the simulation of different constructs and their interactions. These simulations cause multiple dimensions of a person or group's identities. These identities then create an affective realism for the individual or group. However, outsiders' perspectives on individuals or groups will also have intersections. These perspectives cause affective realism from an outside point of view. These two forms of affective realism intersect and affect each other. Intersectionality is found in humans and affects complex human phenomena, including but not limited to religion, culture, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Intersectionality, therefore, shows the intersections between human constructs. As constructs may exist outside the discrimination simulation, so do their intersections. Intersections can, however, indicate multiple layers of discrimination. Human identities and phenomena become a tapestry through intersectionality rather than stagnant concrete constructs.

This concludes the *Theoretical framework* subsection. The theoretical framework is used to create definitions throughout the thesis. These definitions form the conceptual framework that creates concrete boundaries for the current study. The conceptual framework also showcases the bridges between the different concepts.

1.5 Methodology

The research was conducted mainly through a comprehensive literature review. Literature reviews can be "quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method" (Efron & Ravid 2018:11). Quantitative methods are considered to be more scientific and objective, with more emphasis on precision (Efron & Ravid 2018:13; Stausberg & Engler 2011:7). Quantitative methods believe that knowledge is universal and that set rules are outlined through nature and is therefore not significantly individualised (Efron & Ravid 2018:16; Stausberg & Engler 2011:7). Qualitative methods believe that knowledge is acquired through individuals or groups

and is therefore very contextual (Efron & Ravid 2018:16; Stausberg & Engler 2011:6). The mixed method finds merit in both the values of the quantitative method and qualitative method (Efron & Ravid 2018:17; Stausberg & Engler 2011:6). The mixed method approach thus focuses on what part of the study can find the most value in what method to answer the research question (Efron & Ravid 2018:17).

The primary approach of this thesis is quantitative, addressing the global challenge of digital narratives in multi-religious societies. Rather than serving as a curriculum for a specific context, the thesis aimed to assist educators in understanding how and why digital narratives are of value to religious education. The main intention was to promote tolerance and foster more harmonious societies within global settings. The researcher conducted a comprehensive literature review in this study, providing a broad overview of existing research in different fields. All studies should address a specific question or fill a research gap. However, there are macro-focused and micro-focused studies. Studies may be focused on broad or narrow phenomena. Some studies may focus on one group within one geographical area; in this thesis, this is termed a micro study. Macro studies are necessary to bring different voices from different fields together in a broader sense.

Micro studies are essential but can be limiting and may not consider the larger picture. This thesis followed a Macro study approach. It was necessary to consolidate multiple fields of study to understand this phenomenon. The literature reviewed in the thesis contained both macro and micro-focused studies. Few texts address the intersection of digital narratives, religious education, multi-religious societies, tolerance, and the responsible use and cultivation of information. This gap underscores the uniqueness of the present study, positioning it to contribute valuable insights to the field. The literature review involved bringing scholars into conversation through their literature. Many scholarly works are macro-focused on the problem identified within their field and context. While this often provides precious insights into particular situations, it also means that a more holistic understanding of concepts across disciplines may be missed.

Four main concepts came to light from the MQ and SQ: religion, tolerance, religious education and narrative. The definitions created through the theoretical framework showed the continuity between the constructs and their simulations as relevant to the current study; this is termed a conceptual framework (Hiba 2024:4). The definitions that formed part of the conceptual framework act as a bridge between different disciplines, e.g. Religious studies, tolerance

studies⁵ and narrative studies⁶. The definitions were not created to limit the phenomena within the world in general. Instead, it pinned down the contours of the concepts (that are ever-moving and ever-changing) for the context of the thesis. The definitions should thus be seen as a snapshot of these phenomena. These snapshots outline the contours of this macro-focused study. These contours showcase the complexities that religious education professionals need to navigate in societies. The main concepts, religion, tolerance, religious education and narrative, were broadly highlighted in Chapters One to Four. The definitions in these first chapters were crafted using the theoretical framework, creating the main outlines of the conceptual framework.

Chapters Five and Six narrowed down the digital narratives to more specific mediums. Chapters Seven and Eight showcased terms relevant to religious education, digital narratives, and religious (in)tolerance. In these chapters, specific terms were defined to structure the larger snapshot. Narrative simulations of these constructs were also catalogued as examples within Chapters Seven and Eight. The examples from digital narratives showcased that digital entertainment and internet narratives contain concepts relevant to religion education classes. Much more should be done to catalogue phenomena found within narratives to ease the process of choosing narratives for education purposes. It was beyond the scope of the thesis to catalogue all existing narratives. Furthermore, new narratives are created and published daily; therefore, categorising new narratives will always be an ongoing process. The examples in Chapters Seven and Eight were found within scholarly research and were part of a literature review. Where this was the case, it was indicated concerning the scholar. However, some of the narratives were known by the researcher and given as examples. Furthermore, some of the narratives given as examples were sought out for the specific phenomena of this study. This, therefore, adds to the body of knowledge for cataloguing different digital narratives for their religious and (in)tolerant phenomena. Furthermore, Chapter Nine gave the implications and broad principles for curricula in religious education regarding narrative.

This thesis was focused on a specific problem, namely, what role religious studies specialists can play in the responsible use, creation, and interpretation of narratives. This is a multifaceted problem; the researcher chose to do a quantitative literature review across disciplines to bring

⁵ While studying religion and tolerance may go hand in hand, the intersection does not limit someone from studying them independently. Tolerance can be studied from many different fields and is not limited to religious studies. It can, for instance, be viewed from a political, legal and sociological stance.

⁶ Narratives can be studied without considering religion, tolerance or religious education. However, the theoretical framework enables the researcher to see these fields' connections and potential collaboration.

the different scholarly voices together and gain a better understanding of the phenomena. The extensive bibliography attests to the fact that there is much literature in these fields. However, this is one of the few macro studies that put these scholarly voices into conversation with one another within these specific contours, making this study unique. A macro study is needed when a broad problem transcends one context, where the data is not consolidated into one coherent text.

The study worked through a quantitative literature review, as this is appropriate for consolidating the scholarly voices that can contribute to the main topic of the thesis. While a qualitative study may be interesting and necessary for future research, it does not answer the current research questions or add to the thesis's overarching themes. While qualitative data may be interesting and valuable to some readers, it may distract others interested in the research problem. When such a macro study already exists, it creates opportunities for quantitative and qualitative studies to work through the macro paradigm. This is not to say that future studies need to completely agree with the macro paradigm, as scholars will always have differences of opinion. However, it can work as an introductory text that can act as a starting point. As such, a macro text has been identified as a gap in the literature, and this thesis sought to fill this gap.

The primary foundation of the literature was based on religious studies and media studies. However, other disciplines also played a role. Constructing a list of disciplines used throughout the thesis was beyond the thesis's scope. However, some indications can be gauged from the Chapter outline and literature overview. This literature review involved critically analysing the selected literature and synthesising it with the overarching themes of the thesis. In Chapter One, the layout of the themes was explained. The themes were constructed by carefully considering the study's *Objectives*. The objectives consisted of SQ, RG and the PC of the research. The thesis used themes constructed from the SQ, RG and PC to analyse the data retrieved from the literature review (see section 1.3.4 for an in-depth layout). These themes were utilised at the end of each chapter to showcase the relevance of the literature review. There is also a detailed discussion of the themes and objectives in Chapter Ten. In these sections, the researcher's voice was used to showcase the unique understanding and relevance of the literature to the current problem.

These themes assisted in answering the MQ by creating a paradigm through which the literature can be analysed. While the themes explored the broader research problem, they also included sub-themes, such as *Factors to consider*, that highlighted contextualised factors that educators need to consider beyond the scope of the macro-focused study to address individual contexts.

The scholarly sources that were consulted contained much information beyond the scope of the current research problem. These resources should thus not be considered limited to the findings of the current thematic analysis. In summary, the thesis followed a quantitative literature review shaped by the conceptual framework and directed by a thematic analysis. The theoretical framework, namely construct, simulation, affective realism and intersectionality, was used to create definitions that formed the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework thus assisted in creating a bridge between different disciplines, while the thematic analysis focused the overall project on answering the main research question.

1.6 Defining religion

Definitions need to be workable and should help the reader understand the thesis. However, theories and definitions differ (Grimes 2014:189). A definition can only contribute so much toward any conversation (Grimes 2014:189). Harvey (2006:xii, xiii) stated that:

Sometimes academics put things in neat, labelled boxes. This is a destructive process as these 'things' academics deal with are very much alive. They do not belong in boxes nor do they always survive there. Some refuse to stay in boxes, alone and tamed, awaiting a single discipline or Methodology to describe and explain them.

Instead, a dispute, curiosity, and difference can refine ideas and make academic concepts flourish (Hughes & McCutcheon 2021:4). A definition needs to be workable for the particular study, and if it is not adequate, it needs to change (Grimes 2014:189). The definitions presented in the thesis were not intended as definitive explanations for the discussed terms. Instead, they were crafted through the lenses of the theoretical framework: simulation, construction, affective realism, and intersectionality. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of concepts, acknowledging their complexity and variability within different contexts.

This study uses various key terms, with "religion" being this section's only term explicitly defined. This choice reflects the term's foundational importance to the study while not diminishing the value of other terms. Instead of defining all key terms upfront, the thesis incorporates definitions contextually as they arise in the discussion, allowing for a more dynamic and relevant exploration. In subsection 1.7, the following topics are addressed: (i) *Discussion and semantics* of the term "religion," (ii) *Different scholarly definitions of religion*, and (iii) *working definition* of religion that will be used throughout the thesis. This structure provides clarity and sets the stage for the subsequent analysis.

1.6.1. Discussion and semantics

Religion is a noun semantically entangled in various thought patterns and disciplines (Martin 2021b:10), Which makes the word convoluted in academics. Any word will become convoluted if fixated on and analysed enough (Lofton 2021a:36). Religion is a complex and diverse phenomenon; therefore, pinning down the construct is difficult (Beyers 2016:2-3). Listening to the different academic voices is essential, as it lends understanding to the various constructions of the word religion today. A literature review introduces prominent academic voices on this topic while understanding that giving every and all opinions on religion is beyond the scope of this thesis. Religion is a uniquely human-constructed phenomenon as understood at this point in history (Beyers 2016:2; Beyers 2017c:6). However, one's religiosity, or lack thereof, does not determine one's humanity (Beyers 2017b:184). The construct of religion has long superseded the word, as evidently, the word religion does not exist in all communities where the construct is found (Smith 1991:loc 308).

Although the term was used differently from the modern term religion, the word is derived from the Latin root *religio* (Smith 1991:loc 321; Smith 1998:269; Beyers 2016:3). There are strong ties between the word *religio* and early Christian writing to describe both Christianity as a whole and smaller concepts within the religious tradition (Smith 1991:loc 382, 194; Smith 1998:269). The word *religio* was often used to separate Christianity from the surrounding religions, especially if conflicts were involved (Smith 1991:loc 401-406, 412). Patton (2021b:12) described religion as: "an ongoing social and historical argument about ultimate value". Wimbush (2021:16) also stated that religion was:

Historically driven by an agenda of making and maintaining difference/Others—"classify and conquer"—this regime continues to be gendered and reflective of myths of class and ethno-racial hierarchy.

Banton (2011:1249), Lewis (2021b:146), and Nye (2021a&b:11, 152) all expressed sentiments similar to those expressed by Wimbush. Pinn (2021a:189-190) pointed out how religion frames *us* and *them* and promotes the strangeness of the other. This is important as the us-versus-them phenomena are prominent throughout this thesis. Later in the thesis, more can be seen specifically on this term (us-versus-them) under the *character protagonist and antagonist* heading. However, Nye (2021b:153) noted that:

[...] although the term "religion" is a historical construction—that is, its use derives directly from colonialism—the term does still have a use as a descriptor (and potential means of analysis).

The historical construct of conflict and segregation within the word religion is problematic, especially to scholars who wish to use religion not in conflict or segregation but in the pursuit of respect and tolerance. Words often take on new meanings through time (Eckardt et al. 2003:1). Therefore, although this conflict within the word is remembered, new life can and has been breathed into the term. Regardless of its ancient roots, religion is a useable term for the current study that explores religious education in the pursuit of tolerance. The important thing to remember is that religion is a construct, and although its history needs to be accounted for, it is still a powerful and valuable tool (Plate 2021a:207). As a definition and classification, religion is a very modern, western, Christian, and academic concept (Henking 2021a&c:6, 67; Magid 2021c:123; Chidester 2008:351-352). One cannot define religion without considering those who feel that religion is undefinable. They either feel it is too big a term to define, too confining when defined or that definitions will have moral implications. Lewis (2021a:9) pointed out that religion is not universal and is connected to individual contexts. It should not be separated from its time, culture, and personal thought (Lewis 2021a:9). Taves (2021:15) stated that she did:

[...] not attempt to define it, but instead analyse the way it is defined and the role it plays in the formation and maintenance of particular social formations.

Although Taves did not attempt to define religion, she believes it is meritorious to analyse existing definitions. This is also evident in the work of Cox (2010:3), who believed in categorising different definitions into: "(1) theological; (2) moral; (3) philosophical; (4) psychological; and (5) sociological". The study of multiple definitions can also be found in the work of Ferguson (1978:12-18). W.C. Smith (1991:loc 680), Koch (2021:8), and Martin (2021a:141) all found the term religion undefinable. Martin (2021a:141) preferred to work with terms like ideologies, whereas W.C. Smith (1991:loc 1900-1906) preferred cumulative traditions. Lewis (2021b:146) asked a very valid question about the flawed nature of defining religion:

Does not the construction of a category aid us analytically, even if the construction itself is flawed or insufficient? Furthermore, if the term religion is so completely undefinable and unusable, one still needs to find a word for: "that-set-of-things-which-people-do-and-believe-in-relation-to-something-they-consider-a-higher-power".

Although W.C. Smith and Martin both had other suggested terms, one must ask if these terms are first equal to the task and second if they are equally undefinable. Lewis (2021a:9) asked whether a universal understanding of the word religion could lead to violence and anger. Another complication arises by asking, can an outsider genuinely understand a religion they do

not belong to (Magid 2021a:86)? Kavka (2021a:60, 62) stated that an outsider can understand and interpret data within a group they do not belong to while pointing out and analysing incompatibilities within the data. In turn to the previous question, one must ask if outsiders have an otherwise objective view while understanding that true objectivity can never be obtained (Cox 2010:52; Ryan 2016:30). This further prompts the question of what such a study will do to insider-outsider power relations. Beyers (2017b:185) made the following statement:

Religion has to do with education, law, human sciences, economy, ecology, theology and many other fields.

Religion is, therefore, a part of the complex world of humanity. The complexity of intersections between humanity and religion should be reflected within any religious education environment and any definitions of religion; these intersections create a road map or "spider web" (Beyers 2017b:185, 210). Although intersections may aid definitions, they can also make them wildly complex. When genuinely looking at the debates on what religion is, it is no wonder some scholars find it an unobtainable task (Henking 2021a:66). However, one must ask if it is just as irresponsible to make the term disappear from people who see themselves as religious as it would be to impose it on others (Lewis 2021b:146). The question thus stands: to what extent is religion definable? Martin (2021c:19) stated:

Analytic clarity and intellectual honesty demand we be clear on what we are referring to when we use words, as well as the limits of our vocabulary.

Henking (2021a:71) and Plate (2021b:100) stated that defining religion matters in real-world application in law and policy, as it can influence constructs such as freedom of religion. Defining religion can aid in creating constructions to build multi-religious societies into functioning communities (Smith 1991:loc 194). Society has reached a point where blatant ignorance or dismissal of the other is not an option (Smith 1991:loc 219). Definitions can, therefore, play a role in religious education. It may aid in explaining that different people have different constructs of the term, broadening students' views of the simulations of religion. There is a tendency to point out mistakes that have been made in defining religion within the academic field. Scholars either use this to refute different theories attached to the definitions or state it as a warning for future research. Martin (2021c:19) and Hughes and McCutcheon (2021:1) encouraged clarity and discouraged vague definitions. W.C. Smith (1991:loc118) and Hughes and McCutcheon (2021:1) stated that defining religion is important without minimising it to small groups. In contrast, when looking at a believer's point of view, multiple religious constructions may be too wide for a definition (Smith 1991:loc 136). W.C. Smith (1991:loc 124) also stated that the past and future of different religions should be considered.

Durkheim (2016: 28, 32, 33, 29) stated that one should be careful in one's use of words, not using words like supernatural or god(s), as this may exclude religions like Buddhism or lead to questions of what is natural. W.C. Smith (1991:loc 112) and Plate (2021b:99) stated that the separation of religion and the transcendent is one of the mistakes scholars make. Furthermore, one of the big problems is that scholars tend to write to other scholars, not to the public or religious communities, and a divide between the two spheres is seen within their definitions (Plate 2021b:100). A scholarly responsibility toward the public through empathy must be considered while maintaining neutrality, thereby maintaining relevance (Patton 2021a:235; Von Stuckrad 2021a:239; Smith 1991:loc 184). Furthermore, religion and religious should be treated with caution, possibly pointing to vastly different constructs (Martin 2021c:23). Martin (2021c:25) and Magid (2021a:86, 87) stated that many people may not identify with the word religion but rather spirituality, culture or nationalism.

Another problem encountered in the post-secular age is the individualisation of religion (Beyers 2014:9). Martin (2021c:25) warned that identifying with a community and a practising religious person might be two different constructs, e.g., a non-practising secular Jewish person. Henking (2021b:29) and Beyers (2017c:2, 4, 5, 8) encouraged an intersectional view of words like culture, ethnicity and religion, as not to limit identities to one phenomenon as these constructs do not always stand as mutually exclusive to one another or exist in closed-off systems. Enabling students to understand that every person's affective realism is unique and that care must be taken with specific terms is essential. Teaching students to see intersections within phenomena such as religion may enable them to show intersectional sensitivity toward real-world phenomena and people in the future.

1.6.2 Different scholarly definitions of religion

In this section, different scholarly definitions are given, with some thoughts and interpretations of the definitions. Durkheim (2016:51), as translated by Swain, defined religion in the following way:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them.

This is a classical definition and was not written for the modern world. Durkheim lived between 1858 and 1917 (Martins & Pickering 1994:1). There is some accuracy to his definition. However, it is very group-based and does not incorporate the modern individualisation of

religion (Beyers 2014:9). Furthermore, the word church is very Christian and will, therefore, not work in a general definition of religion. Tylor (1920:loc 7313) defined religion as:

The belief in spiritual beings

This definition is very theological in its focus (Cox 2010:3) and is classical. By Tylors' (1920:loc 7313) own admission, this is a minimalistic definition. It potentially excludes religions such as Buddhism, depending on the definition of spiritual beings (without proper explanation, the term spiritual beings is ambiguous). One can easily show the difference in thought patterns within different academic voices by illustrating simplistic definitions. It is, therefore, useful for religious education settings. Kant (1998:188), as translated by Wood and Giovanni, defined religion in the following way:

For the theoretical element of ecclesiastical faith cannot be of moral interest to us, if it does not work toward the fulfilment of all human duties as divine commands (which constitutes the essential of every religion).

This is a very moralistic view of religion (Cox 2010:4) and is a classical definition. It is narrow and can exclude many religious constructs, as religions are not limited to morals, ethics or commandments from divine beings. Furthermore, morals and ethics are also found outside religion (Carr 2013:5). Not all religious people may identify with the simulation of divine command. Tillich (1951:loc 331) referred to religion and theological matters in the following way:

[...] religious concern which is ultimate, unconditional, total, and infinite.

This definition is very philosophical (Cox 2010:5) and classical. This is a minimalist definition. However, it may include things that are not religious, as what is ultimate or infinite for some might not be for others. This definition is often used and has its merits, but it is too broad.

Marx (1843:14), as translated by Stenning, defined religion in the following way:

Religious misery is in one mouth the expression of real misery, and in another is a protestation against real misery. Religion is the moan of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

This is an example of a sociological (Cox 2010:6) and classical definition. This statement is often shortened to the last sentence. Religion is often misused (not always); therefore, this definition can be helpful when pointing to that aspect of religion. However, this definition does

not illustrate the full extent of what religion is and can be. W.C. Smith (1991:loc 1900-1906) hoped that the term religion should be dropped in favour of cumulative traditions:

[...] temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on; anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe.

W.C. Smith's definition is broad and might include many things that have nothing to do with religion. He proposed that the term religion be dropped. Over thirty years later, the term is still used within academics and the world. However, one sees this pattern of non-defining or replacing religion within academic circles. As seen throughout the Chapter, some of his ideas are stepping stones to understanding religion. Jensen (2021c:6) defined religion as:

Religion is a word used to denote a rather fuzzy set of conceptualisations and epistemic generalisations about a range of human activities. For practical purposes, a stipulative "full-coverage" generalisation ("definition") might run like this: "Semantic and cognitive networks comprising ideas, behaviours and institutions in relation to counter-intuitive superhuman agents, objects and posits" (Jensen 2014: 7–8). This generalisation is intended to equally cover e-religion and i-religion. The first includes all that is external [...] The second characterises all the internal processes [...]

The definition given by Jensen is well-rounded in that it does not just promote the concept of material religion but considers the spiritual concept of religion. His definition shows that religion is a construct that can mean many different things. As Jensen stated in the quote, it is a very broad definition. Kavka (2021b:7) defined religion in the following way:

Religion is an authorising system—for authorising certain persons, ideas, and practices.

The definition can easily include and accommodate non-religious things. The concept of power and power struggles and hierarchies within multiple religions is noteworthy (Kavka 2021b:7). This definition is valuable in pursuing religious tolerance in an age where religions do not necessarily know how to live in harmony. This will mainly be evident where ingroup members value the authorised constructs in their religion (e.g. religious leaders, holy literature and rituals) but not those in outgroups. However, this definition seems to take the concept of the spiritual out of religion. Lofton (2021b:9) defined religion in the following way:

Religion is a manner of classifying, symbolising, or schematising usually intended to explain the arrangement or working of a systematic whole.

Lofton's definition of religion works on the principle of construction. Religion is a construct used to simulate a multitude of other constructs. This definition, although accurate, is vague and can contain many things that do not include religion (Plate 2021b:99). The spiritual concept

is also profoundly missing from this definition (Plate 2021b:99). Patton (2021b:12) defined religion in the following way:

Religion is an ongoing social and historical argument about ultimate value [...] religion may be codified by deities, symbols, creeds, texts, rituals, philosophical perspectives, and foundational narratives, but not all of these elements necessarily occur simultaneously, nor are they all essential for the social argument to continue in history [...] Those who make these arguments usually form a community in which their perspectives are understood to be self-evidently true and morally binding.

The value of the definition lies in its use of construct (understanding), simulation (religious elements) and affective realism (what is believed to be true). The value of the definition also lies in its flexibility. The definition pointed out that religion is simulated as a thought pattern as part of a dialogue and showcased the concept of conflict between groups. However, the definition does not point toward peacebuilding, which may also be evident in religious simulations, as seen through the golden rule.

Plate (2021c:13) defined religion in the following way:

Religion is a heuristic term that is most useful when referring to a network of worldmaking technologies that emerge within ever-adapting ecosystems of objects, including cultural products, the natural world, and human bodies. Chief among these religious technologies are the apparatuses humans use in the construction of myths, rituals, beliefs, symbols, gods, and spirits, as they are enacted and engaged in socially and aesthetically special spaces and times [...] Through these processes, enchanting worlds are created and lived within, offering belonging, identity, and a sense of social and supernatural order, while rupturing or displacing other worlds that may operate with competing technologies.

The definition showcases religious constructs and social (personal and interpersonal) simulations. However, it points to creating a spiritual world rather than reacting to it. The lack of simulation of the spiritual in that regard may be offensive to religious people. However, Schaeffer (2021:14) agreed on religion as a construction rather than simulated from the spiritual as it is a less theological view. The word technology in connection with religion can also be found in Pinn's (2021b:12) work. Rather than denoting it to digital technology, it means advancing humanity through this structural tool. More on digital technology can be found under Chapter Four's *Digital narrative and digital technology* heading. Cox (2010:21) defined religion in the following way:

Religion refers to identifiable communities which base their acts of believing and resulting communal experiences of postulated non-falsifiable alternate realities on a tradition that they legitimate by appealing to authoritative transmission from generation to generation.

This definition showcases constructs (communities and information transmission) that are simulated (acts and experiences) and indicates affective realism ("non-falsifiable alternate realities" (Cox 2010:21)). This definition is very group-based and does not illuminate the individual. Furthermore, it works more toward physical communities than also considering digital ones. Hill (2013:30) defined religion in the following manner:

A religion is a worldview, usually associated with certain personal experiences of transcendence viewed as paradigmatic, which, together with shared faith, normative texts, symbolic rituals and moral agreements, sustain a community of like-minded believers.

The definition shows multiple aspects of religion, e.g. spiritual, moral, and physical. The definition did not consider religions with oral rather than textual traditions or the individualisation of religion.

1.6.3 Working definition

This section gives a working definition of religion to navigate the rest of the thesis. It is not an ultimate definition of religion. Some terms used within the definition are only defined later in the thesis. The researcher considered this when constructing the definition. Therefore, later definitions enhance the current definition. The definition should, therefore, be considered in the context of the thesis. The formatting of the definition should not be confused with quotations that are formatted differently. The definition of religion for this thesis is as follows:

Religion is a construct formed by multiple simulations stretching across communities and individuals. As with any other construct, it can be used or misused. It may manifest in a physical, spiritual (possibly transcendent, metaphysical), and digital realm. Although religion can manifest in these realms, it is not limited to it as each individual's understanding of the world may differ. As the digital world is a more modern concept, a divide will be seen in the representation of religions on this plane. The transcendent is a complicated construct and may be excluded from some religious views. Religion may intersect with concepts regarding sacred, mundane, pure-impure, morals, ethics and laws but are not limited to these constructs. Religion intersects with narrative; however, the terms are not mutually exclusive. In this, one can find holy literature (oral or written), the narratives of the person or group who follows a religious construct and narratives told of set groups or individuals. Religion furthermore intersects with, but is not limited to, different human contexts. These human contexts can include but are not limited to culture, law, ethnicity, sexuality, geography (including migration), worldview, scientific

understanding of the world, the construct of time, celebrations, interaction with the other, and personal-interpersonal relations.

Religion is becoming more individualised and is not always group-based. Focusing on religion on an individual scale, remnants of group-based organised religion will be present in different degrees depending on the person and their context. Religion often intersects but is not limited to sacred places, sacred beings, myths, symbols, rituals and spirituality. Religion often inspires strong emotive reactions but is not limited to emotion. Religion often intersects with, but is not limited to, other ideologies, such as nationalism and secularism. Religion can inspire both tolerance and intolerance. Religion may intersect with but is not mutually exclusive with fundamentalism, extremism, terrorism and us-versus-them sentiments. Even those who do not adhere to a religion (individual or group-based) cannot entirely escape the construct because of its deep historical roots. Even in secular societies, religion creeps in as history influences the present, and the human religious experience is not extinguished to date. Adhering to religion or lack of adherents is one of the many threads that impact humanity's affective realism to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the context. Therefore, it will have an impact on one's thoughts and actions.

1.7 Chapter outline and literature overview

This subsection gives a brief overview of the Chapters found within the thesis. A contextual understanding of why each Chapter is essential is also given here. This section includes a brief literature overview of each Chapter, in which the prominent voices are mentioned. The method used within the thesis was a literature review. It should be noted that many academic voices are found throughout the thesis. Scholars not named in this section are not less important; they are just beyond the scope of the section.

1.7.1 Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter One introduced the overall topic of the thesis. The chapter showcased the (i) *Background of the study*. Ceruzzi wrote the book *A History Of Modern Computing* (2013), which played a role in this section; the focus of this book was very technology-based. Chapter One also included (ii) a *Problem statement*, (iii) *Objectives* ((iii.i) *Research questions (MQ and SQ)*, (iii.ii) *Research goals (RG)*, (iii.iii) *Proposed contributions(PC)* and (iii.iv) *Themes*). Chapter One further included the (iv) *Theoretical framework*. The book *How Emotions Are Made* (2018) by Barrett contributed to the conversation. Barrett wrote from an emotivist and

neurobiology perspective. The article *Demarginalising The Intersection Of Race And Sex: A Black Feminist Critique Of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory And Antiracist Politics* (1989) by Crenshaw also played a role in this Chapter. Crenshaw wrote from a legal perspective. Chapter One also included (v) *Methodology and* (vi) *Defining religion* subsections. Hughes and McCutcheon edited a compilation book titled *What Is Religion; Debating The Academic Study Of Religion* (2021) that contributed to this subsection. This book was written from different religious studies perspectives. The Chapter also contained a (vii) *Chapter outline and literature overview* of the thesis. The Chapter ended with the (viii) *Chapter themes*, which contextualised the chapter to the overall objectives of the thesis.

1.7.2 Chapter Two: Tolerance

The aim of religious education for this research is to pursue tolerance; clarification of the term was therefore necessary. This was achieved through a comprehensive literature review under the heading (i) *Debate on the concept of tolerance* that alumnate some scholarly opinions on the subject. The book *Toleration In Conflict: Past And Present* (2013) by Forst played a role in this section, written from a political philosophy point of view. The book *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming The Politics Of Fear In An Anxious Age* (2012) by Nussbaum was added to the literature review; she wrote from a legal, philosophical point of view. The article *(Non)Religious Freedom: A Critical Perspective On The Contemporary Understanding Of Freedom Of Conscience And Religion* (2021) by Prostack also played a role in the Chapter and was written from an ethics perspective. After the literature review followed, a list of (ii) *Different scholarly definitions of tolerance*. To clarify what the term means within the current study, the researcher constructed a (iii) *Working definition*. Then, a section on the (iv) *Simulation of religion and tolerance definitions through digital narratives* followed. The (v) *Chapter themes* concluded the Chapter.

1.7.3 Chapter Three: Religion and education

This Chapter discussed different forms of education regarding religion through a literature review under the heading (i) *Debate on religion and education*. The thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context. However, Chapter Three illuminated some (ii) *Important elements that influence religion education*. This subsection focused on (ii.i) *Age groups*, (ii.ii) *Religion education, politics, law and society*, and (ii.iii) *Obstacles and opportunities: Digital divide, fair use and blended learning*. The book *The Routledge International Handbook Of Education, Religion, And Values* (2013), edited by Arthur and Lovat, is a compilation volume that contributed to the literature used in this Chapter. The compilation volume was written from

religious educators' perspectives. The article *Inter-Worldview Education And The Re-Production Of Good Religion* (2018) by Moyaert also added to the conversation and was written from a religion studies perspective. The article titled *The Quest For The Understanding Of Religious Studies: Seeing Dragons* (2016) by Beyers contributed to this Chapter, this article was also written from a religious studies perspective. The Chapter then continued to the (iii) *Working definition* to navigate the rest of the thesis. Finally, the (iv) *Chapter themes* concluded the Chapter.

1.7.4 Chapter Four: Narrative

Narratives are one of the main concepts of the thesis; therefore, a literature review was necessary to understand the term and its intersections. The section (i), *Debate on the concept of narrative* explained how narrative works within the human mind. This was followed by (ii) *Narrative composition* that explained (ii.i) *Character*, (ii.ii) *Plot*, (ii.iii) *Passive and active narrative*, (ii.iv) *Discourse*, and (ii.v) *Fiction and non-fiction*. After this, the (iii) *Digital narrative and digital technology* section followed. As this thesis deals with accurate and inaccurate narratives, the (iv) *Conspiracy theories, propaganda misinformation, and counter-narratives* section was necessary. A (v) *Religious narrative* section followed, where the term religious narrative was contextualised for the thesis, and the relationship between religious education and religious narrative was explained.

This was followed by the (vi) *Different scholarly definitions of narrative*, where some scholarly definitions were given and briefly discussed. One of the prominent scholars used throughout the Chapter was Gottschall, through his books *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (2012) and *The Story Paradox: How Our Love Of Storytelling Builds Societies And Tears Them Down* (2021). The books by Gottschall are written from a narrative studies perspective. The article *Entertainment-Education Effectively Reduces Prejudice* (2017) by Murrar and Brauer also played a prominent role in this Chapter, as the article was written from a psychological perspective. The article titled *The Function Of Fiction Is The Abstraction And Simulation Of Social Experience* (2008) by Mar and Oatley was utilised in the Chapter; the article was written from a Psychology perspective. The Chapter continued to the (vii) *Working definition* to contextualise the term in the thesis. Lastly, the (viii) *Chapter themes* were discussed.

1.7.5 Chapter Five: Digital entertainment

Four main mediums of digital entertainment were explored in this Chapter. The first medium discussed was (i) *Books in electronic mediums, including* electronic books (eBooks) and audiobooks. In this subsection, one of the prominent voices included the article *How Digital Devices Transform Literary Reading: The Impact Of E-Books, Audiobooks And Online Life On Reading Habits* (2022) by Spjeldnæs and Karlsen; the article was written from a communications perspective. The second medium discussed was (ii) *Filmography*. An article titled *How To Use The Pop-Screen In Literary Studies* (2010) by Reuber played a prominent role in this subsection; the article was written from a literary theory perspective. The third medium involved (iii) *Video games and virtual reality*, which were grouped as very active mediums. A prominent voice included an article titled *Using Virtual Reality And 360-Degree Video In The Religious Studies Classroom: An Experiment* (2018) by Johnson, written from a religious studies perspective. The last medium discussed in this Chapter was (iv) *Music*. The article titled *Hear And Be Heard: Learning With And Through Music As A Dialogical Space For Co-Creating Youth Led Conflict Transformation* (2017) by Gottesman played a prominent role in this section and is based on an educational development stance. The chapter then went over to section (v), which discussed *the use of digital entertainment in religious education* and provided some practical application concepts. The Chapter then concluded with the (iv) *Chapter themes*.

1.7.6 Chapter Six: Internet narratives

Three mediums of internet narratives that form the first three subsections were discussed in this Chapter. The first medium discussed in this Chapter was (i) *Websites*. The article titled *An Authentic Feeling? Religious Experience Through Q&A Websites* (2020) by Scardigno and Mininni played a prominent role in this subsection. This article was written from a religious education point of view. The second medium discussed in this Chapter was (ii) *Social media*. The article titled *How Does Social Media Use Relate To Adolescents Internalizing Symptoms? Conclusions From A Systematic Narrative Review* (2020) by Sarmiento et al. played a role in this section. The article was written from an educational psychology and communication arts point of view. The last medium discussed in this Chapter was (iii) *News*. The article titled *Cross-National Evidence Of A Negativity Bias In Psychophysiological Reactions To News* (2019) by Soroka et al. played a role within this subsection. This article was written from a communications, media and political science perspective. The Chapter proceeded to a section

titled (iv) *The use of internet narratives in religious education*. The Chapter concluded with the (v) *Chapter themes*.

1.7.7 Chapter Seven: Terms relevant to religious education

Chapter Seven explored *Terms relevant to religious education*. The first term explored was (i) *Ritual*. In this section, *The Craft Of Ritual Studies* (2014) by Grimes played a prominent role in the literature review. The book by Grimes was written from the perspective of religion and culture studies. The second section included two concepts: (ii) *Myth and symbols*. The article *Theorizing Myth To Facilitate Comparison And Re-Description In Biblical Studies* (2022) by Ballentine played a prominent role in the mythology section. This was written from the perspective of religious studies. The article *National Identity Between The Principle Of The Secular State And Freedom Of Religion* (2022) by Tokrri et al. played a role in the symbol section. This was written from an education and social science perspective. The last term connected with religion discussed was (iii) *Spirituality*. In this literature review, the book *Spirituality A Brief History* (2013) by Sheldrake played a role. This book was written from a theological perspective. The terms discussed in this Chapter all had a (i.i; ii.i; iii.i) *Discussion and semantics section* that consisted of a compact literature review. Each subsection also had a section on (i.ii; ii.ii; iii.ii) *Working definition* that clarified the terms for use in the thesis. The sections also contained (i.iii; ii.iii; iii.iii) *Examples from digital narratives* where different mediums with examples were given as a catalogue. Each section has a (i.iv; ii.iv; iii.iv) *Narrative evaluation example* where a narrative was evaluated in more detail. Lastly, the Chapter concluded with the (iv) *Chapter themes* section.

1.7.8 Chapter Eight: Digital narratives and religious (in)tolerance

Chapter Eight bound the thesis by showcasing intolerance and counter-narratives in the digital world. The first three headings described the concepts pointed out in the narratives. The first terms discussed were (i) *Secularism and nationalism*. In this subsection, the Chapter *Religion In The Public Sphere* (2013) by Fridlund played a role. The chapter was written from a political science perspective. The second set of terms discussed were (ii) *Fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism*. In this section, the compilation book *Handbook Of Terrorism Prevention And Preparedness* (2021a), edited by Schmid, played a prominent role. This book is a compilation volume with multiple perspectives, but the main perspectives came from extremist prevention and political studies points of view. The third set of terms discussed were (iii) *Islamophobia, Antisemitism, and minority-majority relationships*. In this section, the compilation book *Understanding Interreligious Relations* (2013), edited by Cheetham et al., played a role. This

book is also a compilation volume with the main perspective being from theology, religion, and globalisation studies. The Chapter continued to the (iv) *Examples from digital narratives* that act as a catalogue for (in)tolerant narratives. Two narratives were discussed in more detail under the (v) *Narrative evaluation example* subsection. The Chapter concluded with the (vi) *Chapter themes*.

1.7.9 Chapter Nine: Implications for religious education and broad principles for curricula

Chapter Nine discussed the (i) *Implications for Religious Education*, (ii) *Broad principles regarding digital narratives and curricula*, and (iii) *Chapter themes*. This Chapter can assist educators who would like to know more about how digital narratives impact religious education and may assist with some broad principles to help educators with curricula. As the thesis is not a curriculum written for a specific context, these are just general principles that educators should mould and expand to their context.

1.7.10 Chapter Ten: A discussion of the objectives and themes

Chapter Ten gave the thematic analysis of the overall objectives of the thesis (SQ, RG and PQ). The headings reflect the themes namely: (i) *To identify the religious studies professionals' roles in using digital narratives in education environments*, (ii) *To identify religious studies professionals' roles in encouraging the responsible creation of digital narratives*, (iii) *To identify how these professionals can play a role in interpreting digital narratives* and (iv) *Adding to the overall conversation of scholarly definitions*. The main themes were underscored by subthemes, which can be viewed in Chapter 1 under the heading *Themes*. This chapter provided a detailed explanation of the thesis findings.

1.7.11 Chapter Eleven: Conclusion

Chapter Eleven is the concluding Chapter of the thesis. This Chapter included the following headings: (i) *Thesis Chapters*, (ii) *To whom is this study of interest*, (iii) *Limitations and suggestions for further research*, and (iv) *Concluding remarks*.

1.8 Chapter themes

This Chapter is an introduction to the study and does not extensively answer the study's objectives. However, this Chapter touched on some of the study's themes:

- Critical thinking abilities and digital narratives (SQ6, RG3, PC5)

The section titled *Theoretical framework* highlighted the terms construct, simulation, affective realism and intersectionality. This theoretical framework highlighted some basic principles of how the human mind works. A theoretical framework such as this can aid students in understanding themselves, narratives and others, thereby aiding their critical thinking abilities. This is not the only theoretical framework that can be used, nor should theoretical frameworks become stagnant. As new understandings of the human mind emerge, so should curriculums adjust. Theoretical frameworks form part of the typical fact-based learning of curriculums, but they can aid the students with vocabulary when working with digital narratives. Students should be reminded that although these theoretical frameworks exist, many differences may occur regarding how people think, such as visual or linguistic thinkers (Mange et al. 2015:210). However, as a short introduction, students should be challenged to find specific constructs in digital narratives and think about how they are simulated. Students should be challenged to see what affective realism (e.g. biases, prejudices, "truths") may have played a role in creating narratives and the narrative's possible effect on consumers' affective realism. Lastly, the different intersections of constructs and characters may be evaluated.

- Post-secularism and digital narrative (SQ8)

The subsection titled *Defining religion* added to this section as the definition designed by the researcher is post-secular (defined in Chapter Eight) in nature. The definition highlighted that religion is not disappearing as predicted (discussed in Chapter Eight). There are multiple layers of realms where the concept may be realised. Religion is not just group-based but also individualised. People who identify as religious and irreligious were considered with the definition. The definition showcased that religion impacts humanity today regardless of religious affiliation because of religion's strong history within human society. Therefore, these modern concepts of religion must be considered when evaluating narratives in religious education settings.

- Providing new definitions to add to the ongoing conversation of scholarly definitions (PC13)

This Chapter provided unique definitions of intersectionality (Found under the *Theoretical framework* heading) and religion (found under the *Defining religion* heading). Therefore, these two definitions add to the overall conversation of scholarly definitions. The researcher did not coin the terms construct, simulation, affective realism, or intersectionality. However, the thesis contributes to the conversation on these terms by utilising them in constructing definitions. The thesis contains complex terms that are not one-dimensional. By utilising this theoretical framework, the researcher could showcase multiple facets of one term within one definition. A positive aspect of defining in this manner is that multiple definitions can complement each other. This does not imply that other defining systems do not complement each other. For example, if one defines religion and indicates the intersection with tolerance, then a definition of tolerance will enhance the definitions of religion and *vice versa*. This theoretical framework can be used within more focused studies within specific contexts. The researcher recognises that definitions can become long and complex. Long and complex definitions may not be ideal for researchers seeking a compact definition. However, complex phenomena may be misunderstood with compact definitions. That said, definitions should be chosen or written with each study in mind. This concludes the *Introduction* Chapter; the following Chapter focuses on the concept of *Tolerance*.

Chapter Two: Tolerance

For this thesis, religious education is in the pursuit of tolerance. Therefore, a literature review introducing the different academic voices on the phenomena is essential. In this Chapter, one finds (i) the *Debate on the concept of tolerance*, (ii) *Different scholarly definitions of tolerance*, (iii) *the Working definition of tolerance for the use of this thesis*, the (iv) *Simulation of religion and tolerance definitions through digital narratives*, and the (v) *Chapter themes*.

2.1 Debate on the concept of tolerance

Tolerance is derived from the Latin word *tolerantia* or *tolerare* (Forst 2013:37; Batool & Akram 2020:1482). The term *tolerantia* is found within the first century CE in, for example, Cicero's work (Forst 2013:37) and was commonly used to describe endurance, survival and bravery (Batool & Akram 2020:1482). Therefore, it has more to do in this early context with one's honour on account of one's actions rather than an action or way of thinking about other people (Forst 2013:37). The word is still used in this way today if one thinks of pain tolerance, for instance. Intolerance is not unique to any religion and is not bound only to religion. Instead, one can be intolerant or tolerant toward many different concepts; examples include but are not limited to ethnicity, culture, and sexuality. However, the focus of this thesis is on religion and tolerance. Therefore, some intersectionality will feature as religion is just one of the building blocks of humanity.

The concept of tolerance as bravery or endurance (as a sign of trust in God) was found in the thoughts of the early Christian church (Forst 2013:38). However, some forms of the early church writings include concepts such as hospitality and acceptance under the concept of tolerance (Forst 2013:29). Both tolerance and intolerance are found within the Christian New Testament (Forst 2013:41). Forst (2013:41) used the following biblical verses as examples Galatians 3:28, (pro-tolerance) Revelation 22:13–15 and Galatians 1:8 (anti-tolerance). Christianity and western thought are not singularly responsible for the concept of tolerance, even though the word is derived from there (Karim & Terebessy 2003:1; Batool & Akram 2020:1483). For example, traces of political tolerance can be seen in India's history shortly after the start of the common era and again between 1500-1600 CE (Nussbaum 2012:60). In this part of history, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam are the main religions to advocate tolerance (Nussbaum 2012:60). Hinduism is seen as a very inclusive and tolerant religion because of its plurality (Batool & Akram 2020:1483). Buddhism outlines ethical concepts such as tolerance and peaceful existence as part of a balanced way of living (Batool & Akram 2020:1483).

Islam also has a concept of tolerance, wherein people's freedom of conscience should be respected (Batool & Akram 2020:1483; Widayati & Maulidiyah 2018:686; Vaezi 2018:3). Quranic verses that simulate tolerance include Al-Qur'an, 29:46; 49:13; 5:48; 16:125, and simulations of intolerance are shown in Al-Qur'an, 2:191; 4:89 (Karim & Terebessy 2003:4; Elius et al. 2019:97, 98, 99). Religious tolerance is one of the qualities needed in modern multi-religious societies to exist peacefully (Smith 1991:loc 207, 213; Karim & Terebessy 2003:1, 6). Forst (2013:1) stated, "The promise of toleration is that coexistence in disagreement is possible". This is a profound statement as it shows that tolerance is never a singular concept but is always accompanied by otherness, violence, or disagreement. Tolerance is not neutrality or approval but rather a form of endurance (Moyaert 2018:6). Magid (2021b:10) made the following statement:

Religion is often its own worst enemy. While it is associated with the potential to transcend boundaries of tribe, language, and place, religion often becomes that which solidifies borders of separation, reifying difference. Religion serves as one of the most potent collective exemplars of transtribal, translinguistic, and deterritorialised orderings of society.

The nature of uniting and dividing should be considered when discussing religious tolerance, empathy, and humanisation. One cannot speak about religious tolerance without seeing the concept of religious intolerance and social imbalance (Forst 2013:3, 4). Therefore, intolerance can be seen within religious groups battling for power over each other or one group overpowering another (Kavka 2021b:7; Smet 2020:615). The simulation of tolerance is just as old as religion, even if both existed long before they had an English word assigned to them (Forst 2013:1-2). Every human construct, such as law, has a historical context that can lead to social imbalance (Moyaert 2011:93). The concept of tolerance might align with what a person believes (religiously, morally, or politically), or it might go against their moral code (Forst 2013:3). Individuals' views are influenced by their context, including the law of their country, religion, culture, and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, one should consider that different religious and cultural groups will have different ideas of tolerance (Vaezi 2018:4). Forst (2013:17, 18) mentioned multiple concepts and levels of tolerance depending on the simulation (experience within a specific context). Forst (2013:18) asked the following essential questions:

Is it exercised by persons, by groups, by 'society' or by the 'state'? And what are the objects of toleration? Convictions, systems of convictions, worldviews, personal qualities, even persons themselves, individual actions, practices, etc.? And, finally, which actions are required or forbidden by toleration?

Smet (2020:611, 616) echoed these two constructs of a legal and state construct versus a civilian construct. A balance is needed between the state and civilian levels of tolerance (Batool

& Akram 2020:1481). A good policy does not help if it is incompatible or unenforceable among its inhabitants. Tolerance depends on what one finds acceptable, objectionable but tolerable and that which cannot be tolerated (Forst 2013:24). Forst (2013:18) and Verkuyten & Killen (2021:51) stated that tolerance cannot be claimed in the presence of indifference or affirmation, as they stand in contrast to the concept. Tolerance can only extend so far; otherwise, complete intolerance and hatred also need to be tolerated in a way that defeats the purpose of striving toward tolerance (Forst 2013:23; Karim & Terebessy 2003:1; Schmid 2021c:25). Toleration and human rights are often found together, yet the concepts can drive and inhibit each other (Forst 2013:572).

Human rights such as freedom of religion are western Christian constructs (Prostak 2021:184). In entirely secular countries, the freedom not to belong to a religion is included in human rights (Prostak 2021:183). However, how freedom of religion is presented, and functions depends on multiple factors, thereby varying in context (Fox 2019:29). Modern secular concerns regarding tolerance are less Christian-orientated and focus on the state's neutrality (Prostak 2021:184, 192). However, the remnants of history and cultural bias may still influence this neutrality of the state (Moyaert 2011:93). Other human phenomena are of equal value and can be explored in applicable research. Prostak (2021:191) stated that western laws usually look at two concepts of religion:

[...] the inner sphere (freedom of conscience; freedom of thought) and the external one (freedom of religion; freedom of religious practice).

The conclusion is usually that one is free to pursue one's religious practises as long as it stays within the public interest (Prostak 2021:192). Furthermore, religious tolerance, human rights, and respect are often used in law and courts within countries where religious freedom is practised (Smet 2020:611; Gunawan et al. 2019:8). However, the meaning of tolerance and respect will differ depending on the definition of each legal context (Smet 2020:614). This, again, echoes tolerance as a construct and not necessarily a fixed term that means the same in every context. Debate on the necessity of tolerance in a more modern sense can be found in the work of Lock and Bayle as early as the seventeenth century (Smet 2020:614). However, some of their thoughts on tolerance were still limiting regarding who may be tolerated (Smet 2020:614).

Rieffer-Flanagan (2019:20, 23) argued that one should not mistake religious tolerance for freedom of religion, even though they are often used interchangeably. However, understanding these two terms may significantly impact policy (Rieffer-Flanagan 2019:25). According to

Rieffer-Flanagan (2019:25), freedom of religion cannot exist without religious tolerance. However, religious freedom is not necessarily a prerequisite for religious tolerance, as tolerance is easier to achieve (Rieffer-Flanagan 2019:25, 35). Furthermore, religious freedom takes time and effort to build (Rieffer-Flanagan 2019:38). One model of religious tolerance or religious freedom will not be functional in all contexts as sociocultural circumstances develop over time (Rieffer-Flanagan 2019:39). According to Rieffer-Flanagan (2019:24-25) religious tolerance is more of an oppressive system where one religion allows others to exist. Freedom of religion gives equal rights and openness to expressing all beliefs and is, therefore, more positive (Rieffer-Flanagan 2019:39). Depending on one's conception of how tolerance is simulated, freedom of religion may be included or excluded from the concept. The definition of tolerance and freedom of religion regarding Rieffer-Flanagan's work is discussed in more detail under *2.2 Different scholarly definitions of tolerance*.

Politically, one also finds different understandings of tolerance, especially regarding its placement toward respect and how the terms differ (Smet 2020:615). Law and politics are unavoidable subjects regarding religious tolerance, and although this is not the main focus of the thesis, the subjects are discussed briefly. Because of the connection regarding tolerance in law, highlighting some examples of values and misgivings that have taken place is essential and will aid in understanding the term tolerance. The countries given as examples are not necessarily the focus of this thesis. Instead, they are examples that will aid in a broad understanding of what is happening globally with these phenomena.

Religious cases are analysed through tolerance and respect in the United States of America (USA) (Smet 2020:611, 622). However, the USA law has been guilty of majority bias toward Protestant Christianity (Smet 2020:635; Phan & Tan 2013:228). Christian symbols have been said to be passive and secular rather than purely religious and are more easily accommodated (Smet 2020:636). In practice, suspicion and intolerance (such as flight searches, protests and vandalism) have been seen against Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Islamic and Roman Catholic immigrants (Nussbaum 2012:7, 8). However, the most significant problem has been intolerance against Islamic groups (Nussbaum 2012:8-12). People's religious affiliations have the potential to demarcate them as different from the national or cultural norm of a country, leading to discrimination (Beyers 2017c:6).

India is a secular state, and respect and tolerance are seen as similar within their legal system (Indiparambil 2018:435; Smet 2020:622). Hinduism is the majority religion within India and is seen as most compliant with the country's secular laws, a way of life, and part of the national

identity (Smet 2020:645, 646; Bouma 2013:56). A bias toward Hinduism has been noted within the country's laws, especially in cases surrounding Muslims and non-conforming cases of Hinduism (Smet 2020:645). India has laws that state that a person may not forcibly be converted to a religion; however, many false accusations of coercion have been made against minority groups (Indiparambil 2018:436; Phan & Tan 2013:222). Minority groups within India, such as Christianity and Islam, have suffered harsh surveillance and violent attacks (Indiparambil 2018:436, 437; Phan & Tan 2013:220).

Indonesia has a very diverse society in terms of culture and religion, with Islam being the majority (Gunawan et al. 2019:38; Kato 2017:77). In Indonesia, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is one of the most prominent Islamic organisations in the country and has a significant political influence (Mietzner & Muhtadi 2020:59). This organisation sets out a concept of tolerance toward different religions; however, Mietzner and Muhtadi (2020:60) have found that the follower of the NU is not more tolerant than any other Islamic practitioner in Indonesia. They also stated that tolerance had been seen as a political tool for the NU rather than the values they try to promote (Mietzner & Muhtadi 2020:62-63). On the other hand, Kato (2017:86) pointed out that the NU does try to counter religious propaganda and accept other religions; therefore, a conflicting picture forms this Islamic group. However, Kato (2017:87) pointed to the tension between religions within Indonesia, especially considering political leaders. Mietzner and Muhtadi's (2020:69) survey showed that religious intolerance is rising within Indonesia compared to similar studies in previous years, similar to global trends.

European countries have also seen bias toward Christian concepts considered culturally relevant rather than religious (Prostak 2021:193). This will include having Christian symbols such as crosses in schools as a passive cultural marker rather than a religious one (Italy) (Prostak 2021:193; Durham 2013:10; Tokrri et al. 2022:96). However, other religions are not granted such cultural relevance, and their symbols are seen as active rather than passive (Prostak 2021:194). This can be seen through banning traditional female Islamic head coverings from work or public spaces, as it is a "strong symbol" (Nussbaum 2012:4; Prostak 2021:194; Tokrri et al. 2022:94). While these debates about strong and weak symbols are debated it should be considered that all religious symbols should by European countries' policies, be taken out of the public sphere (Prostak 2021:193). Therefore, immigrants or people not practising the dominant religion are treated as the others within society or as "second-class citizens" (Beyers 2017c:6).

Ethiopia was long identified as an Orthodox Christian state, but the separation of church and state and religious tolerance and freedom of religion were instituted in 1974 (Tolera 2017:40, 41). However, the state has been seen to interfere with their communities' freedom of religion, especially its Islamic minorities (Tolera 2017:41). The cause of the negativity toward Islam in Ethiopia is said to be the state's relationship with the USA (Tolera 2017:42). Some interference includes banning religious head coverings such as the hijab in state-owned education establishments (Tolera 2017:55). Much conflict amounts between religious groups in Ethiopia, both between different Christian denominations and between Christianity and Islam, leading to deaths and property damage (Tolera 2017:43, 48). Digital media, along with propaganda, misinformation, and conspiracy theories, has been spread to sow hatred (Tolera 2017:45). Tolera (2017:53) stated that "Christianity is more legitimate and connected to the par excellence political establishment".

These are examples of how different countries are said to be neutral but do not necessarily act equally toward all religions (Bouma 2013:58). Where flexibility is found within the law, it is not necessarily used equally but is usually partial toward the majority (Nussbaum 2012:109). The balance between freedom of religion and limitations on religion is complicated (Prostak 2021:201). Therefore, as the state needs to maintain a specific order, as tolerance has limits, so does freedom of religion (Prostak 2021:201; Rieffer-Flanagan 2019:25). Freedom of religion and religious tolerance are intertwined. However, the concept of unequal rights within the freedom of religion is visible and, therefore, flawed (Prostak 2021:201).

What factors can influence religious intolerance? Religious intolerance is fuelled by the narrative of a definite protagonist and an antagonist in all situations (Gottschall 2021:22; Nussbaum 2012:21; Samuel 2021:174), showcasing the vital relationship between religion, tolerance, and narrative. Emotions play a significant role in religious (in)tolerance, especially fear, as it is strongly linked to survival (Karim & Terebessy 2003:1; Nussbaum 2012:21, 58). However, when misplaced, it is an emotion that can cause much more harm than that which is feared (Nussbaum 2012:58). The emotional reaction can be interpreted as a response to one's affective realism (Barrett 2018:284). Narratives that spread fear and the us-versus-them phenomena include conspiracy theories, propaganda and misinformation; this can also be linked to negativity bias and moral contagion (discussed in Chapter Four) (Fessler et al. 2014:3; Brady et al. 2017:7313). As misinformed narratives and propaganda transcended their untrue realm historically, they became part of what people believed (affective realism) (Nussbaum 2012:21; Rieffer-Flanagan 2019:22).

Narrow world views, ingroup, and outgroup perceptions are also partly to blame for misinformation and intolerance playing into an unhealthy us-versus-them phenomenon (Karim & Terebessy 2003:1; Verkuyten & Killen 2021:53; Rieffer-Flanagan 2019:22). Affective realism plays a role with ingroup, outgroup, fundamentalistic, and extremist views. How religious beliefs influence other groups can also play a role; for example, if a specific religion is seen as homophobic, it will influence how outgroup members who are not homophobic see the group (Verkuyten & Killen 2021:53). Similarly, if the government favours a religion, minority groups can have a negative emotional response to the favoured group (Rieffer-Flanagan 2019:22). A lack of information and education can also play a role in religious tolerance (Karim & Terebessy 2003:1). Although education does not necessarily mean that everyone enjoys the freedom of religion, it can aid in the process toward religious freedom and tolerance in the future (Rieffer-Flanagan 2019:37).

According to Karim and Terebessy (2003:10), some Islamic societies are discouraged from learning too much about concepts outside their religion. This can be seen in other cultures and religious groups and is not unique to Islam. However, Karim and Terebessy (2003:10) encourage curiosity, learning, and critical thinking. One can increase tolerance by leading by example and being tolerant (Karim & Terebessy 2003:12; Widayati & Maulidiyah 2018:686; van der Walt 2016:1). This leads to another question: does tolerance mean that people need to compromise (Karim & Terebessy 2003:2)? Karim and Terebessy (2003:2) stated that one does not compromise one's own beliefs by being tolerant. Although they also stated that one needs to be respectful and uncritical of other people's beliefs (Karim & Terebessy 2003:2); unfortunately, this will already seem like a compromise to religious groups that are fundamentalist or extremist. Nussbaum (2012:2) highlighted three essential principles to create a better-functioning multi-religious society, including respect, critical thinking, and empathy. When using the term tolerance, humans often affirm the negative rather than changing the perspective to the positive (Forst 2013:19). In doing so, one ends up with people who do not act on their prejudice or even hatred but do not change their thought process either (Forst 2013:19).

The work of tolerance is not to wipe out freedom of thought and speech; instead, it is to change "grossly irrational and immoral prejudices" (Forst 2013:20). One way to change this way of thinking is through humanisation. Humanisation is the recognition and respect of a person because they are human and therefore worthy of respect and human dignity (Smet 2020:616; Nussbaum 2012:61). This, of course, does not mean that beings that are not human are

unworthy of respect and dignity (Nussbaum 2012:63). It has however been shown that humans tend to feel more empathetic toward other humans (de Wied et al. 2021:870). Unfortunately, historically, not all people were treated with respect and dignity (Nussbaum 2012:62). Humanisation and respect are essential concepts when dealing with freedom of religion, tolerance, and religious conscience (Nussbaum 2012:119-120). Moyaert (2011:88) made the following statement:

Respect is characterized by its universal claim to transcend the limited intimacy of the affective relationships. Understood as respect, recognition is situated within the domain of universal rights that can be claimed and thus belongs to the legal sphere. Recognition here means understanding each person as autonomous and equal to every other person. The positive self-relationship that results from the experience of knowing one is recognized as a subject of rights is, self-respect. The legal affirmation of universal human dignity confirms one's own human dignity. Respect implies both civil rights and political and social rights [...]

This statement by Moyaert shows the fine line between respect and human dignity. The us-versus-them phenomenon often found within society has dimensions of dehumanisation. The *us* then sees the *them* as less than human (McCauley 2021:142). Therefore, *they* are treated as less deserving of fundamental human rights, historically leading to genocide and other atrocities (McCauley 2021:142; Kogan 2017:387). Fundamentalists and extremists can often dehumanise others to further their cause (Pratt 2013:257). The value of the other is seen as less than that of the ingroup, and they are often viewed as evil or ignorant, thereby contributing to their dehumanisation (Pratt 2013:257; Kogan 2017:387). Therefore, a strong narrative forms in terms of protagonist and antagonist. In that case, the fundamentalist is the protagonist, and the other is the antagonist. A clear protagonist and antagonist are unlikely in reality, whereas, in fiction, it is the norm (Gottschall 2021:123). However, this is the reality for a fundamentalist. This leads to whether polarising fictional narratives (us-versus-them or good versus evil) can make one more susceptible to polarised thinking in reality. McCauley (2021:143) made the following statement about dehumanisation:

Perception of a bad essence is a deep form of dehumanization. A bad essence cannot be reformed or re-educated; it can only be eliminated. All those who share the bad essence become legitimate targets, as all cockroaches are a target - large and small, old and young, whether they have raided our pantry or not. Pollution threat rationalizes killing by category.

This statement showcases the harsh reality of dehumanisation thinking. The call from Barrett (2018:286) to be curious and change one's affective realism is vital when looking at concepts such as tolerance and humanisation. Nussbaum (2012:140) stated that curiosity about people outside of one's norm could lead to the better humanisation of the other. By doing so, one can

also humanise the behaviour of the other and cultivate empathy for their belief and decisions made based on conscience (Nussbaum 2012:143). One of the ways humanisation and identification with groups that one does not belong to can occur is through digital media that have protagonist representations of these groups (see Chapter Four) (Murrar & Brauer 2017:19).

High levels of diversity are found in multiple countries today (Verkuyten & Killen 2021:51). Verkuyten and Killen (2021:51) stated that one does not need to value a concept to tolerate it. Therefore, tolerance does not inherently value diversity (Verkuyten & Killen 2021:51). However, Nussbaum (2012:141) clarified that humans have the right to search for meaning in their own way, which needs to be respected and valued. Looking at a way forward in religious education with a tolerance devoid of respect, no value for diversity, and no changing of prejudice is not what this thesis aims to encourage. Instead, greater respect, valuing diversity, and changing bias and prejudice are greatly encouraged through religious education. This is evident in the working definition of tolerance later in this Chapter.

2.2 Different scholarly definitions of tolerance

Different scholarly definitions are explored in this subsection to understand how the different tolerance constructs are simulated. Forst (2013:27-32) gave four concepts of tolerance; these are seen as four definitions of tolerance:

(1) Permission conception, toleration designates the relation between an authority or a majority and a minority (or several minorities) which does not subscribe to the dominant system of values. Toleration here means that the authority (or majority) grants the minority the permission to live in accordance with its convictions so long as it – and this is the crucial condition – does not question the predominance of the authority (or majority) [...] (2) The second conception of toleration, the coexistence conception, resembles the first in that, according to it, tolerance likewise counts as an appropriate means of avoiding conflict and pursuing one's own ends and does not itself represent a value or rest on strong values [...] For now, an authority or majority and a minority or minorities do not confront one another but groups of approximately equal strengths who recognise that they must practise tolerance for the sake of social peace and in their own interests [...] (3) By contrast, the respect conception of toleration proceeds from a morally grounded form of mutual respect for the individuals or groups who exercise toleration. The tolerating parties respect one another as autonomous persons or as equally entitled members of a political community constituted under the rule of law [...] (4) In discussions of the relation between multiculturalism and toleration, a fourth conception is occasionally encountered which can be called the esteem conception. It involves a more demanding form of mutual recognition than the respect conception for, according to it, toleration means not only respecting the members of other cultural or religious communities as legal and political equals but also esteeming their convictions and practices as ethically valuable [...]

From these definitions, it is clear that Forst (2013) showcased how different concepts of tolerance are simulated. Forst's concept terminology ascribed to each type of tolerance is noteworthy as most definitions can fall into one of these categories. However, it should be stated that Forst (2013:26) does not see these constructs as absolute or that one exists exclusively without the other. Tolerance is a construct; therefore, it is ever-changing and individualised like religion. Forst (2013:26) wrote these constructs with politics and law in mind. Therefore, he did not write the definitions with individuals in mind. Karim and Terebessy (2003:1) defined tolerance in the following way:

Tolerance is the attitude of letting other people live the way their culture requires them to live.

This is a very simplistic and accurate definition of tolerance that ignores the problems that may arise, such as how human rights and laws are implemented. Smet (2020:615) gave the following statement of tolerance:

Tolerance, at least as understood in political philosophy, operates as a negative lens. It relies on disapproval by those with power (usually a majority) of those without power (generally a minority). In its most pernicious mode, tolerance involves drawing boundaries of societal belonging, of in-groups and outgroups. Tolerance's negativity has led Nussbaum, among others, to reject it as 'too grudging and weak' an attitude towards religion [...] In its strongest form, respect instead equates to esteem or positive regard for difference. In other words, respect operates as a positive lens.

This simulation of tolerance shows the concept in a negative light. This definition equates with the permission conception in Forst's (2013:27-32) definitions. In this definition, respect is a concept outside tolerance. This tolerance theory is found within the world and is constructed within political philosophy. Therefore, this is an accurate definition of some forms of tolerance. However, the tolerance that this thesis hopes to encourage cannot stand without the concept of respect. Verkuyten and Killen (2021:51-52) defined tolerance in the following way:

First, tolerance is not indifference or neutrality but involves not interfering with others' beliefs or practices that are evaluated negatively, such as when others engage in cultural practices or voice beliefs that are unappealing, unsettling, or uninviting [...] Second, tolerance implies having moral reasons for accepting what someone is negative about [...] Third, tolerance does not mean that anything goes and that children's judgments of relativism differ from their tolerance of divergent beliefs.

Verkuyten and Killen worked with the idea of children and religious education in mind. This definition aligns with Forst's (2013:28-29) coexistence conception of tolerance and acts as a negative lens. Batool and Akram (2020:1482) defined tolerance in the following way:

There are two key models of tolerance: (1) passive tolerance and (2) active tolerance. The first one refers to the acceptance of differences as factual, whereas latter means to involve with others despite differences and variations.

The definition given here is simplistic and describes two simulations of tolerance. The first definition refers to tolerance as a concept and the second more as a simulation. It, however, does not give the full extent of the complexity of the construct. Widayati and Maulidiyah (2018:686) defined tolerance in the following way:

The researchers conclude that religious tolerance is the ability to respect, respect and not interfere with the lives of followers of other religions. In addition, tolerance has meaning in a fair, honest, objective attitude, allowing others to do different things regarding their religion. Tolerance is living in harmony and peace as part of religious freedom.

The value of respect and freedom of religion seen within the definition is appreciated. However, the scholars did not state whether this definition regards state or civilian tolerance. The limitation of tolerance is unclear, especially regarding concepts like law. Mietzner and Muhtadi (2020:67) gave the following definition of religious tolerance in the context of Indonesia:

Against this background, we propose to define religious tolerance as an attitude that accepts the free expression of beliefs and conduct of practices by citizens endorsing a faith different from one's own, and that views the constitutional rights of such citizens as equal to those held by the followers of one's own faith. "Religious intolerance" then, is an attitude that rejects, and tries to ban or limit, the expression of beliefs and/or the practices of citizens endorsing a faith different from one's own, and that views the constitutional rights of followers of one's own faith as superior to those held by followers of a different faith.

The definition reflects a version of Forst's (2013:27-32) esteem conception. This definition was explicitly created with the Indonesian context in mind, hoping that a western view of religious tolerance would not be forced on the context (Mietzner & Muhtadi 2020:67). The definition includes both religious tolerance and intolerance, thereby clarifying the boundaries of the phenomena. Rieffer-Flanagan (2019:24) believes that religious tolerance and freedom of religion should be kept as separate ideas. Rieffer-Flanagan (2019:24-25), therefore, gave the following definition of the two terms:

Religious tolerance involves living with others who hold different, and perhaps objectionable, beliefs and engage in unfavorable practices [...] Religious tolerance exists in a society when a majority religion accommodates the presence of a minority religion [...] This suggests that religious tolerance is a negative right, and amounts to a willingness to endure, or leave, those individuals or groups who possess a different belief set in order to coexist without interference [...] Religious freedom involves not merely putting up with different beliefs or practices or not persecuting individuals with different creeds, but involves opening up a social space for individuals and groups with divergent religious beliefs and practices to actively engage in their faith. Religious freedom involves not simply possessing a set of beliefs, but the ability to be active in a religious tradition (practices) and to freely express one's self in various (non-violent) forms.

The two terms may function as two different definitions of tolerance, as seen in Forst's (2013:27-32) permission- and respect- or esteem-conceptions. The idea stated here by Rieffer-Flanagan (2019:24) was to make religious tolerance and freedom of religion two different concepts. On the one hand, this makes sense, especially when viewing definitions of tolerance in which respect, empathy and equality are not a part. The problem with this definition is that a government can pursue religious tolerance without official freedom of religion when one completely separates the two terms. Religious tolerance without the pursuit of freedom of religion is almost void and is the lowest form of tolerance. Tolera (2017:58) weighed up the difference between religious tolerance and religious pluralism and gave the following definitions:

To briefly introduce the two, religious plurality/diversity simply shows the existence, at a given time, of people of different faiths in a given society. Religious pluralism, on the other hand, relates to the attitude in which religious plurality/diversity is appreciated and beliefs other than one's own viewed as looking at the cosmic order from a different perspective [...] Moreover, religious pluralism is wrongly understood as religious tolerance, although the latter in fact shows hierarchical relationships where the dominant/hegemonic tolerates the subordinate or subaltern, i.e., 'I' (the dominant) tolerates the 'other' (the subordinate).

The definition of tolerance correlates with Forst's (2013:27-28) permission conception. The definition given by Tolera segregates the idea of religious tolerance and religious pluralism. This definition rings true with Rieffer-Flanagan's (2019:24) definition, which gave the difference between religious freedom and religious tolerance. Both these scholars see a significant limitation within the construct of tolerance, probably owing to their simulation (experience) of the phenomena. Tolerance in this narrow, oppressive view does not allow for freedom of religion, pluralism, respect, and mutual acceptance. It is necessary to work toward a definition where this concept of tolerance may be a start. However, tolerance must always strive toward something more significant than not simply persecuting the other. If governments, communities and individuals feel they are in a compliant place of tolerance, they will never strive for more. Tolerance then becomes stagnant and will not yield fruit.

2.3 Working definition

The researcher created this definition to navigate the rest of the thesis. Some terms that are used within the definition are only defined later in the thesis. The definitions of these terms enhance this definition. Therefore, the rest of the thesis should be considered to understand the definition fully. As mentioned in Chapter One, the definitions composed for the use of the thesis were

formatted in this manner to prevent confusion of where the extensive definition began and ended. Here follows the definition of tolerance for the thesis:

Tolerance is a construct. It can be simulated through laws and regulations. The government or other authorities enact this construct in a set country. This simulation intersects with human rights (e.g. freedom of religion) and to what degree this is implemented. It influences how laws are written and interpreted, which can have real consequences on many people's lives. The ideal will be for this construct to be neutral and not to favour one group over another. However, facilitation through neutrality is not always a reality in practice. Tolerance intersects with but is not limited to secularism and nationalism. Moreover, not everything can be tolerated. An example is breaking the rules of a country (e.g., murder). However, some laws may undermine groups (e.g., not being able to wear religious clothing). Law and tolerance are a complex web. Furthermore, policy should aid the development of tolerance among the inhabitants of a country. A well-written policy in an intolerant society is of little use in the everyday interaction between people in a multi-religious society.

Tolerance can also be simulated as a skill. This skill is found in all people. In some, it may be well-developed; in others, it may be less developed. Tolerance works based on a scale and does not manifest in only one simulation. The skill of tolerance includes the knowledge that one's constructs, simulations and intersections create affective realism (even if devoid of this terminology). Furthermore, understanding other people's constructs, simulations, and intersections creates their affective realism. In understanding this, no one's affective realism will be completely compatible with another. This can be on a greater or lesser scale. Tolerance can extend to any human phenomenon with differences in constructs, simulations, intersections, and affective realism. Therefore, tolerance intersects with but is not limited to religion, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationalism, and language.

A person with a well-developed tolerance skill is not devoid of the idea of threat or fear. Instead, a person with a well-developed skill of tolerance does not perceive every difference in construction, simulation, intersection, and affective realism as a threat to their own. A well-developed skill in tolerance intersects with humanisation, empathy, and respect. However, a well-developed skill of tolerance may not be limited only to these constructs. No person can possess the perfect skill of tolerance; however, one can strive toward developing the skill to the best of one's ability. A well-developed skill of

tolerance does not tolerate everything, and one can still understand right from wrong and detect real or perceived threats. Underdeveloped skills in tolerance may lead to weaker forms of tolerance that put up with others while still viewing them with great suspicion and as a threat. Underdeveloped skills in tolerance may intersect with vulnerabilities to fundamentalism, extremism, negative us-versus-them phenomena, dehumanisation, lack of empathy, fear, withdrawal, and disrespect. However, it is not limited to these intersections.

Some intolerant phenomena may include but are not limited to Islamophobia, Antisemitism and unhealthy minority and majority religious dynamics. Intolerance is, therefore, the lack of practice of the skill of tolerance toward a group or phenomenon. Intolerance may thus intersect even stronger with the constructs that intersect with the underdeveloped skill of tolerance. A person may have multiple layers of tolerance toward different phenomena. Therefore, tolerance is not static in an individual. A person may have a strongly developed skill in tolerating some constructs, phenomena, or people. However, they may have weaker skills or even intolerance toward other constructs, phenomena, or people. In some situations, weaker skills or intolerance may not mean a person does not have the skill. Instead, the person may need help transferring the skill to different phenomena.

Furthermore, like any other skill, one may need to consider people's abilities to master a set skill. It is a skill that needs constant tending; therefore, one's capacity for the skill is not an excuse for intolerance. The well-developed and underdeveloped tolerance skills are not the only forms but merely some crucial parts of the spectrum. Complete intolerance also forms part of the same spectrum. Therefore, many constructs will exist between these three constructs of the spectrum. Multi-religious societies should encourage the development of the skill of tolerance. This can be done through different forms of diversity training that many countries worldwide have already implemented. However, these courses' continuous development, implementation, and refinement must be taken seriously. The skill of tolerance will affect a person's affective realism regardless of whether it is strongly developed or underdeveloped. Therefore, tolerance impacts interpersonal responses, emotional reactions, narratives, and societal relationships.

This is an extensive definition, as tolerance is not a narrow construct.

2.4 Simulation of religion and tolerance definitions through digital narratives

This section notes how defining religion or tolerance can be illustrated through digital narratives in a religious studies class. Digital narrative is discussed later in Chapter Four of the thesis. When analysing a digital narrative, one can ascribe a definition of religion or tolerance to narratives with traits of the phenomena. However, not all narratives have traces of religion or tolerance; therefore, this will not always be necessary or applicable. The thesis proposes that when using digital narratives in religious studies classrooms, one can ask the class to assign readily existing definitions to narratives. This will allow students to practice using definitions within different contexts. By doing this, students will see how definitions differentiate the different concepts of religion and tolerance by using the narratives as simulators. Narratives can also simulate fractures of religion and tolerance concepts rather than full constructs. Therefore, examples of ritual, myth, symbols, spirituality, secularism, nationalism, fundamentalism, extremism, terrorism, Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and minority-majority relationships should also be considered (see Chapters Seven and Eight). These are just examples; many fragments of religion and tolerance may be found within digital narratives.

The concepts in digital narratives do not always fully portray real-world contexts but can sometimes be fictional. This does not make them useless, as these concepts are often drawn from real-world contexts, such as religion. However, it is essential to be cautious here as narratives are always only a shadow of reality; they are never the whole picture. Therefore, one can use narrative in religious studies classes as a simulation and illustration. More on how narrative works as a simulation or illustration can be found in Chapter Four. At the same time, one must be careful not to reduce concepts such as religion, religious communities, religious constructs and tolerance or intolerance only to what is encountered in digital narratives. Students should constantly be reminded that the concepts simulated through digital narratives in class are real constructs that are important to various people. The variation in constructs must be discussed to avoid religious people and constructs becoming caricatures or stereotypes in students' minds. Furthermore, pointing out stereotypical and inaccurate constructs to students within digital media will also enable them to see these problems in the future.

When ascribing a definition of tolerance or religion to a narrative, it should not be understood as the view of the narrative creator but rather as an interpretation from the Scholar as the narrative receiver. Defining religion in digital narratives might help students broaden their view of religion or tolerance and not just focus on what they feel the phenomena should be. If this simulation through narrative is used, the person leading the class will have to choose various

definitions and narratives that match each other. This will help ease the class in choosing definitions that fit the narrative. However, one must not make the mistake of choosing a narrow narrative. Students have their contexts and constructs of religion and tolerance. Therefore, more than one definition can apply to a narrative debate and can be a valuable tool within the class to broaden the students' horizons. Using basic narrow definitions may be very helpful as narratives do not always show all the complexities of religion and tolerance. More complex definitions will also contribute to healthy debate among university-level students.

A religious studies university class can practice creating definitions for phenomena found in narratives. This can be given to the students as an assignment for class credit and help students expand their thoughts and research skills. The assignment can aid students in building the skill of creating definitions for their post-graduate studies. Therefore, the narrative will aid in simulating situations for students to analyse. Another assignment option is to ask students to observe a specific phenomenon within any digital media they consume, for example, in the space of a month or semester. For example, if they see traces or complete representations of specific religions. Students can be asked to find simulations of, for example, rituals or nationalism in digital narratives. Students can then be asked to write an assignment where the phenomenon is first briefly explained and defined, and they can briefly describe observed phenomena in the narratives. Lastly, they can analyse the accuracy of the representation of the observed phenomena. Variation and creativity can be used to make unique assignments in this way. Giving feedback to students on their definitions may help their defining skills.

2.5 Chapter themes

This Chapter helped to address the following themes:

- The responsible and ethical use of narratives (SQ2, RG2)

One of the most significant skills necessary in multi-religious societies is humanisation and tolerance. However, as seen in Chapters Four, Seven and Eight, not all narratives are created with positive intent. Understanding concepts such as tolerance and humanisation may aid in the responsible use of narrative. One's understanding of tolerance and the humanisation of others can be deeply entangled with one's ethics and values. Therefore, broadening these concepts can enable students to view narratives more responsibly.

- Content creators (SQ3, RG7)

Content creators should be encouraged to showcase humans in a humanising manner. Narratives are very contextually bound, and most have an antagonist. However, it is essential not to typecast groups with prejudice against them, thereby perpetuating stereotypes. Content creators should be encouraged to create detailed characters with multiple intersections, encouraging humanisation. Furthermore, content creators should consider how tolerance or intolerance is showcased within their narratives.

- Interpretation of narratives (SQ4)

When using narratives in articles, scholars can assign or create definitions for tolerance and religion. This can assist other scholars in utilising these narratives within education settings to simulate narratives for defining purposes.

- Digital narrative as a creative source (SQ5; RG5; PC6).

Definitions of religion and tolerance are often used within education settings. Definitions may feel overwhelming to students, and the differences between definitions may not always be clear. By utilising narratives while teaching students, apparent differences may be illustrated. Broadening students' understanding can lead to an increase in their tolerance skills.

- Critical thinking abilities and digital narratives (SQ6, RG3, PC5)

By asking students to evaluate narratives for their religious or tolerant constructs, educators encourage students to think critically about the narrative. By asking students to assign definitions to narratives, educators can encourage students to work critically with the material used in class and the digital world.

- Tolerance and the responsible use of digital narratives (SQ7, RG6, PC4)

If students can better understand the different forms and definitions of tolerance through narrative, they can better understand the difference between well- and under-developed skills of tolerance. Understanding the phenomena may increase students' awareness and tolerance skills. Furthermore, if intolerant or lower levels of tolerance are present within a narrative, they can see the concept and make sure that it does not negatively affect their affective realism.

- Post-secularism and digital narrative (SQ8)

If post-secular societies have set ideas about what is appropriate regarding tolerance, humanisation, and equality, it will impact how narratives are formed. Narrative creators may or may not portray these ideals in the context they are found in, thereby perpetuating existing societal ideologies. However, individuals may feel different from the context that they are found in, thereby creating narratives that contrast the existing ideologies. These are concepts that can be considered by religious studies classes.

- The creation of content (SQ9, PC10)

Religious studies professionals should understand humanisation, tolerance, and intolerance concepts well. If religious studies professionals want to create digital content, promoting tolerance and humanisation while creating counter-narratives (discussed later in the thesis) to counter intolerant narratives within the digital world would be ideal. Religious studies professionals can potentially create accessible and responsible information that the general public can access and use to fact-check against narratives.

- How religious studies and media studies can benefit each other (RG4, PC7, PC8, PC9)

Not all misinformation found within narratives comes from religion or tolerance. However, religion and intolerance are often tools used to manipulate audiences; thereby, religion studies is ideally situated to be part of the conversation of critical information evaluation.

- Providing new definitions to add to the ongoing conversation of scholarly definitions. (PC13)

This section provides a unique, comprehensive, if broad, definition of tolerance. This adds to the ongoing conversation of the scholarly definitions of tolerance. Furthermore, this study encourages using different definitions in classroom settings (often done) while encouraging digital narratives to illustrate the differences in tolerance and religion. This segment contributes to the conversation by encouraging creative learning concepts within classes. This concludes the Chapter on *Tolerance*. In the following Chapter, *Religion and education* are discussed.

Chapter Three: Religion and education

In this Chapter, the semantics and concepts encountered within religion and education are explored, and problems in education involving religion are showcased. The Chapter includes (i) *Debate on religion and education*, (ii) *Important elements that influence religious education*, (iii) *Working definition* and (iv) *Chapter themes*. Note that there is no separate section for scholarly definitions; instead, they are included in the literature review. This thesis focuses on the global phenomena of plurality, digital media, and religious education. This thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context, nor does the researcher aim to do away with current curriculums already in place. However, certain constructs must be considered when implementing digital narratives in religious education.

3.1 Debate on religion and education

Religion education is one of the more complex subjects with many conceptual and semantic entanglements. As seen in Chapter One, the construct of religion is not easy to pin down. It intersects with many other constructs and simulations within the human experience. In any phase of life, religious education falls into social, ethical, and political concerns (Durham 2013:1). Much debate has been given to whether religion belongs in education and its worth as an academic field (Arthur & Lovat 2013:1). Historically, academic fields such as science and mathematics that were seen as more quantifiable had more authority than, for example, humanities (Arthur & Lovat 2013:1). However, different fields in humanities, such as religious studies, are being valued more today than previously realised (Arthur & Lovat 2013:1). Arthur and Lovat (2013:1) stated that many scientific pursuits, such as string theory, go beyond the quantifiable. Humanity's religious and spiritual concepts have become part of different fields such as neurobiology and politics (Arthur & Lovat 2013:1). Much the same can be said for narrative studies, as there was always a higher and more rational pursuit than 'stories'. However, Chapter Four focuses on narrative and clearly illustrates the value of narratives.

Religion and education have many terms that might be conflicting or semantically entangled, making it hard to distinguish the difference. Discussing all theories and opinions on religion and education is beyond the scope of this thesis; however, some broad terms are discussed to show the variations. The main difference between the different terms found within religion and education is the two main end goals of education. The first end goal can be to instruct the pupil on religious matters in a confessional way by instructing students on their spiritual well-being and concepts like life after death (Arthur 2013:62). The second end goal can be to educate them

on multiple religions in a non-confessional way (Arthur 2013:62). Where is the line between these two concepts? For example, the South African Government (2003:26) defined religious instruction and religious education as:

Religious instruction refers to a programme of instruction which is aimed at providing information regarding a particular set of religious beliefs with a view to promoting adherence thereto [...] religion education describes a set of curriculum outcomes which define what a pupil should know about religion.

It should be noted that these are just definitions that work well as examples. This thesis is not overtly focused on a South African context, as digital narrative and multi-religious societies are global phenomena. It is a necessity and a responsibility to educate people in pluralistic societies about the diversity they will inevitably encounter (Beyers 2017b:205). Confessional religious education in children is usually the responsibility of parents and their respective religious communities (Beyers 2017b:205). It should be noted that religious instruction is not synonymous with indoctrination. The two constructs can intersect or stand separately. Religious instruction can lead to critical thinking and evaluating one's religious constructs. However, the focus of the current study is on religious education (non-confessional), not religious instruction (confessional). Ubani (2013:42) used the term "existentially sensitive education". Ubani (2013:42) defined existentially sensitive education in the following way:

Education that recognises the students as existentially active beings by supporting the articulation of search for meaning, recognition of fundamentally defining issues of the individual (i.e., stories, experiences, people, hobbies) and promoting a coherent and purposeful lifestyle.

Existentially sensitive education is a broad concept that goes beyond only the religious (Ubani 2013:50) and, therefore, goes beyond the scope of the current thesis. Ubani's (2013:42, 43, 45) work highlighted a search for meaning, morals, values, purpose in life, and spirituality. Ubani (2013:50) viewed education on religious matters in three distinct ways: confessional, non-confessional, and something in between, not necessarily just non-confessional "learning about religion" but also gaining knowledge on a spiritual level. He warned educators not to indoctrinate students but to make the subject matter relevant by not presenting it clinically (Ubani 2013:43, 45, 50, 51). Ubani suggested that students should be challenged to use their critical thinking abilities in existential education (Ubani 2013:51). Educators may easily cross the line to indoctrination in this model without realising it. However, remembering that one is working with complex existential concepts and individuals who seek to understand them can be considered.

The South African National Policy On Religion And Education highlighted four models that portray typical simulations found in the world concerning government and religion (South African Government 2003:3-4). First, the policy identified the "theocratic model", where there is no separation between state and religion (South African Government 2003:3). The second model the policy identified was the "Repressionist model", where the state tries to take away religion from the public sphere (South African Government 2003:3-4). The third model identified by the policy was the "separationist model"; the state is impartial or apathetic toward religion (South African Government 2003:4). Lastly, the policy identified the "co-operative model" where a separation between religion and government is seen, however, religion is not regarded apathetically; instead, each has its place and esteem in society (South African Government 2003:4). These models are considered by scholars like Krüger et al. (2009:310). The relationship between governments and religion influences if and how religious education is taught within countries. Laws, policies, and regulations should be considered when developing religious education courses. These models can assist religion studies professionals in navigating the complex relationship between state, religion, and education.

Other terms for these models also exist. Arthur (2013:66), for example, referred to secular models of religious education. Secular education is non-confessional and strives to protect freedom of religion and personal conscience, reflecting the "separationist model" (Arthur 2013:62, 66). Furthermore, the terms Liberal secularism, which reflects the "co-operative model", and fundamentalistic secular system, reflecting the "Repressionist model", were found in Arthur's (2013:66-67) work. Arthur (2013:62, 67, 68) criticises secular education's neutrality claims, as true neutrality is impossible; therefore, secular education can often benefit one group while suppressing others, just as secular societies often do. This demonstrates that educators need to be aware of their affective realism, even when working from a secular viewpoint. Many different words are often used for similar simulations of religious education. Hughes & McCutcheon (2021:1) gave the following statement:

The non-confessional, academic field of religious studies (as it is often called, though it goes by other names as well, including the history of religions and comparative religion, even the science of religion).

In the quote, Hughes and McCutcheon did not differentiate between the terms. Different approaches might be taken to studying religions when the name changes. Lofton (2021a:36) made the following statement:

If religion is an idea we have about things, then we ought to learn about how we have ideas about things in order to study religion. Scholars of religion do not study belief. Scholars of religion study how believers come to think something is a belief.

This was echoed by W.C. Smith (1991:loc 315) when he stated that a religious person focuses on constructing their ultimate truth, such as God or the universe, whereas religious scholars focus on the simulation that encompasses religion. Therefore, one studies humans, their interactions, thoughts and what is found in the world as the constructs of religion. It is impossible to quantify the transcendent; however, human thought and reaction surrounding the transcendent can be studied (Beyers 2017b:194). A sticky web emerges between the term's religion and religious. Beyers (2016:2) stated that:

This distinction between Religious and Religion Studies is based on a semantic argument. 'Religious' in Religious Studies is an adverbial description of the nature of the study undertaken, focusing on the study. With Religion Studies religion is used as a noun indicating the object to be studied.

Religious studies might seem to be the study of beliefs (confessional) or be seen as the plural for religion (Henking 2021a:70). In this thesis, the terms religion education and religious education are used interchangeably. As showcased here, religion studies is the educational theory used within the thesis and defined at the end of the Chapter. The terms refer to the non-confessional fields meant to educate about different religions or the study of different religions (Beyers 2016:3); this includes all major, minor, and even ancient religious traditions (Beyers 2017b:189). Methods, such as the history of religion, literary studies, comparative religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion and phenomenology of religion, started as a field but became more a methodical part of religious studies as a whole (Beyers 2016:1, 2). Many of the different terminologies found to describe religion education and the study of religions arose from different historical contexts (Beyers 2016:1). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to describe and discuss all the different contexts and terms that arose to study religion. Religion is not a simplistic construct; the study of religion is inherently interdisciplinary and multi-methodical (Beyers 2016:1, 8; Beyers 2017c:7). Beyers (2016:6) made the following statement:

Religious studies is not concerned with the question of truth of any expression of religious encounter. All expressions of belief according to religious studies are valid and true.

Therefore, religion studies work within post-modernist societies that are characterised by multiple truths and fragmentation (Beyers 2014:2). Other forms of education are worthy of

exploration, and many of the theories used in the thesis are transferable to other forms of education involving religion. Theology is one of many examples of education that is linked to religion. Theology is a term that is closely associated with the Christian religion (Ryan 2016:14). Theology comes from the Latin words *Theos* and *Logos* and is therefore connected to the forming and understanding of Christianity based on the Bible (Ryan 2016:14). This is a very narrow view of theology. Many other religions call their understanding and expansion of their faith theology. Examples of this are Islamic and Jewish theologies; however, theology is not limited to these religions (Dag 2022:1; Homolka 2017:426; Beyers 2016:6). Caution must be taken as there might still be a very Christian connection to the word theology. Theology also includes different fields; examples include Liberation-, feminist-, creation-, inter-church- and Quantum theologies (Ryan 2016:16-17,19). These fields can even become more specialised, for instance, not just feminist or liberation theology, but specifically, African feminist theology showing strong forms of intersectionality (Phiri & Gunda 2022:620).

Theology of religions or "theological religious studies" usually involves evaluating and understanding the other from a specific perspective (Beyers 2016:3). For instance, one can investigate from a Christian theological perspective to understand oneself and the other (Beyers 2017a:3; Beyers 2016:6). Beyers (2017a:3) stated that:

Theology of religions also aims to formulate principles and guidelines regarding the practical coexistence, witnessing toward and dialogue with members of other faiths.

Theology of religions is a valuable construct that can guide people of a specific religion toward understanding other religions. Beyers (2017a:16) further stated that:

A theology of religions requires not only seeking similarities but also identifying differences, and then seeking points of contact. The purpose of this analysis is to suggest a comprehensive approach to understanding religions.

This is a vital field, especially taking meetings between people in pluralistic societies into account (Beyers 2017a:1). Furthermore, plurality is more prominent through digital technology, exacerbating the need for such a field (Beyers 2017a:2). However, the theology of religions is not used as the principal construct of religious education for this thesis. This is because the thesis is constructed from the perspective of multi-religious students in one class;

theology of religion can easily border on confessional education. This being said, digital media will be just as valuable a resource for classes that work from a theological point of view.

Moyaert (2018:1) described worldview education as:

[...] in inter-worldview education, the goal of which is to promote understanding between people who uphold different religious and non-religious worldviews. Inter-worldview education includes both religious and non-religious voices in the classroom and engages them in a dialogical learning process. Because it is not focused solely on people who belong to a particular faith tradition and based on the assumption that everyone has a 'worldview', i.e., a particular way of looking at the world, inter-worldview education aspires to be more inclusive than inter-religious or inter-faith education. How this will play out concretely varies from country to country and depends on the relation between Church and State, national histories and sociological developments.

This statement was not meant as a definition but can be used as one. What is striking about the term worldview used here is its inclusiveness, as not everyone in pluralistic societies will relate to religion. A greater voice can be given to those who do not affiliate with religion in an educational context, as their affective realism should also be understood and tolerated. However, care must be taken where the concept of religion and worldview intersect, thereby not making the phenomena mutually exclusive and reductionistic. Furthermore, one must set clear boundaries when using this term, as it can intersect with many phenomena. Beyers (2016:1) stated: "Religious studies is concerned with studying religion or the absence thereof". If the study of religion is concerned not just with the phenomena of religion but also its absence, worldview education and religion education may be more aligned than one might think. Nationalism, secularism and other ideologies can also play a role in religious education (Beyers 2017b:189). As these phenomena are evaluated in the thesis in a global context rather than one specific context, educators and policymakers are advised to take these semantic entanglements seriously when developing curricula. Moyaert (2018:2) pointed out that true neutrality in the classroom is not possible and that:

[...] such claims do not sufficiently reckon with the fact that inter-worldview education happens in a particular socio-political context that is marked by structural inequalities and uneven power relations between people with different worldviews.

Students outside of the norm or what is considered acceptable are disadvantaged if they do not fit into nationalist ideologies (Moyaert 2018:2, 7). The degree of difference may also not be equal for all people considered as other, as some others conform more to the dominant ideology (Moyaert 2018:8). This problem transcends the term worldview education and can be applied in any interreligious and intercultural education. Furthermore, she pointed out that the conflicting ideas of what tolerance means can create problems in classrooms (Moyaert 2018:6).

Illiteracy is fuelled by constructs of weak tolerance as one only needs to put up with, rather than learn from and understand, the other (Moyaert 2018:6). This leads to anything from inappropriate behaviour to violence, where strong tolerance leads to dialogue and literacy (Moyaert 2018:6, 7).

Diversity education is just as crucial for understanding oneself as it is for understanding others (Sears 2012:548). Intersectionality and how one's identity is not one clear-cut neat political box may aid in this understanding of self and, consequently, others (Sears 2012:548; Masquelier 2022:9-10). These are important statements, as religious education does not encourage everyone to follow universalist approaches. However, if students follow such an approach, this should also be considered, respected and tolerated. The terms citizenship education, intercultural citizenship and global citizenship education (GCE) are also terms used within forms of plurality and education (Castiglioni & Bennett 2018:229; Giroux & Bosio 2021:3). Plurality is challenging the old legal and political assumption of citizenship (Castiglioni & Bennett 2018:229-230). Giroux and Bosio (2021:4) made the following statement:

Second, citizens need to be multiliterate in ways that not only allow them access to new information and media-based technologies but also enable them to be border-crossers capable of engaging, learning from, understanding, and being tolerant of and responsible to matters of difference and otherness.

This statement again points to critical thinking, multiple literacies, tolerance, and media use. Citizenship education focuses on social responsibility and social issues rather than just information on set topics (Giroux & Bosio 2021:4, 6), like religion. Although citizenship education is valuable, it is not the primary view taken in the thesis. However, the use of responsibility and social justice, together with a local and global view, are constructs that will and can be considered. The "preventing and countering violent extremism" in educational programs acts as a "firewall" (resilience) for youth against extremism by engaging critical thinking abilities and empathy (Samuel 2021:165, 166; Schmid 2021c:20). Thereby, extremism and fundamentalism can be countered through well-trained educators and policymakers who take the vulnerability of youth seriously (Samuel 2021:175, 176). Schmid (2021c:28) emphasised good governance and social justice to encourage citizens who will be less tempted to fall prey to extremist propaganda (Schmid 2021c:28). Therefore, the government outside of the educational process also has a role in encouraging healthy and content citizens.

Schmid (2021c:29) made the following statement:

Since nobody is born a terrorist, push and pull factors during adolescence and acts of commission and omission from parents, schools, and communities during the formative years of a child play a large role in turning young people to harmful and problematic behaviors when the immediate environment cannot satisfy the basic human needs of young people.

This statement is important because it illustrates that no person, regardless of their demographic, is born with extremist ideas embedded in their mind. Meeting the needs of the youth and educating them from a young age is crucial in preventing extremist ideologies. Samuel (2021:176) stated that age groups and social-cultural circumstances would dictate students' different needs, levels of understanding and critical thinking abilities (Samuel 2021:176). Furthermore, religious (interreligious), cultural (intercultural) literacy, and interaction with others should be encouraged (Samuel 2021:179). Zeiger and Gyte (2021:359) stated that a crucial part of countering propaganda is educating people to have "media literacy". It is possible to counter religious extremism with healthy role models and counter-narratives from credible sources, such as survivors of terror attacks, reformed terrorists and relatable young social media influencers (Samuel 2021:176, 177). Digital narratives can fulfil this purpose in religious education settings, as in-person conversations are not always possible (Samuel 2021:176, 183, 184; Zeiger & Gyte 2021:372). Furthermore, assuring students can spot misinformation used to manipulate people is also essential in education systems (Zeiger & Gyte 2021:372-375). This showcases the intersection between religious literacy and media literacy, which are both focal points of the current study.

3.2 Important elements that influence religion education

This section discusses some essential elements that can influence religious education. This includes (i) *Age groups*, (ii) *Religion education, politics, law and society*, and (iii) *Obstacles and opportunities*. It should be noted here that the current study focuses on a global phenomenon of digital narrative and multi-religious societies. Therefore, when an educator wants to utilise digital narratives, adjustments must be made for their specific context. The current study does not propose replacing systems that may already be in place. Instead, digital narratives should enhance curriculums that are already in place. This does not imply that there are no educators who use digital narratives. Instead, the thesis guides those who want to know more and implement digital narratives if they do not already use them as a teaching tool.

3.2.1 Age groups

What age groups should be targeted for religious education is a difficult question. Educating the youth is ideal, as it helps that they do not grow up with too much prejudice and will limit their vulnerability toward conspiracy theories, propaganda, fundamentalism and extremism (Batoool & Akram 2020:1843; Van der Walt 2016:2-3; Durham 2013:1, 7; Samuel 2021:166; Schmid 2021c:29). Extremist groups often give some form of problems evident in the community and give violence as the only solution for youth to solve the problem (Samuel 2021:172). This only amplifies the need for religious education in the pursuit of tolerance for youth. When pursuing this type of education, it is essential to take into consideration that religion can have a dualistic nature of propagating tolerance and intolerance (in some cases leading to violence). The current young generation is more exposed to digital narratives and plurality than their predecessors (this may vary contextually). When working with younger groups, the website Common Sense Media (2023)⁷ is an excellent resource for parents and educators to utilise when working with children and digital narratives. This resource focuses on multiple forms of digital narratives and the responsible use of these narratives. It should also be noted that this resource is not overtly focused on religion but rather a place where parents can give opinions on narratives and comment on content that may influence children.

A large part of many human populations are children and young adults; these are also very impressionable groups (Samuel 2021:171, 172). The reality is that children are under the protection of their parents or legal guardians (Durham 2013:1). This is as it should be; however, one must not underestimate the power struggle that can occur within religion and education. Suppose parents themselves do not understand the religion of the other, fear or have grave prejudices against set religion(s). In that case, they might object to their children being educated about these religions even if the concept lies purely on a non-confessional and academic basis. Even if parents allow their children to receive religious education, it might not be enough to combat the prejudices that their children are exposed to in a home setting (Tarant 2020:129). Children's direct community and leaders in their societies may significantly impact what they think more than just their education system (Tarant 2020:129; Kogan 2017:379). Religion education and other forms of diversity training may help combat harmful affective realism children may have already formed. As time is limited with students, education must be as

⁷ For easy access, please follow the link: <https://www.commonsense.org/>

effective as possible. Using narrative as part of religious education can help with the effectiveness of courses.

Understandably, parents may have concerns about their children's education on religious matters, regardless of the parents' religious association (Durham 2013:1). Religion education can significantly impact how someone perceives themselves and others (Durham 2013:1). Some of the fears that can arise from a parent's perspective include the following but are not limited to it. The fear that the child might be indoctrinated or that children will have religious instruction (confessional) rather than religious education (non-confessional) (Durham 2013:5). Parents may, therefore, fear that their children may be led astray from the religious context that they prefer to pass on to them (Durham 2013:5). Furthermore, parents do not always have the religious literacy required to assist their children if they have questions on other religions. Parents may fear that their children will be taught inaccurate or stereotypical views (of their religion or that of the other). The fear, therefore, is that the religion education teachers are not as educated in the matter as they should be or cannot neutrally deliver the curriculum (Durham 2013:7). Considering this fear of the parents, the teachers may have their fears as stated by May et al. (2022:482):

For teachers, religion often feels like a taboo topic because of its perceived politically sensitive nature, fears of being accused of proselytizing, and/or hesitancy to engage in critical conversations that may be viewed as challenging the religious convictions of students or their caregivers.

Teachers are humans, and their affective realism, including ideologies and religious and cultural background, may influence how they deliver the curriculum (Moyaert 2018:9). There can also be a fear that dominant view prejudice may overpower the curriculum, leaving minority groups vulnerable (Durham 2013:6-7). Thereby, it needs to be taken into account that many minorities around the world feel their otherness and already need to adapt to dominant ideas, such as time structures (Moyaert 2018:9). When they do not conform, their otherness may be questioned or scrutinised in a way majority ideologies never are (Moyaert 2018:9). The reality is that the listed fears are valid concerns. However, the reality that should be just as great a concern is that religious education is essential to help one function in a multi-religious society. Most people worldwide find themselves in multi-religious countries and have to function within that context (Durham 2013:9; Beyers 2017a:1). This will be even more true for future generations. Religious education cannot be ignored because of the diversity in most countries (Durham 2013:9).

One of the ways some of the concerns may be addressed is by educating adults. Young adults attending university are ideal as they are part of tomorrow's parents and the workforce. Many scholars focus on religious education for children. Although it is wise to focus on religious education in children, religious education at the tertiary level is also essential. Furthermore, it is crucial to ensure that children's educators are well-rounded enough in their religious education to help facilitate religious education. Therefore, only considering children's religious education will not give the most significant benefit— one must especially focus on young adults at university and other tertiary institution levels. One of the reasons why it is easy to focus on children is because they are in the education system; not all adults or young adults have the benefit of attending tertiary education. Furthermore, different forms of diversity training are usually optional in higher education.

One of the possible remedies for this is developing religious education programs that anyone can attend or that may be facilitated at people's places of work. This may be interesting for future research; however, it is outside the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, an effort can be made to create religious education classes (non-confessional) that parents and children can attend together. The adults can learn alongside the children in this scenario, alleviating some of the parents' fears. Parents can then have a conversation with their children about the content of the class with more ease, as they know what was taught. Parents can also ask the religious education professional if they have questions that they struggle to answer. This line of thinking may also cause complications, such as parents with fundamentalistic beliefs interfering with the class. However, this is also beyond the scope of this thesis.

Narrative education and media literacy have been shown to work on all levels of education and are not unique to children (Aufderheide et al. 2008:2). This can be seen, for example, in studies like that of Murrar and Brauer (2017:6, 10) where they tested the impact of narrative on adults. Therefore, the principle of narrative education within religious education is being proposed at all levels of education. Some digital narratives with concepts connected to religion, tolerance, and intolerance are given as examples of narratives in Chapters Seven and Eight. However, the thesis is not a curriculum for a specific target group. The thesis can serve as a tool to help educators understand why narrative is essential in education settings and assist with writing a curriculum that includes digital narratives for their context. Educators, therefore, need to evaluate any narrative before using it in education settings. Narratives should always be age-appropriate and chosen with the audience in mind (Murphy et al. 2013:13). If the narrative is

found to be inappropriate and completely unrelatable, it will influence narrative transportation (discussed later in Chapter Four) and may not have the effect one wished (Cheong 2015:23).

Furthermore, the sheer amount of narrative created today makes for much content to explore in classrooms. The current study is more focused on tertiary education. However, many of the concepts are directly transferable to classes with younger groups. Whether a class is multi-religious or homogeneous may need to be considered when choosing a narrative for religious education settings. Educators must ensure they do not stagnate in one narrative for years, as it can become outdated and irrelevant to new groups. Constantly searching for new and exciting narratives can form part of the re-evaluation of curriculums. A curriculum needs to consider many concepts, especially when including narrative. Chapter Four discusses this in more detail under *Religious education and narrative*.

3.2.2 Religion education, politics, law and society

The focus of this thesis is not overtly on law and politics, making this section brief. Cheetham et al. (2013:1) made the following statement concerning religious diversity and politics:

In a religiously plural world, how different religious communities get along with one another is not just an academic question; it is very much a focus of socio-political and wider community attention.

Religious education has created debate within law and society (Durham 2013:1). It is especially true when looking at the education of children, who teaches them and what they are taught (Durham 2013:1). Barnes (2013:17) stated that the social and political pressure put on religious education sometimes has such a strong influence that academic pursuit gets lost. Barnes wrote from a UK context but spoke generally about the phenomena. Similarly, Durham (2013:1) made the following comment on religion and education:

Current educational systems typically reflect the current equilibrium reached in what are often ongoing struggles concerning the appropriate role of religion in educational settings, and in the public sector more generally.

When evaluating how to use religious education within the context one is found in, it will be essential to consider these structures (Durham 2013:1). When one considers using narrative education, it will be necessary to consider the context of the people and their legal systems (Durham 2013:2). Politics and law come into play within religious education due to human rights (Durham 2013:1; Arthur 2013:68). The concept of human rights may look different depending on the context in which one is situated. However, the two primary human rights that interact here are the right to religious freedom and education (Durham 2013:1). When focusing on children's religious education, one needs to take the rights of the parents to educate their

children about their personal religious views and worldviews into consideration (Durham 2013:2). However, it often happens in multi-religious societies that different human rights might conflict (Bouma 2013:57). What right may take hierarchy over another will depend on the country's laws and contexts (Bouma 2013:57). Therefore, one again sees the state's impact on religion and education, as seen through the four models mentioned in the South African policy as mentioned previously (South African Government 2003:3-4).

In most countries, the government has power over what schools teach (Durham 2013:2). As seen in the previous section, the different tolerance measures will be reflected within schools because of the state's power over education (Durham 2013:2). Therefore, reflecting how religion is viewed within the state and society, such as the imbalances of majority bias within the concepts of tolerance (Durham 2013:2). Whether a school can have a religious ethos will depend on the laws of each country (Durham 2013:2). Three main simulations are found, either religion is banned from schools (confessional and non-confessional), non-confessional religion can be taught, or schools have a religious ethos or a combination of the two (Durham 2013:4, 5). Durham wrote from a USA perspective but spoke about the phenomena generally as he writes an introduction chapter to a compilation volume that involves many different contexts. The focus of the current study is on religious education rather than religious instruction, therefore, further elaboration on the ethos of institutions is beyond the scope of this thesis. One must also consider that policies, laws and religious education curriculums must change and adapt as the migration of people can lead to the diversity of a country changing from its present stance (Bouma 2013:56). These constructs cannot become stagnant in an ever-changing world and diversity. Therefore, constant re-evaluation is needed to ensure laws and curriculums are as up-to-date and functional as possible for the applicable society.

3.2.3 Obstacles and opportunities: Digital divide, fair use and blended learning

This subsection is very brief as it is not the main topic of the thesis. However, three factors must be considered when using digital narratives in educational settings. The first factor is what is available regarding resources (blended learning, online or in person) to implement digital narratives in educational settings. Secondly, the digital divide can cause potential problems within educational settings. Finally, licencing laws of media use for specific contexts may influence media use in education settings. Being sensitive toward the context one is found in is of great importance. As this thesis was written with a global phenomenon in mind, it is suggested that educators consider these three factors when utilising digital media in educational settings.

Different approaches may be taken when working with digital narratives depending on the country's context and place of learning. If the necessary equipment (e.g. projectors, screens, and speakers) is available within the class setting, digital media may be utilised within class settings. What equipment may be necessary will depend on the type of narrative; more on this can be seen in Chapters Five and Six. Distance and online learning may also utilise digital narratives. Blended- or hybrid- learning combines in-class elements with online elements (Hrastinski 2019:564, 565; Ntim et al. 2021:50; Amarin 2022:4115). Many forms of blended learning exist, and the time ratio may also differ (Hrastinski 2019:567); the best ratio depends on the context, educator, students and curriculum. The Covid-19 pandemic created a greater need for distance- and blended learning (Ntim et al. 2021:49, 56; Ginting et al. 2021:425; Alkarani 2022:139; Amarin 2022:4115); not everyone was prepared for distance learning, as many education systems relied on in-person education (Ginting et al. 2021:425). Implementing blended and online learning and development looks different in the post-COVID era (Alkarani 2022:139).

Different applications can be used to facilitate online learning; some examples include (Ginting et al. 2021:425): "Google Classroom, Zoom, WhatsApp Group, Google Meet, MS Team". Furthermore, Blackboard is often a blended learning tool in higher education settings (Alkarani 2022:139). Amarin (2022:4116) stated:

Blended learning can include many learning tools such as online virtual cooperative learning software, internet-based courses, self-learning courses, electronic performance systems, and education systems management.

This statement makes it clear that blended learning can include many different tactics. It is advised that educators pursue different blended learning avenues. This thesis will not dwell on the different technologies for too long, as many institutions have explored distance learning during the pandemic. Blended learning is preferred by students and can enhance their performance and critical thinking abilities (Ntim et al. 2021:49, 57, 58). If material is used that students can re-watch or re-use when using blended learning, they may have better comprehension (Ginting et al. 2021:436; Alkarani 2022:141). If blended learning is an option, digital narratives may be used within the online basis of education and in-person classes. When utilised with online learning, the ability of different online educational systems must be considered. In some cases, links may be shared to the digital narrative. If PowerPoints may be utilised on the platform, it should be possible to embed parts of digital narratives into the class or lecture. However, students may be given assignments where they are asked to analyse some of the narratives they encounter daily. Digital narratives may also be utilised as a part of pre-

class reading, often expected from students before a class. This will all depend on one's context and curriculum needs. It is beyond the scope of the current study to advocate for a specific learning method in terms of blended, online or in-person education.

A problem that needs to be accounted for is the digital divide, which refers to the uneven distribution of digital resources (Ünver 2017:1). This can be because of a lack of literacy in digital technology or a lack of physical resources (e.g., computers and stable internet) that are needed to access the digital world (Ünver 2017:5; Ginting et al. 2021:429, 431; Alkarani 2022:142). The lack of resources may be a problem for educators and students, depending on the context (Ginting et al. 2021:429, 431, 435). Digital literacy is just as critical as having access to physical equipment (Rahman 2014:34). Amarin (2022:4115) made the following statement: "Modern electronic technology and media are no longer a luxury, but a necessity imposed by the information age and e-learning". Because of the digital divide, some may still view technology-based learning as a luxury. One must take technological advances, including educational technology, into account, as it is constantly evolving (Ntim et al. 2021:53). However, educational institutions need to take the educators' and students' abilities into account and make sure that they are (or that they become) literate enough to use these tools to the best of their ability (Ginting et al. 2021:428; Amarin 2022:4114, 4124; Ntim et al. 2021:52). Digital illiteracy may put some students at a disadvantage if blended learning is used. The digital divide is discussed further in Chapter Four.

The final problem to consider is copyright and fair use. Educators should consider the laws of the country where the material is used and the rules and regulations for each educational institution (Aufderheide et al. 2008:14). Fair use rights do exist and extend to education at school levels, tertiary education, and non-profit education (Aufderheide et al. 2008:1). Confusion and discomfort often arise when talking about copyright and fair use (Aufderheide et al. 2008:4; Boulton 2009:81). This confusion can lead to educators feeling uncertain about the narratives that they may use and thereby not utilising digital media for the benefit of their students (Aufderheide et al. 2008:4). However, materials that are copyrighted are often used within learning institutions, and some form of fair use usually exist (Aufderheide et al. 2008:4). Fair use laws and regulation usually have forms of flexibility, especially if educational, social and cultural benefits can be seen within the use (Aufderheide et al. 2008:6).

One of the main concerns is to use only as much of the original material as is necessary for the educational purpose to be fulfilled (Aufderheide et al. 2008:6, 10; Boulton 2009:81). Educators

are encouraged where ambiguity exists in regulations to take the lead and help transform regulations so they become more evident (Aufderheide et al. 2008:8; Boulton 2009:82). The document by Aufderheide et al. (2008)⁸ is highly recommended for further reading in this matter. It should be stated that many forms of digital narratives exist that are not strictly copyrighted and were made for educational purposes. With this in mind, these resources can and should also be utilised. This thesis does not discourage the use of copyrighted material as long as it is done within the fair use laws and regulations of the context in which one is found. As the current study is investigating a global phenomenon, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to give a fully comprehensive guide for all contexts. Therefore, only the information that needs to be considered is mentioned.

3.3 Working definition

The researcher wrote the following definition with the thesis in mind. The definition contains terms that were defined throughout this thesis. These terms enhance the definition and should be considered to understand the definition fully. The researcher does not seek to dictate how religious education should look in all contexts through a unified theory. Instead, existing systems should be used and re-evaluated to fit ever-evolving human societies. However, the researcher has a specific construct in mind when using the term religion education, necessitating a definition. This definition is not meant to make the term stagnant. Furthermore, the researcher believes the work highlighted in the current study is transferable to other forms of religious education that do not reflect this definition's view. The format change indicates the contours of the definition. The definition of religious education is as follows:

Religion education is a construct that is simulated through the education of students on all levels of education about religion. Religion education and religious education are used interchangeably as a non-confessional, multi-religious form of diversity education necessary to function in multi-religious societies. Religion education, therefore, stands in contrast to religious instruction. Religious instruction is performed to teach someone how to practice a set religion. Religion education should consider contextual factors of the students, the community and the ever-changing religious landscape of the world. Religion education intersects with full constructs of religion and religious phenomena such as ritual, symbol, myth, and spirituality. However, religious phenomena are not limited to these constructs. Furthermore, religious education intersects with constructs

⁸ For easy access to this document, the following link is advised:
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277045295>

such as secularism, nationalism, and politics. Religion education should seek to minimise fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism. Discriminatory thinking must be addressed, such as Islamophobia, Antisemitism, and minority-majority religion dynamics. However, discriminatory thinking is not limited to these phenomena, and the context will dictate what the need would be in the curriculum.

Religion education should be facilitated through all available resources, including religious narratives found in digital narratives. Through these narratives, one can educate students to become lifelong learners. Students should be taught to think critically about the information they receive and be made aware of inaccurate information. Students will then be less prone to fall prey to misinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda. Students should be made aware of their responsibilities when utilising narratives. This includes their responsibilities as content receivers and possible content creators. Religion education should facilitate a space where students can expand their tolerance skills while encouraging respect and humanisation. Religion education should focus on real-world phenomena and problems such as current events. Religion education depends on the student's age and focuses on constructs such as morals, ethics, values, social justice and social transformation. Religion education should create an awareness of one's own and others, constructs, simulations, affective realism, and intersections. Religion education can create the skill of lifelong evaluation of self and lifelong learning. This will ensure that students' affective realism toward themselves and others is reevaluated to remain healthy for the changing contexts throughout students' lifetimes.

The definition is broad, as is necessary for the current study.

3.4 Chapter themes

This Chapter addressed the following themes:

- Factors to consider (SQ1; RG8; PC11)

When working with digital narratives regarding religion in education settings, one must ask what the aim of the course is. Religion education (non-confessional) and religion instruction (confessional) can have vastly different outcomes. Neither one is incorrect; however, the choice of narratives may be significantly affected by the aim of the course. Non-confessional education often works with non-homogeneous groups, whereas confessional education tends to be more homogenous (although this is not absolute). Educators need to be sensitive to the demographic and aim of the course. With the demographic in mind, age groups will also

significantly impact what narratives can be used. This thesis was more focused on religion education for tertiary students. However, digital narratives can be utilised within any age group. If narratives used in education settings are age-inappropriate, the aim of the narrative (to make courses more interactive and practical) may not be met.

As many narratives are created yearly, it should form part of reforming and re-evaluating curriculums to choose new and relevant narratives. Socio-political context may influence both needs and possibilities within religious education and may dictate what narratives may be contextually relevant. Educators must consider the type of education they are bound to, e.g. online, in-person and blended learning. These different forms of education may profoundly impact when and where digital narratives are utilised. For example, digital narratives must be implemented in class if education takes place in person with no online option. If there is an online opportunity, pre-class readings and assignments may contain narratives and classes. Furthermore, the digital divide may significantly impact the extent to which narratives can be implemented. Lastly, educators need to ensure the fair use laws in their country and institutions, as this can impact the use of copyrighted material.

- Post-secularism and digital narrative (SQ8)

In this post-secular age, there is a greater appreciation for non-traditional scientific education, which includes the study of religion and narrative. This must be considered, as religion and narratives did not stand the test of "reason" in the secular age. As illustrated throughout the thesis, both impact humanity, regardless of its acknowledgement in academic fields. However, when acknowledged in academic fields, people can learn to use narrative responsibly (contextually and individually bound). Furthermore, governments and laws can significantly impact how and if religion education is taught in education systems. Religion studies is an ideal theory for the current study as it leans toward the post-secular mindset of multi-religious and multi-cultural societies; within this, all truths are relative and of value.

- Providing new definitions to add to the ongoing conversation of scholarly definitions (PC13)

This Chapter adds to the conversation of scholarly definitions as it contributes a unique definition of religious education. The definition was designed to contextualise what is meant when the thesis used the term. However, the concepts within the thesis are transferable to other forms of religious education and should not be made stagnant by definition. This concludes the Chapter on *Religion and education*. In the following Chapter, *Narrative* is discussed.

Chapter Four: Narrative

Narratives are one of the main concepts in this thesis. In this Chapter, the (i) *Debate on the concept of narrative* is discussed, followed by (ii) *Narrative composition*, (iii) *Digital narrative and digital technology*, (iv) *Conspiracy theories, propaganda, misinformation and counter-narratives*, (v) *Religious narrative*, (vi) *Different scholarly definitions of narrative*, (vii) the *Working definition* of narrative for use in this thesis and the (viii) *Chapter themes*.

4.1 Debate on the concept of narrative

What narrative is and how it should be defined is not the main focus of most scholars in the field of literary studies (Koenitz 2018:2). This contrasts definitions and semantics surrounding words like religion or tolerance. However, there is no consensus on how to define narrative, although definitions exist (Koenitz 2018:1). How narrative works within the human mind is debated. Narratives are found among all people and cultures (Nomura et al. 2015:1; Smith et al. 2017:1). This does not mean all narratives are identical in all contexts; instead, some form of narrative exists among most humans. Narrative is an immense concept that includes anything from fiction like romance novels to more factual works like documentaries or retelling of history and everything in between (Gottschall 2021:35). Humans value narratives, and those who create the narratives are also highly valued (Smith et al. 2017:1). Narratives have the power to influence people's affective realism and, consequently, their actions (Levinger & Lytle 2001:186; Aufderheide et al. 2008:3).

Narratives are introduced to humans at a young age, and this might be one of the factors influencing their thoughts and behaviours (van Laer et al. 2013:797). Narratives are deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of people because it works on and through emotion (Gottschall 2021:57; Shaked & Clore 2017:27). Emotion, as with narrative, is found among all people; this is not to say all emotions are universal, context will play a significant role on how emotions are simulated (Barrett 2018:50-51; Shaked & Clore 2017:27). Emotion helps to make concepts more memorable and can assist learning (Bryson & Levine 2008:186). Narratives often have fluctuations of emotion, and narratives with greater success are usually more emotionally charged (Gottschall 2021:88; Bezdek & Gerrig 2017:61). Narratives are often exciting and differ from real life, as the boring, less emotionally charged time is absent (Gottschall 2021:58; Mar & Oatley 2008:175).

Narratives focus intensely on justice and morals and have clear-cut lines between darkness and light, good and evil (Gottschall 2021:123; Gottschall 2012:loc 1628; Carr 2013:12). The word

story (used by Gottschall as a synonym for narrative) and history are both derived from the same Greek root word *histor*, meaning "referee, wise man or judge" (Gottschall 2021:124). With the current study in mind, the word story is too informal; therefore, the word narrative is used. The term story also seems to have a more fictional connotation. Although this thesis deals with fictional narratives, non-fictional narratives are considered; therefore, the word story is not appropriate for this study. The true function of narrative is not entirely known, although it may have a range of biological purposes (Gottschall 2012:loc 455). Mar and Oatley (2008:173) made the following statement on the function of narrative:

[...] narratives have a more important purpose. They offer models or simulations of the social world via abstraction, simplification, and compression. Narrative fiction also creates a deep and immersive simulative experience of social interactions for readers. This simulation facilitates the communication and understanding of social information and makes it more compelling, achieving a form of learning through experience.

When consumed, narratives act as simulators, creating experiences that influence constructs and affective realism. Simulation is how humans experience the world; narrative adds to this experience of understanding the world. From this, one can gather that the human mind can learn through indirect simulations (narratives) (Oatley 2016:619). Oatley (2016:619) gave the following statement:

If fiction is the simulation of social worlds, then, similar to people who improve their flying skills in a flight simulator, those who read fiction might improve their social skills.

The example given by Oatley shows how indirect simulation, where the person is not living through a social phenomenon yet experiencing it through the character, can influence the human mind. One can, therefore, learn from the situations found within narrative simulations, better equipping oneself if such a situation occurs (Consoli 2018:78, 88; Oatley 2016:618, 624). Narrative has much the same effect on the brain (seen through MRI imaging) as real-life simulations would have (Oatley 2016:622; Consoli 2018:88). One of the great benefits of this phenomenon is that if the right narratives are used, people can humanise and understand others with more ease (Oatley 2016:625, 626; Consoli 2018:88), thereby creating a powerful tool not only for classrooms but for lifelong learning. Singh (2021:185-186) felt that the simulation theory did not adequately explain narrative function as it should not work for unrealistic fictional constructs and unrelatable characters (Singh 2021:186). Singh (2021:186) suggested that narrative is an experience of sympathetic pleasure and suggested a sympathetic plot theory, which still included that narratives have learning potential (see subsection on plot). Although this view is considered, the simulation theory is widely accepted and seen as part of the function

of narrative for the thesis. Different theories, like simulation theory and sympathetic pleasure, can help fill in each other's gaps.

Narrative is one of the most significant influences humans can use toward other humans and acts as a tool to maintain society and its immediate standing (Gottschall 2021:13, 19). Narratives can benefit humans if used correctly; however, their effects are not always reliable and positive (Gottschall 2021:13-14, 20; Mar & Oatley 2008:182). Sestir and Green (2010:273) investigated the influence of media on one's personality as perceived in self-identification. With this in mind, they stated that different types of media had been banned, as they can act as simulators, the fear being that the media will influence the minds of consumers (Sestir & Green 2010:273). One of the most pressing problems is that, in some cases, people become part of the narrative rather than observers (Gottschall 2021:18). In other words, the narrative simulation becomes so real that it affects the person's reality. At this point, the person's affective realism does not predict anything other than the story laid before them. The problem, thus, is that people fall prey to conspiracy theories and misinformation. The lack of critical thinking, especially with something as powerful as narrative, is problematic when working with information. Critical thinking is a term found throughout the Chapter and thesis; however, it is not a primary term. It is essential to understand what is meant by the term. The following definition of critical thinking, as given by Uzunöz et al. (2018:81), is used for this thesis:

As a cognitive component, critical thinking skills include analyzing arguments, making inferences using deductive or inductive reasoning, judging or evaluating, and making decisions or solving problems. On the other hand, as an affective component, critical thinking dispositions can be seen as attitudes or habits of mind. These dispositions include open-end fair-mindedness, inquisitiveness, flexibility, a propensity to seek reason, a desire to be well-informed, and a respect for and willingness to entertain diverse viewpoints.

This definition should, therefore, be considered where the term is encountered. One of the main reasons people are attracted to narratives, especially fiction, is escapism (Green & Brock 2013:325; Chen 2015:21; de Graaf & Hustinx 2011:142). The term "expansion of self" can also be used, but the two terms are mutually exclusive for this study (Slater et al. 2014:444; Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:558). Escapism involves the narrative consumer's emotional focus shifting from their emotion to the emotions concerned in the narrative (Bezdek & Gerrig 2017:61; Slater et al. 2014:440). Narratives give the human mind an escape from everyday life, the inner voice and self-regulation; they are relaxing, fun, and can reduce boredom (Chen 2015:21; Slater et al. 2014:441).

Escapism is much sought after by many people and is considered a basic human need, as it stops one from fixating on real-life problems and helps regulate one's body budget (Slater et al. 2014:441, 442; Barrett 2018:178). In times of trauma or change, when self-regulation is more difficult, the need for escape will be more prominent (Slater et al. 2014:446). As trauma is being mentioned, it should be stated that escapism is not purely negative or positive, and the thesis is not projecting a negative lens on escapism when mentioning it in the context of trauma. As with other human needs, such as sleep or food, one's needs may differ under different circumstances found in one's lifetime. The inner need to utilise narratives can have significant positive effects and assist with self-regulation (Slater et al. 2014:451). Narratives have been shown to have a positive effect on people who experience, for example, symptoms of anxiety, heavy stress and PTSD (Park et al. 2019:6). Escapism takes many forms and is not limited to narrative consumption. According to Slater et al. (2014:443), escapism can include but is not limited to:

People "lose themselves" in their absorption in work, in their hobbies and creative expression, in athletics, or in contemplation of a sunset. People experience "self-abandon" in romantic love and sex, in drug and alcohol use, in religious experience, or in ideological fervor.

Humans use different forms of escape, which tend to have various biological markers and consequences (Slater et al. 2014:448; Singh 2021:193). Different forms of escapism may be positive or negative depending on the medium and its use. Para-social interaction is a phenomenon where humans react in the same way to real-life phenomena (such as social contact) versus narrative phenomena (Schiappa et al. 2005:92; Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:556; Murrar & Brauer 2017:3). An example of para-social phenomena is when people who watch horror stories have mild post-traumatic stress syndrome even years later (Gottschall 2021:37). Para-social interaction involve people bonding with characters and public figures as if they knew them in reality (Schiappa et al. 2005:96). Increased social interaction with minority groups or just a group other than one's own has been shown to increase tolerance (Schiappa et al. 2005:93; Murrar & Brauer 2017:3). Therefore, para-social interaction through digital narratives can have a similar pro-social effect (Schiappa et al. 2005:93; Murrar & Brauer 2017:3-4).

Narratives are simulations, and out of these narratives, humans can build constructs or break them down (Morin et al. 2019:1; Djikic et al. 2013:31; Braddock & Dillard 2016:446), just as human realities are made up of simulations of experiences (Barrett 2018:27). Out of these simulations, constructs are built, these constructs are past experiences used by the mind to

predict outcomes (Barrett 2018:28; Djikic et al. 2013:32). Narrative is beneficial as it acts as a simulator without the related risk of real live threats (Morin et al. 2019:2; Mar & Oatley 2008:173). Therefore, if one is gifted in the art of creating narratives, one creates a convincing simulation. Convincing here does not necessarily mean being close to reality, as many unrealistic concepts might appear in narratives. However, the brain must be captivated by the narrative.

The captivation caused by the narrative is called narrative transportation (Bezdek & Gerrig 2017:60; Chen 2015:21; van Laer et al. 2013:798). Narrative transportation is a theory attributed to Green and Brock (2013:316). Green and Brock (2013:324) acknowledged other academic minds, such as Gerrig (1993:10-11), who referred to narratives as a journey, forming their theory's foundation. Narrative transportation includes the feeling that one is part of the narrative world instead of the physical world (Green & Brock 2013:317; Bezdek & Gerrig 2017:60; Chen 2015:21; van Laer et al. 2013:798). Captivation by narrative includes not being aware of one's physical surroundings but rather being engaged in a narrative realm (Green & Brock 2013:317; Bezdek & Gerrig 2017:60; Chen 2015:21,22; de Graaf & Hustinx 2011:142, 143). Many factors may influence the level of transportation experienced by consumers, for example, the quality of the narrative (Green & Brock 2013:328). Accordingly, van Laer et al. (2013:799-805) made the following statements on narrative transportation:

[...] we define narrative transportation as the extent to which (1) a consumer empathizes with the story characters and (2) the story plot activates his or her imagination, which leads him or her to experience suspended reality during story reception [...] The more story receivers (a) are familiar with a story topic, (b) pay attention to a story, (c) possess transportability, (d) are young, (e) are educated, and (f) are female, the more narrative transportation increases [...] The more narrative transportation increases, the more (a) story-consistent affective responses increase, (b) critical thoughts decrease, (c) narrative thoughts increase, (d) story-consistent beliefs increase, (e) story-consistent attitudes increase, and (f) story-consistent intentions increase.

The suspension of disbelief occurs when humans experience narrative transportation (Green & Brock 2013:11; Gottschall 2021:45; Consoli 2018:87). In this, one is freer to accept certain concepts and suggestions than when one is only in a state of ordinary consciousness, and changes can occur within one's constructs (Chen 2015:21; van Laer et al. 2013:801; de Graaf & Hustinx 2011:143). Therefore, in the suspension of disbelief, one can experience para-social contact with minority groups (the other) through narrative transportation, and constructs can be changed through the narrative simulation (Schiappa et al. 2005:93). Transportation evokes emotion from the consumer and peaks with emotionally charged and suspenseful moments in the narrative (Bezdek & Gerrig 2017:80; Chen 2015:22; de Graaf & Hustinx 2011:144, 146,

148; Green & Brock 2013:317; Bezdek et al. 2013:409). One's reaction time regarding one's physical surroundings is also lessened if narrative transportation is present, especially in emotionally charged narratives (Bezdek & Gerrig 2017:80). First-person narratives often have a stronger emotional response than omniscient narratives (de Graaf & Hustinx 2011:14).

Narratives have historically been oral and social, and this has drastically changed with the printing and digital age (Gottschall 2012:loc 1687). Narratives are still consumed socially today; however, the social aspect of narrative is not a necessity. In a social setting where more than one individual consumes a narrative, eye blinks, and heart rates tend to synchronise (Nomura et al. 2015:2; Pe´rez et al. 2021:7). Rapid eye blinks can indicate that a consumer has a higher emotional engagement with the narrative and a higher level of transportation (Nomura et al. 2015:2). Similarly, the higher transportation found in the narrative, the higher the possibility of heart synchronisation (Pe´rez et al. 2021:7). Narrative has a significant physical influence on the body, therefore if groups consume it, it can act as a bonding agent. Sestir and Green (2010:273) pointed to the concept of cultivation theory by stating:

[...] argues that media consumers come to internalize messages from their preferred media and apply them to the real world. Cultivation theory essentially argues that people come to view the real world as similar to the world portrayed in the media.

Narratives influence many factors, such as anything from self-identity, meaning-making, how others are perceived, and social interactions (Sestir & Green 2010:273; de Graaf & Hustinx 2011:142; Slater et al. 2014:446; Homolar 2022:325, 327, 328). The term persuasion may also be used instead of cultivation (de Graaf & Hustinx 2011:142). Whether a person is transported and cultivated can depend on the goal of the narrative. Advertising and non-fiction may be less transporting than a narrative intended for fictional entertainment (van Laer et al. 2013:810; Djikic et al. 2013:31). Repeated interaction with a favourable narrative character can have the same effect, if not greater than a relationship with a favourable person in the physical world (regarding self and construct expansion) (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:564, 566; van Laer et al. 2013:811). Identifying with a character is one of the variables that need to be considered as it can influence the degree of transportation and cultivation (Sestir & Green 2010:275; van Laer et al. 2013:802; Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:565-566; Murrar & Brauer 2017:4). If one identifies with specific attributes of a narrative character, one will be more compelled to identify with the character in general (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:571).

How much a person identifies with the character and is transported by the narrative can influence the persuasion power experienced by the consumer (Sestir & Green 2010:257; Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:565-566). Similarly, familiar topics and visual effects can

create higher transportation (Mar & Oatley 2008:178; Schmid 2021b:573). Persuasion is a temporary narrative effect, although the long-term effects are not yet certain (Sestir & Green 2010:257; Appel & Richter 2007:115). After the narrative transportation and suspension of disbelief, one gets to the point of retrospective reflection (Gottschall 2021:64). Retrospective reflection works with implicit memory (Gottschall 2012:loc 867). An analysis is unconsciously done to create new constructs from the narrative and strengthen or break down existing constructs (Green & Brock 2013:320). Fictional narrative usually has even less conscious reflection than non-fiction, for the consumer does not necessarily consider it essential (Appel & Richter 2007:116). Regardless of categorising fiction or non-fiction, one gathers information from the narrative, even if done unconsciously (Appel & Richter 2007:116). This unconscious reflection needs to be aided through conscious retrospective reflection (critical thinking), regardless of medium and narrative type.

Narratives can have a powerful impact on how people think. Hollywood has been accused of pushing certain morals and concepts onto its audience (Gottschall 2021:42). This is fair, but the question does not just lie with the narrative writers but those who receive it. The influence of narratives is immense; therefore, people who create narrative content have a responsibility to develop responsible content (van Laer et al. 2013:811). The problem is being responsible to whom? Understanding this responsibility in conjunction with the narrative receivers' responsibility is essential. One of the problems is the balance between these two groups' responsibility to maintain a healthy society. The concepts showcased in this subsection are essential for scholars who want to analyse narratives and use them in educational settings as they showcase the mechanisms and impact of narrative on the consumer.

4.2 Narrative composition

This section briefly introduces (i) *Character's protagonist and antagonist*, (ii) *Plot*, (iii) *Passive and active narrative*, (iv) *Discourse*, and (v) *Fiction and non-fiction*. Educators can emphasise some of these constructs in their own work or use them to help guide students when asking them to analyse narratives. The terms intersect with narrative, and the terms are used in the definition of narrative (found at the end of the Chapter). However, some digital narratives can be less complex and not intersect with all of these constructs; they are not a lesser form of narrative, as narrative is not limited to these constructs.

4.2.1 Character's protagonist and antagonist

In this subsection, the *Discussion and semantics* surrounding narrative characters are discussed. Character strongly intersects with the *Us-versus-them* phenomena discussed in this subsection. The us-versus-them phenomenon is vital throughout the thesis. Lastly, *Working definitions* of the words' character and us-versus-them are given for this thesis.

4.2.1.1 Discussion and semantics

Mar and Oatley (2008:175) gave the following statement on character:

Comparably, people form models of the minds of those with whom they interact [...] In literature, and to some extent in ordinary life, a mental model of this kind is known as character. It is a simulation that allows us to know what another might be wanting, thinking, and feeling.

In narrative, one often has two prominent personalities or characters, a protagonist and an antagonist, the first being the hero and the second the villain (Gottschall 2021:127; Singh 2021:183, 184). The drive and reason behind an action define whether a character is seen as a protagonist or antagonist (Prusa & Brummer 2022:11). This is seen through "character voice", which can be characterised by four constructs: "style", "rhythm", "tone" and "values" (Phelan & Frow 2022:258). The antagonist is often not given to character growth and usually has traits that people dislike, such as greediness and self-promotion at the depredation of others (Gottschall 2021:127). The antagonist of a narrative usually ends up failing or changing at the end of the narrative (Singh 2021:184). The protagonist of a narrative is mostly given to character growth, has a strong moral code, is brave, and does things for the greater good (Gottschall 2021:127; Ho 2020:100). Singh (2021:184) made the following statement:

The protagonist is appealing. They might be strong, clever, humble, skilful, attractive, generous, or considerate.

Protagonists are characters that can benefit an in-group. Even if the character is fictional and cannot benefit the audience in real-life situations, having a character exhibit good in-group traits is still beneficial. However, the pure good construct of heroes can be seen as unattainable and even disconnected from the reality of flawed humanity (Ho 2020:100, 101). Therefore, the character has the potential to be unrelatable (Ho 2020:101). Purely antagonistic characters are also unrelatable because humans tend to see themselves as protagonists (Slater et al. 2014:441; Homolar 2022:333). The characters within narratives are usually much more simplified than the problems found in real-life people (Gottschall 2021:156). In other words, Gottschall (2021:156) stated that average humans are not necessarily as easily definable as pure good or evil. Protagonists are often constructed to have empathy so the audience can identify with the

character (Djikic et al. 2013:30-31; Appel & Richter 2007:117). Prusa and Brummer (2022:5) stated that:

[...] heroes fight for a good cause for the betterment of mankind, while villains inflict injury upon the world [...]

This is a very simplified definition of what a protagonist and antagonist may mean. An exception to the protagonist and antagonist commonly found within digital narratives are anti-heroes and anti-villains (Prusa & Brummer 2022:1, 6). The term anti-hero is a very recent development in linguistics found in the 18th century (Ho 2020:113). However, it is a construct that has surpassed the test of time, originating in the ancient world (Ho 2020:113). Both anti-heroes and anti-villains cannot just tick the good or evil box (Prusa & Brummer 2022:2; Ho 2020:101). The anti-hero and anti-villain have an allure because of their flawed nature (Prusa & Brummer 2022:4, 5; Ho 2020:101). Prusa and Brummer (2022:5-6) gave the following statement on anti-heroes:

Antiheroes, by contrast, both attract and repel us. They represent flawed characters who say what they think and do what they want. They ingratiate themselves with their audiences for their gritty realism, no matter how good or bad it may seem [...] Further, antiheroes do adhere to something akin to a code of conduct, but they typically have a chaotic, perverted, or aggressive personality which is not bound by the limits of conformity [...] Antiheroes may exhibit these shortcomings while acting according to poor judgment, but this is precisely what helps the audience better identify with them. Finally, antiheroes constantly blur the line between good and evil while being largely amoral.

However, different degrees of anti-heroes exist in narratives: "light, nihilistic, and dark" (Prusa & Brummer 2022:7). Anti-heroes are more of a spectrum ranging from more protagonist to less protagonist. However, the anti-hero never turns into a purely evil character (Ho 2020:105). An anti-hero may be seen as an alternative or even a criticism of social norms and values (Ho 2020:10). Anti-heroes are more relatable but not necessarily a good match for the norm of humanity. Prusa and Brummer (2022:3, 23, 33) pointed out how digital media has created a fascination with anti-heroes, which may lead to the idealisation of similar political characters; they use Donald Trump as an example. However, Ho (2020:102, 114) stated that the image of heroes in the narrative changes as society changes. This flawed nature of humanity may have impacted the change from the hero to the anti-hero. However, Prusa and Brummer's statements

on how narrative may change or influence society apply. Reality and narrative impact each other, making the responsibility of the content creator and consumer important.

Prusa and Brummer (2022:6) gave the following statement on anti-villains:

Similar to traditional villains, the anti-villain stands in the way of the hero's goal, but does not need to be downright evil. While the antihero is a protagonist who usually fights on the side of "good", but with questionable or selfish motives, the anti-villain is an antagonist who usually plays the villain's game, albeit with some noble cause. As such, the antihero and anti-villain may be thought of as two sides of the same coin: similar in their distinct differences.

Narrative creators may be able to portray "villains" in a humanised fashion with thoughts, emotions, and reason in the form of anti-villains. Narrative creators sometimes rewrite villains to be anti-villains as the principal characters. Within these narratives, writers often take the time to construct back-stories of previously missed perspectives of the villain (Hundertmark 2014:1, 7). Examples of these anti-villains can be seen in the films *Maleficent* (2014) by Stromberg and *Cruella* (2021) by Gillespie (Hundertmark 2014:2; Fatihah & Mustofa 2022). Furthermore, in anti-villain narratives, a different character (other than the original villain) usually takes on the antagonist role (Hundertmark 2014:11). Therefore, the us-versus-them phenomenon does not entirely disappear. However, unlike complete antagonists, anti-villains and anti-heroes can experience character growth (Gottschall 2021:127; Hundertmark 2014:11). As society and narrative influence each other, the question arises whether anti-heroes are a symptom that people are willing to express some form of context and humanisation toward the other. Alternatively, at the very least, a willingness to concede that stories do not only have one side (Hundertmark 2014:2). If narratives are to affect education positively, it will be critical to use the groups relevant to the teaching material in protagonist roles (Schiappa et al. 2005:93).

Phelan and Frow (2022:255) called the para-social phenomena the "mimetic" part of character identification. A character is, therefore, seen as a person (Phelan & Frow 2022:255, 256). They also point to a "synthetic" component that contrasts the para-social interaction, as some part of the narrative receiver consciousness realises the character is not real (Phelan & Frow 2022:255, 256). The "mimetic" or para-social works together with and against the "synthetic" component, creating empathy with the character while keeping the audience member within the audience (Phelan & Frow 2022:255-260). They explained that characters can be seen as "thematic", representing a group (Phelan & Frow 2022:255, 256). It can do more harm than good if religious groups are depicted in antagonistic narrative roles (Schiappa et al. 2005:94), especially if the depiction becomes thematic, creating a stereotypical or utterly wrong image

of a group (see Chapter 8 for more on this phenomenon). The mimetic, synthetic and thematic concepts can play a significant role in analysing narratives.

4.2.1.2 'Us-versus-them

As the us-versus-them phenomenon is mentioned throughout the thesis, a short explanation may be necessary. The us-versus-them phenomenon is found within narratives and the physical world (Hogan 2022:200). It is a complex phenomenon that involves in-group and out-group categorisation. Boyer et al. (2015:1) made the following statement:

Contact between people from different groups triggers specific individual- and group-level responses, ranging from attitudes and emotions to welfare and health outcomes.

The us-versus-them phenomenon can manifest in many different ways. The grouping may include but is not limited to race, religion, nationality, gender, sexuality, and any other construct that can leave one group distinct from another (Boyer et al. 2015:1). Us-versus-them phenomena have been noted in the compliance toward the Covid 19 pandemic regulations (Van Scoy et al. 2022:6-7); as controversies emerge on who is more compliant, we are more compliant than *them* (Van Scoy et al. 2022:6-7). Furthermore, as the virus was first detected in China, indiscriminatory anti-Asian (although mainly Chinese) sentiments were also seen worldwide (Barr et al. 2021:795). In this, people are used as "scapegoats" for problems like epidemics beyond anyone's control (Barr et al. 2021:795, 796), contributing to a thematic understanding of groups.

Humans usually see themselves as protagonists in their own lives (Slater et al. 2014:441). The perception of one's victories is more likely to be self-caused, while one's failures have external reasons (Slater et al. 2014:441). One's construct of self and life story is mainly based on experiences, not necessarily factual but not entirely fictional (Gottschall 2012:loc 1969). Humans understand the world by simulating their experiences and creating constructs from the simulation. Group relationships depend on in-group protection and threat detection mechanisms (Boyer et al. 2015:2, 4, 10). There is safety in groups; therefore, having the group's approval is essential (Boyer et al. 2015:3, 4). Similarly, out-group or outcast members are considered potentially dangerous (Boyer et al. 2015:6, 10). The us-versus-them phenomenon has been exploited by emotionally manipulative charismatic leaders seeking to further their cause (Prusa & Brummer 2022:14, 17). Prusa and Brummer (2022:3, 23, 26, 33) used Donald Trump and Adolf Hitler as examples; however, the two ideologies should not be seen as equally extreme or similar.

4.2.1.3 Working definitions

The researcher constructed the following definitions with the current study in mind. The format difference indicates the contours of the definition and should not be confused with a quote. Character for the use of this thesis is defined in the following way:

Character is a construct built up from simulations of a persona. Character can be used for humans in reality (e.g., someone of good character) or as a persona in a narrative (non-fictional or fictional). Character intersects with the following constructs: action, emotion, personality, morality and perspective; however, it is not limited to these constructs. Character intersects with human identity-based phenomena, including but not limited to religion, culture, language, nationalism, and sexual orientation. Characters can be strongly developed, or very little development may take place. Furthermore, Characters may be well-rounded with many intersections, or they may be very simplistic. Characters balance on a protagonist and antagonistic spectrum. Most characters are more intent toward one than another. However, anti-heroes and anti-villains are less clear on where in the spectrum they may exist. In cases such as video games, the player may be afforded chances to direct an avatar's character depending on how active the narrative is. Character displays context and affective realism of a fictional or non-fictional digital narrative persona. Narrative characters can influence the affective realism of their audience. This effect will, however, depend on the audience and if they evaluate the narrative through their critical thinking abilities.

The us-versus-them phenomenon is defined in the following way for the use of this thesis:

The us-versus-them phenomenon is a construct simulated through the safety of the in-group and the danger of the out-group. This phenomenon intersects with intolerance, fear, paranoia, violence, prejudice, fundamentalism, extremism and dehumanisation; however, it is not limited to these phenomena. The us-versus-them phenomenon can range from friendly (e.g., a sports game with two or more teams) to dangerous (e.g., war). The us-versus-them phenomenon intersects with narrative and real life. Any identity construct that can become group-related can lead to an us-versus-them phenomenon, e.g., one gender identity as opposed to another (e.g. women versus men or transgender versus binary), one religion as opposed to another (e.g. monotheism versus polytheism or Christianity versus Islam). The us-versus-them phenomena are deeply connected to a

person or group's affective realism. How narratives illustrate the us-versus-them phenomena can affect the audience's affective realism.

This concludes the subsection on *Character's protagonist and antagonist*.

4.2.2 Plot

Under the *Discussion and semantics* subsection, a short literature review to showcase the importance of plot through the different academic voices is given. The *Working definition* is also given to clarify the term's meaning in the thesis.

4.2.2.1 Discussion and semantics

Plot is one of the critical constructs of narrative, which concerns the order in which a narrative's storyline occurs and the themes that influence them (Wolff et al. 2013:1, 2, 4; Kuhlmann & Blum 2021:1). One finds that plot events can be minor or major depending on how much influence they have on the storyline (Kukkonen 2020:5). Wolff et al. (2013:4) stated that:

Events are the building blocks of the story and provide information about what happened, but they do not offer any interpretation of the story as a whole. The role of the plot is to identify events that are important to progressing the story, and to interpret the relationship between events from a particular perspective.

Whether the characters or plot is devised first depends on the narrative's author (Moallem & Raffe 2020:307-308). Some authors form plots to fit characters, while others form characters to fit plots (Moallem & Raffe 2020:307-308). The author's creation of a story plot is called emplotment (Wolff et al. 2013:2; Hogan 2014:202-203). Narratives have a concept of "plot speed", which gives the audience an experience of time within the narrative (Kukkonen 2020:1). Kukkonen (2020:1) stated that:

'Plot speed' is the conceptual velocity of movement through plot events, and it can be rooted in the physical speed of the story world (where characters are in a rush) or the discourse speed (where the written form of the narrative indicates chapters, instalments, and so on).

Plot speed can include many variables that are not necessarily all measurable, for example, the time in which character growth occurs (Kukkonen 2020:3, 4, 10); narratives can progress at different speeds at different times of the narrative (Kukkonen 2020:2). Plot speed will determine how the narrative is experienced and, therefore, will affect concepts like transportation. Most narratives have a plot based on trouble or problems and how the protagonist and antagonist fit into set problems (Gottschall 2021:154; van Laer et al. 2013:802). Trouble makes narratives interesting for the viewer as it builds suspense, acts as a learning mechanism, and makes narratives more memorable (Singh 2021:187). Narratives usually have

solutions (happy endings), at least at the end of the narrative, to the problems encountered by the protagonist (van Laer et al. 2013:802; Singh 2021:184; Hogan 2022:193).

Not all narratives end positively for the protagonist; nevertheless, these narratives usually have some just end (Singh 2021:191). Narratives may also end without resolution, which is called a cliffhanger (Kukkonen 2020:8; Wirz et al. 2022:5). The hope is that by interrupting the narrative at a suspenseful moment, people will be more inclined to binge-watch a series (Wirz et al. 2022:4, 5). With the development of digital media, especially digital narratives, came the overconsumption of narratives in short amounts of time (Wirz et al. 2022:3, 5). The study by Wirz et al. (2022:20) showed that people are not necessarily more inclined to continue watching just because of a cliffhanger. Furthermore, people who dislike cliffhangers may even avoid a series because it is prevalent in its style (Wirz et al. 2022:22).

Singh (2021:183) used the term "sympathetic plot", which refers to the trouble encountered as an obstacle the protagonist must overcome to solve at the end of a narrative. Narratives require the audience to cooperate, even passively, with the protagonist and learn from their troubles (Singh 2021:185). A protagonist in an adverse situation, especially one not caused by themselves, causes greater sympathy with the character (Singh 2021:189). Singh (2021:191) stated that "sympathetic pleasure" is experienced when the protagonist succeeds despite adversity. In contrast, Hogan (2022:195) referred more to an empathetic response toward the protagonist. However, Singh (2021:185-186) did not subscribe to the simulation theory. Therefore, sympathy would be more fitting than empathy in Singh's work. However, since the researcher does subscribe to the simulation theory, empathy might be more fitting. Sympathy is considered as part of empathy, although much debate exists on whether they overlap or are separate constructs (Lishner et al. 2016:2-3). Lishner et al. (2016:2-3) gave the following explanation for sympathy and empathy:

However, the term [sympathy] is used by some contemporary social scientists to describe a feeling of concern for another in need [...] The term empathy was first used by Titchener to describe the process of einföhlung, whereby an observer seeks to mentally project the self into the state of another person or object.

Therefore, empathy has much more to do with genuinely trying to understand someone else's perspective, whereas sympathy is more about feeling sorry for but still distancing from the person or phenomenon. Chang et al. (2021:3, 4) gave the following statement on empathy:

Cognitive empathy is involved in assessing another agent's emotions, beliefs, goals, or intentions within a given situational context. It comprises of several subcomponent processes, such as perspective-taking and attributing feelings and thoughts to self and others [...] Cognitive empathy allows individuals to recognize, understand, and predict how other agents will respond in social situations. These social cognitive processes provide a foundation for the formation and maintenance of social relationships that are mutually constructive.

The subscription to the simulation theory will significantly impact whether one refers to empathy or sympathy. As the researcher subscribes to the simulation theory, Chang et al.'s statement is used to define empathy in the thesis. The definition describes what empathy means and how it helps humans function in the world. Empathy and humanisation are potent tools in building functional, tolerant, multi-religious and multi-cultural societies. Both sympathy and empathy are emotional connections that can be felt in a narrative depending on the context of the consumer (Johnson-Laird & Oatley 2016:82-98). Furthermore, remembered emotion is where the consumer's past may be rekindled by watching the narrative (Johnson-Laird & Oatley 2016:82-98). However, one must consider that the more relatable the narrative is, the more empathetic response can be expected from the consumer (Chang et al. 2021:9). Narrative plots aid the consumer in creating images that help with narrative transportation (van Laer et al. 2013:802). Plots, therefore, influence narrative transportation and will, in turn, influence the empathy felt by the consumer.

Affective realism is one of the mechanisms by which humans predict what will happen next in reality (Fridman et al. 2019:3; Barrett 2018:284); similarly, narrative receivers constantly try to predict what will happen next in narratives (Kukkonen 2014:721, 736). Audiences sometimes accept narrative plot twists with improbable changes, leading to new predictions in the future (Kukkonen 2014:720, 725, 727). These unpredictable changes may lead the audience to be transported through curiosity deeper into the narrative (Kukkonen 2014:726). Life's unpredictability may play a role in the attractiveness of an unpredictable narrative (Kukkonen 2014:734). Thinking of narrative as a simulator can explain trouble plots within narratives as a non-threatening way of learning (Morin et al. 2019:3). However, plots are recurring through different narratives and are therefore not perpetual (Shaked & Clore 2017:32). It is beneficial for narratives to use relatable human problems; this might be part of why narratives reoccur (Singh 2021:184). Narratives are not spontaneous creations but evolve in human conditions

such as culture (Singh 2021:186). Cross-cultural narrative patterns may be ascribed to overlapping ethical concerns, although not a universal understanding of constructs (Hogan 2022:188).

4.2.2.2 Working definition

The researcher created the following definition with the thesis in mind. The formatting difference showcases the contours of the definition and should not be confused with a quote. The working definition of a narrative plot for the use of this thesis now follows:

Plot is a construct that refers to the simulation in which a character finds themselves. Therefore, plot acts as a type of affective realism for the characters. As multiple characters may have different ideas of reality, plots may have multiple affective realisms working together. The plot helps to facilitate para-social interaction, narrative transportation, and narrative prediction. Plot and characters influence one another, as neither one can adapt without influencing the other. Narrative plots intersect with identity formation concepts, including but not limited to religion, culture, laws and politics. Narrative plots are intensely based on the problem-solution and us-versus-them phenomena. Resolution of problems and cliffhangers also come into play with the narrative plot.

Plot intersects with the concept of theme, storylines (major or minor), events, interpretation, historical backgrounds, plot speed, character growth, curiosity (of the viewer), the digital world, emotions and ethics. However, narrative is not limited to any one of these constructs. Narratives and plots are contextually bound; however, the more globalised society becomes, the more universal plots will become. Plots are often repeated throughout multiple narratives. Plot is a lens of affective realism temporarily in place because of the suspension of disbelief phenomena. The affective realism created through a plot is temporarily shared between the content creator, consumer and characters (irrespective of the time and space between the creation and consumption of the narrative). Plot is one of the narrative factors that can influence human constructs through narrative simulation. Therefore, one's affective realism can be altered or reinforced through narrative plots.

This concludes the subsection on *Plot*.

4.2.3 Passive and active narrative

In this subsection, active and passive narratives are discussed. The *Discussion and semantic* section gives a short literature review of the different academic voices followed by the *Working definition* for the use of the thesis.

4.2.3.1 Discussion and semantics

For this study, passive narrative is the concept of narrative with minimal interaction, such as audiobooks and filmography. On the other hand, active narrative is when the person must physically interact with the narrative to proceed. The term interactive narrative is also often used (Moallem & Raffe 2020:305). Active narratives include video games, virtual reality (Moallem & Raffe 2020:305), social media and, to some extent, eBooks. Active and passive narratives are not always a clear-cut line. One should, however, consider that a passive narrative is not entirely passive (Bezdek et al. 2013:409). The narrative consumer's brain contributes much detail not given by the author, as seen with eBooks (Bezdek et al. 2013:409; Gottschall 2012:loc 157; Mar & Oatley 2008:186). The more a person is transported, and the more suspense is built, the more the person will become active in the narrative, even if this only happens in the consumers' thoughts (Bezdek et al. 2013:411, 413). As technology evolves, different digital narratives can become more active (Koenitz 2018:8). Examples of interactive films include *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018) by Slade (Hoydis 2021:4) Or *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy Vs The Reverend* (2020) by Scanlon. In these types of films, the viewers are offered choices. The choices that the viewer makes directly impact the storyline.

Sestir and Green (2010:285) stated that active narrative might have higher transportation, leading to higher suspended disbelief and identification levels. However, Mar and Oatley (2008:186) stated that a narrative's impact does not necessarily depend on whether it is active or passive. It would rather depend on the subject matter and overall transportation level of the narrative (Mar & Oatley 2008:186). Therefore, the active and passive narrative is not foolproof in predicting transportability and identification. There are many reasons why active narratives may have higher transportability and influence (cultivation or persuasion). In video games, the main character is usually customisable, leading to higher identification levels (Sestir & Green 2010:285). Furthermore, although the storyline is usually written, some games give consumers the freedom of choice, which might influence the outcome of the narrative (Sestir & Green 2010:285). Different games have different levels of interaction; some may be more active than

others. A narrative with different outcomes can have more active simulations than a game with only one storyline (Moallem & Raffe 2020:308).

The more control is given to the narrative receiver, the less control the narrative author has over the content (Moallem & Raffe 2020:310). An example of a more passive video game with only one storyline would be *Super Mario Bros* (1985) by Miyamoto. On the other hand, an example of a game with different outcomes would be *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) by Nelson. What narrative has a more significant effect on one's affective realism and construct is up for debate. However, it again brings the responsibility aspect of the narrative to the foreground. Narrative creators have a big responsibility to create responsible content. However, the narrative receiver is primarily responsible for choosing their content responsibly and using their critical thinking abilities, thereby creating and maintaining healthy personal constructs and affective realism. The balance of the responsibility scale may differ depending on the active and passive narrative, especially if one can predict higher transportation. Information received from narratives should be evaluated, which is even more true for narratives with higher transportation. Different consumers may have different levels of transportation regardless of whether the narrative is active or passive, making self-evaluation a vital factor.

4.2.3.2 Working definition

The researcher created the following definition with the current study in mind. The formatting indicates the contours of the definition and should not be confused with a quote. The definition of active and passive narrative for the use of this thesis now follows:

How a narrative's simulation occurs influences passive and active narrative constructs. No narrative is entirely passive, as some interaction occurs in the mind of the narrative receiver through narrative transportation. Therefore, how active or passive a narrative is depends more on a spectrum than a clear-cut construct. Narrative simulations can be very passive, meaning that no physical interaction is needed from the consumer for the narrative to proceed. These narratives usually do not offer choices in plot outcomes and character customizability. However, if well-written, these narratives may have an active component in the consumer's mind. Narratives on the passive side intersect with Books in electronic mediums, filmography, music, news, and websites. However, all these constructs have exceptions, as narratives become more active with the development of new technologies.

Narrative simulations can also be very active, meaning that physical interaction is needed from the consumer for the narrative to proceed. These narratives could offer choices in plot outcomes and character customizability. However, a narrative can be considered active without customizability and choice. Like passive narrative, active narrative also has the potential for narrative transportation. Narratives on the more active side of the spectrum intersect with video games, virtual reality, and social media. However, these constructs may have exceptions and be seen as more passive. Therefore, the active narrative is not limited to these constructs. How one's affective realism is influenced by active or passive narrative is unclear. Instead, narrative consumers should note what types of narratives transport them more personally and take more care to think critically about information after a higher transported state. However, all information consumed through narrative should be considered critically as it can affect consumers' affective realism.

This concludes the subsection on *Passive and active narrative*.

4.2.4 Discourse⁹

Discourse is just one of the components that help construct narratives. Discourse is very influential and can impact humans' affective realism. For this reason, the *Discussion and semantics* and *Working definition* subsections were needed.

4.2.4.1 Discussion and semantics

Discourse is a form of communication through words (written or audible) in a conversational context (Vaezi 2018:1; Amalia et al. 2015:162). According to Gottschall (2021:10), one of the defining characteristics of humanity is the ability to communicate. The communications that occur every day in the lives of ordinary people are postured to influence the narrative around them to their advantage (Gottschall 2021:11; Barrett 2018:287); discourse found in digital narrative similarly impacts the human mind (Jensen 2021a:43, 44). Influential forms of communication have been termed swaying (Gottschall 2021:11), tweaking (Barrett 2018:287) or seeping (Jensen 2021a:45). However, this influence requires a conscious or unconscious interpretation or processing (for example, listening to someone or consuming narratives) (Amalia et al. 2015:162). Wang and Holland (2014:273) stated that "Comprehension of narrative stories plays an important role in the development of language skills". Discourse stimulates human interest, encouraging interaction with other humans (Amalia et al. 2015:163). In the case of digital narrative, discourse can help create curiosity from the narrative receiver. Misinterpretation and unpredictability of discourse are often found within human conversations (Amalia et al. 2015:164) and narratives. Clarity is encouraged when it comes to discourse found in narratives because of the possibility of misinterpretation.

Communication in the form of narrative helps humans to construct and make sense of the world (McGrath 2019:9, 26). Therefore, discourse can potentially influence a person's affective realism. Narratives often have discourse simulated as communication between characters and the audience, including dialogues, monologues, or general narrations. Both narrative (in their different forms) and communication hold the power to influence the human mind (Gottschall 2021:12). Discourse is also a large part of religion, and this can be through ancient holy

⁹ The term dialogue is often found in scholarly texts that discuss the communitive part of the information utilised in narratives. This term can have linguistic problems, as it may refer to a discussion between two or more people. This may, therefore, exclude concepts like monologues and narrations. While the term dialogue is not incorrect, discourse may be more descriptive of verbal and non-verbal (e.g. body language and social cues) communication. These communications are critical to how information is passed down through narratives. While there may be a lengthy discussion on the merits of both terms, it is beyond the scope of the thesis to have a detailed discussion on the subject.

literature, gatherings, or more modern means such as the internet, digital conferences, blogs, or YouTube (Plate 2021a:204). This, however, does not mean that all forms of discourse are equally authoritative. Digital narratives expose modern people to discourse, ideas, experiences, views, and outside influences they may not have encountered otherwise (Plate 2021a:209). Discourses, like narratives, are highly contextual (Amalia et al. 2015:163); human contexts have shifted into a globalised, digital, multi-religious, multi-cultural society, influencing the understanding of contextual narratives. This has further led to a need for inter-religious discourse that may present many challenges (Vaezi 2018:1; Amalia et al. 2015:165). However, an in-depth discussion on inter-religious or inter-cultural discourse is beyond the scope of this thesis. The interpretation of narratives and discourses has become increasingly complex because of the changing contexts of human societies.

4.2.4.2 Working definition

The researcher composed the following definition with the current study in mind. The format difference indicates the contours of the definition and should not be confused with a quote. The following definition of discourse is used for this thesis:

Discourse is a construct. Discourse is how communication is simulated. Discourse is simulated verbally but can involve body language. Discourse intersects with digital media and daily life. Discourse is contextual and intersects with emotion, religion, culture, and geography. However, discourse is not limited to these constructs. In narrative, discourse is a form of communication between characters and extends to the narrative receiver. Discourse is a tool humans use to affect the world around them. Discourse includes dialogues, monologues and narration. Discourse, in all its forms, can influence people's affective realism.

This concludes the subsection on *Discourse*.

4.2.5 Fiction and non-fiction

There is a significant difference between fiction and non-fiction. However, one might be surprised that non-fiction is not always accurate and factual, and fiction is not synonymous with misinformation. The *Discussions and semantics* section briefly overviews the two concepts in the different academic voices. The *Working definition* section clarifies the terms fiction and non-fiction in the current study.

4.2.5.1 Discussion and semantics

Fiction is more based on the imagination of the writer than non-fiction (van Laer et al. 2013:802; Djikic et al. 2013:29). Non-fiction is usually based on stories that have happened in the physical world (Djikic et al. 2013:29). Fiction, however, does not fall into the same realm as propaganda or fake news, as fiction does not hold itself true, whereas fake news depicts itself as accurate but is instead fabricated (Djikic et al. 2013:29; Appel & Richter 2007:113; Weisberg 2016:462-463). Therefore, the consumer approaches fiction as not completely embedded in the physical world while maintaining a certain acceptance of the imagined world for interaction to occur (Weisberg 2016:462-463). Narrative transportation and suspension of disbelief (Green & Brock 2013:11; Mar et al. 2011:818-819) will play a role in the partial acceptance of fictional narratives.

Sugiyama (2021:8) brought up the problem of whether fiction can only mean falsehood. One must ask if it is possible to learn from fiction that contains non-factual and fabricated concepts (Sugiyama 2021:8; Appel & Richter 2007:113-114; Braddock & Dillard 2016:449). Sugiyama (2021:8) stated that it is possible because the facts and lessons embedded in the narrative are not undone by the fabrications. Narrative creators are responsible for fact-checking their work, and fictional work often contains many real-world concepts (Djikic et al. 2013:29; Green & Brock 2013:329), helping the believability and comprehension levels of the narratives (Weisberg 2016:466). How much reality is embedded within fiction will depend on the author (Weisberg 2016:462). Fictional realities may be constructed with reality as its foundation, or a new reality might emerge (Weisberg 2016:463). The reader uses parts of reality to understand the non-reality, especially when information is not disclosed (Weisberg 2016:465).

Fiction allows the writer to create a teachable scenario, regardless of whether it is based on complete fact (Sugiyama 2021:10; Mar & Oatley 2008:185). Imagination is one of the critical constructs within the human mind that makes understanding fiction (the non-reality-based parts) possible (Weisberg 2016:462, 463). Consumers use discretion to separate fact from fabrication when consuming narratives (Sugiyama 2021:8). Fiction is an excellent learning tool, as it acts as a mnemonic, therefore, content consumers can retain information creatively (Sugiyama 2021:10). People who consume fictional narratives more often than non-fiction such as the news, have more positive world views that the protagonist will prevail (Gottschall 2012:loc 1678). Narrative transportation and cultivation are not dependent on a work being fictional or non-fictional (van Laer et al. 2013:802; Braddock & Dillard 2016:450, 461).

There is not always a clear-cut line between fiction and non-fiction (Weisberg 2016:467). The line between a documentary and a fictional account of a historical battle may be thin or wavy (Weisberg 2016:468). However, most people can understand the difference between the fictional and the physical world (Weisberg 2016:467). When narrative receivers know that a narrative is a non-fiction work, they know that what is being represented does not just spring from someone's mind but is tied to real people and events (Phelan & Frow 2022:260). When a character is created (fictional), an impasse exists between seeing the character as a person "mimetic" and knowing they are not real "synthetic" (Phelan & Frow 2022:256, 257, 260, 262). However, what many narrative receivers do not consider is that non-fictional characters begin with an actual person "mimetic" but are twisted into the best protagonist version, showing some parts and omitting others "synthetic" (Phelan & Frow 2022:260, 262). Missing the synthetic aspects of narrative simulations can significantly affect how information is perceived.

4.2.5.2 Working definition

The researcher constructed the following definition with the study in mind. The format difference indicates the contours of the definition and should not be confused with a quote. The working definition of fiction and non-fiction for the use of this thesis is as follows:

Fiction is a construct simulated through narratives with non-reality (not in the physical world) foundations. Fiction can intersect on different levels with the physical world. However, fiction is not limited to the physical world. Therefore, care must be taken with information that does interact with the physical world, as it can be accurate or misinformed. Fiction can affect one's affective realism. Non-fiction is a construct simulated through narratives with reality (physical world) as a foundation. Non-fiction can intersect with fabricated and omitted constructs. However, this is problematic and not ideal as it leads to misinformation. Thus, non-fiction should try to be as factual as possible. Non-fiction can affect people's affective realism.

This concludes the subsection on *Fiction and non-fiction*.

4.3 Digital narrative and digital technology

Digital narratives are one of the main concepts of the thesis. Digital technology enables the existence of digital narratives. However, the word technology existed before the digital world. The *Discussion and semantics* of the terms technology and digital narrative are found in this section. Furthermore, the *Working definitions* clarify the terms digital technology and digital narrative for use within this thesis.

4.3.1 Discussion and semantics

Digital narratives and technology are part of the world and influence people and their thoughts (Jensen 2021a:45; Bryant 2021:V; Ruest et al. 2018:268). Through human action, technology has a more significant influence than ever before (Baumgartner 2013:241). The effect that technology has through human agents is not inherently neutral and should not be "underestimated" (Veldsman 2020:1, 5). The digital world has provided humans with an on-tap narrative. Gottschall (2021:22) described this new age of on-tap narrative as the "big bang of storytelling". Sestir and Green (2010:273) agreed on this premise and stated that historical humans would not have imagined the number of narratives modern humans can access. The on-tap narrative gives humans a place to escape to instantly (Slater et al. 2014:443). Gottschall (2021:22) emphasised that the mass amount of narrative available through the digital world can be dangerous to humanity considering globalisation. The concept of globalisation includes multi-cultural and multi-religious societies because of the ease of movement and technological advances (Bouma 2013:55). The digital world is making the need to incorporate multiple communities more prominent (Smith 1991:loc 194).

It is not that the digital world is a significant threat; instead, it is the narratives and propaganda that are spread through narratives in the digital world that are problematic (Gottschall 2021:22). The time taken up by narratives is extended as humans worldwide utilise digital technology. The time spent on digital narrative may differ from context and personal use. Narrative consumes more time than socialisation in the physical world of the average person (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:556). Gottschall (2012:loc 2257) stated that:

The technology of story telling has evolved from oral tales to clay tablets, to hand written manuscripts, to printed books, to movies, television, kindles and iPhone.

The way that narratives are delivered is ever-changing. Digital technology is only one of the long-evolving concepts of narrative distribution (Gottschall 2012:loc 2257). These technologies, if utilised correctly, can help the process of humanisation and empathy concerning others (Nussbaum 2012:147). In this thesis, digital narratives are concerned mainly with digital entertainment and internet narratives. Digital entertainment for the use of this thesis includes the following: (i) *Books in electronic mediums*, (ii) *Filmography*, (iii) *Video games and virtual reality*, and (iv) *Music*. Internet narratives for the use of this thesis include the following: (i) *Websites*, (ii) *Social media*, and (iii) *News*. These constructs are the focal points of this thesis. This does not mean that other focus points do not exist or that other scholars will classify the narratives similarly. The digital narratives named in the previous paragraph will

not be defined here; instead, definitions will be given in the Chapters that follow. However, it is not possible to speak about digital narratives without its facilitator, digital technology.

The question must, therefore, be asked what technology is and how this relates to the digital world. Historically, technology could be a household item/invention that made life easier, for example, a grain mill or a horse saddle (Jensen 2021b:178). In its modern sense, technology is usually related to the digital world or electronic devices (Jensen 2021b:177). Technology influences and changes humanity as much as humanity changes technology (Baumgartner 2013:239, 240). The use of technology in the historical sense has helped humanity survive (Baumgartner 2013:240). Modern constructs of technology and narrative are more digital-centric than their historical counterparts. As seen in Chapter One, Plate (2021c:12-13) and Pinn (2021b:13) defined religion as a type of technology. In the older sense of the word, the word technology can accurately describe what religion is. However, when the word technology is used within the current work, it refers to digital technology unless stated otherwise. Therefore, this thesis does not stand in opposition to the idea of religion as a technology. Instead, the context of the word technology is used differently from Plate and Pinn in this thesis. Note that the previous statements do not entail that religious movements do not utilise digital technology, as many religions utilise these technologies for their benefit.

Although every computing component and its history is not explained in this thesis, it is essential to understand that electronic technology has not been with humanity for a long time. Technology in the electronic scene is still new and modern compared to other human tools. The start of computing technologies was in the 1940s (Ceruzzi 2003:14). The first commercial computing devices became popular in the early 1970s; they were math-based and did not focus on narrative (Ceruzzi 2003:214-215). Therefore, technology initially utilised numbers rather than letters and language (Ceruzzi 2003:55, 214-215). At this time, the new technology was not yet taken seriously by many, and few people had access to it (Ceruzzi 2003:216). However, those who owned the computing devices started experimenting and expanding the technologies' capabilities (Ceruzzi 2003:216). By the mid-1980s, personal computers were more popular and had better capacities than their predecessor; however, they were not nearly up to the standard we have in today's technology (Ceruzzi 2003:217). By the 1990s, personal computers had become even more popular and advanced (Ceruzzi 2003:13); from there, they only became more popular. No matter what theory of time one subscribes to, computers are still relatively new in terms of human history.

Digital narratives need digital devices to be enacted. This can include one or multiple digital devices. These devices include but are not limited to computers, televisions, cell phones, tablets and gaming consoles. Some narratives, however, are also dependent on the internet. Some narratives classified under digital entertainment rather than internet narratives may also depend upon the internet. However, digital entertainment does not have to be internet-dependent. Furthermore, one cannot exclude entertainment from internet narratives. Narratives are meant to captivate and entertain. The two constructs are, therefore, not entirely exclusive. Instead, they are a way of classifying for this thesis. Many digital narratives are internet-dependent, whether they are internet narratives or digital entertainment. For this reason, it is crucial to consider the construct of the Internet. The internet has become a construct that is difficult to define because it has a vast scope at this time in human history (Haigh et al. 2015:144). The internet has also changed as technology advanced, making the definition even more complex (Haigh et al. 2015:144). A definition that might have been given 30 years ago would be incomplete for what the internet is today (Haigh et al. 2015:144).

Email was one of the first functions of the Internet; however, it has long surpassed being only a facilitator of emails (Haigh et al. 2015:144). To complicate matters, an academic engineering view of the internet and a public view differ (Haigh et al. 2015:144). Academics may think more of hardware, software, and wavelengths, whereas the public may think more of any device and application that requires the internet (Haigh et al. 2015:144). When web browsers came into existence, they started attracting much more attention from non-academic users (Haigh et al. 2015:146). This thesis is not too concerned with the academic constructs as it focuses on narratives. Therefore, devices and applications that are internet-capable and dependent will be broadly seen as the internet. This does not mean that academic views on the internet are unimportant. A definition of the internet will not be given here as it is beyond the scope of this thesis. A general construct of applications, devices and web-based constructs will be seen as part of the internet for the use of this study. Many people have access to and create narratives online, leading to human constructs such as religion, culture and other social constructs flooding the living history being built.

When looking at digital technology, one also has to investigate the "digital divide" (Ünver 2017:1). The word inequality is also used to describe the divide between people who have access to digital technology and those who do not (Ünver 2017:1). However, it is not just about whether a person owns digital technology or has access to it in another way (Ünver 2017:5). Governments worldwide have started to implement programs where digital technology is made

available for those who cannot afford access to it on their own (Rahman 2014:34). Whether a person is technologically literate is just as important as having access to the technology (Ünver 2017:5). What digital technology and the internet is used for is also essential (Ünver 2017:6). Ünver (2017:6) made the following statement:

Another study points out, that more educated people use the Internet more actively and their use is more information oriented, whereas the less educated seem to be interested particularly in the entertainment functions of the Internet.

However, this is not to say that educated people do not use the entertainment function or that less educated people do not use the internet for information. The amount of usage toward entertainment or information may just be skewed. Rahman (2014:34) made similar observations: when children are given technology without instruction, they tend to use the entertainment functions rather than become computer literate. Bridging the gap in the digital divide is therefore not as easy as giving people access to technology (Rahman 2014:34). Rather, courses designed to help individuals become computer literate are just as important (Rahman 2014:34). When people are computer and information literate, it can lead to better critical thinking when utilising digital entertainment. There are theories of whether electronic and digital technology positively or negatively affect humanity (Baumgartner 2013:240). Technology can be seen as not positive or negative in its construct (Baumgartner 2013:239, 240). However, the use of the technology can be classified as non-neutral depending on the user's intent (Baumgartner 2013:239, 240). This can be seen especially in the construct of digital narratives. The responsibility of content creators and content receivers is of great importance.

Not only are narratives found in digital media, but digital technologies can also help to create narrative plots. Artificial intelligence has developed the capacity to create creative works like narratives and art (Svenungsson 2024:7). Wolff et al. (2013:1, 2) stated that programs like Storyscopes help develop plots for museum narratives. Storyscopes uses artificial intelligence to create narratives based on human ideas (Zither AI 2020). While artificial intelligence's role in narratives is an important topic, this is not the main focus of the current study. Instead, how technology-manufactured plots influence people may be an interesting point to pursue for future research. Future research can focus on the responsibility this places on narrative receivers, as the narrative creators are not just humans but programs. Therefore, this may impact the responsibility of the narrative receiver to look at the narrative with an even more critical eye.

4.3.2 Working Definitions

The researcher constructed the following definitions with the current study in mind. The format change should not be confused with a quote. Instead, it indicates the contours of the definitions. The following definition of technology is used for the thesis:

Digital technology is a construct that comprises multiple tools used by humans. These tools do not include electronic devices, such as toasters, that may connect to other devices via the internet. Instead, these technologies can usually simulate multiple functions. Digital technology refers to electronic devices with or without internet capabilities. Digital technology intersects with but is not limited to the following simulations: communication, entertainment, internet and web browsers, organisation, navigation, financial services, photo and video creation, mathematics, and security. The following technological devices are relevant to narrative studies: personal computers, cell phones, tablets, virtual reality devices, the internet and gaming consoles. However, technology is ever-evolving, and digital technologies are not limited to these concepts. These devices work via screens, text, images, videos (or moving images), and audio. Therefore, a lot of human senses can be triggered by digital technology. Digital technology is integral to many people's everyday lives; therefore, it can affect people's affective realism. Because digital technology and digital literacy are not available to all, the digital divide must be considered when working with the digital world. For instance, the digital divide may influence communities without or with less access if the digital world becomes part of education systems.

The term digital narrative is also defined here. However, this is not the definition of narrative, which can be found at the end of the Chapter. The following definition of digital narrative is used for the thesis:

Digital narrative is a construct simulated through narratives only accessible through digital technology. Digital technology, therefore, acts as a facilitator for digital narrative. For people who own digital devices, digital narratives are constantly available. Therefore, it can have an impact on their affective realism. Digital narratives can be divided into digital entertainment and internet narratives. Digital entertainment and internet narratives intersect with each other. However, it is a loose form of classification. Internet narratives depend more on the internet, although they may still be entertaining. Digital entertainment may or may not use the internet, but it is crafted for entertainment

purposes. Digital entertainment intersects with books in electronic mediums, filmography, video games, virtual reality, and music. Internet narratives intersect with social media, websites, and news. Digital narratives are available at the touch of a button and can affect humans' affective realism.

These definitions clarify terms used frequently within the thesis and add to the understanding of the definition of narrative at the end of the Chapter.

4.4 Conspiracy theories, propaganda misinformation and counter-narratives

One of the main focal points of this thesis is that information gained by narratives can be accurate or inaccurate. Therefore, depending on what information is consumed, it can lead to (in)tolerance. Investigating what is meant by terms such as conspiracy theories, propaganda, and misinformation is essential. Furthermore, counter-narratives are often utilised against these harmful types of information. Different scholarly voices are showcased in the *Discussion and semantics* section, and the *Working definitions* will clarify the terms for use in the thesis.

4.4.1 Discussion and semantics

Narratives can be horribly misinformed and completely fabricated (Gottschall 2021:20). Misinformation can be found in any narrative medium. Therefore, educating people to think critically about the information they receive is crucial. However, not all misinformation is created equally. Some narratives may have information that is not correct; however, the narrative creator may not be spreading misinformation with the intent to harm. This does not mean that misinformation is good or positive. However, its effect can be minor. A better understanding of what small amounts of less important misinformation may do to one's affective realism may be an interesting project for future research. There is, therefore, a spectrum of what misinformation may be. Misinformation, however, can result in conspiracy theories or propaganda. The term conspiracy theory is attributed to Popper (Yablokov 2019:294). Popper (2011:306) stated:

[...] I call it the 'conspiracy theory of society'. It is the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrences of the phenomenon (some hidden interest which has first to be revealed) and who have planned and conspired to bring it about.

Popper coined the phenomenon of conspiracy theories in 1945; however, the construct existed long before he coined it. Conspiracy theories have long superseded the construct of digital

narrative. The spread of information and narrative has changed significantly since the term was coined. One of the critical elements that Popper (2011:307) pointed out was:

I do not wish to imply that conspiracies never happen. On the contrary, they are typical social phenomena. They become important, for example, whenever people who believe in the conspiracy theory get into power.

This statement from Popper is critical. When conspiracy theories live in people's minds, they become a problem in reality. Hofstadter (2012:3-4) stated that:

I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy I have in mind. In using the expression "paranoid style," I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes. I have neither the competence nor the desire to classify any figure of the past or present as a certifiable lunatic.

Hofstadter (2012:4) said that if conspiratorial thinking were limited to such individuals, it would not be worth investigating from his academic perspective. However, it is interesting to note that many scholars misinterpreted his work to this degree, even with his apologetics woven in (see, for example, Yablokov (2019:291)). Conspiracy theories are not unique to one society (Robertson 2021:21). Gottschall (2021:77; 2012:loc 1392) described conspiracy theories as narratives told to manipulate through blatant lies and half-truths or carefully placed facts as a means to a different end. Conspiracy theories are gaining much traction, and misinformation is a big problem in an age of information (Gottschall 2021:94). These modern myth-like narratives are compelling because they explain things that usually do not have a satisfying explanation and are an easy way to place blame (Franks et al. 2013:1; Nussbaum 2012:23; Yablokov 2019:294, 295; Madalina 2015:280).

Tarant (2020:116) gave the following statement on fake news:

The term "fake news" became popular recently although the term has a more narrow scope. Fake news is deliberately crafted pieces of disinformation produced for public consumption. Unlike fake news, conspiracism is often an expression of genuine belief. In practice, it is impossible to distinguish between online content created to intentionally mislead and content created as a manifestation of a genuine, even if completely wrong, belief.

This statement by Tarant shows the interconnectedness between fake news and conspiracy theories. Robertson (2015:8-9) highlighted three main ways religion intersects with conspiracy theories. This included "conspiracy narratives" (1) "about" (2) "in" and (3) "as" "religion(s)" (Robertson 2015:8-9). The first refers to panic that is spread about groups (real or imagined), such as "witch-hunts" and scapegoating of minority groups (Robertson 2015:8). The narratives promote the idea that these groups usually seek to destroy a particular way of life usually the dominant view of society (Robertson 2015:8). The second concept refers to how conspiracy

theories function within religious groups (Robertson 2015:8-9). In other words, how conspiracy theories function within the group that believes them and their close association with extremism and violence (Robertson 2015:8). The third concept is "non-falsifiable" beliefs that are generally seen as conspiracy theories by most of society, yet there are people who treat this information as their religious belief (Robertson 2015:9). The idea of religion as "non-falsifiable alternate realities" is also found in the work of Cox (2010:21). Furthermore, because conspiracy theories are entangled in many different concepts including religion Robertson (2015:7) believed it to be undefinable.

If the conspiracy theory has a strong narrative, it is hard to alter the minds of people who believe this narrative with bland facts (Gottschall 2021:95), thereby rendering fact-based learning less effective than education systems that incorporate narrative. Placing scientific language and real problems in these conspiratorial narratives helps to make them even more convincing (Nussbaum 2012:23; Robertson & Amarasingam 2022:198). Conspiracy theories can have vast implications, like violence and health risks, or they can be a part of a narrative that makes complex concepts easier to accept (Franks et al. 2013:2; Nussbaum 2012:21). Emotion plays a vital role in the transmission and susceptibility of people to a narrative. More fear-inducing news is often deemed more relevant than news that does not induce fear (Fessler et al. 2014:1-2). It is important to note that fear is a normal emotion considered part of the human survival mechanism and can manifest in many different ways depending on the individual (Merizalde et al. 2021:964-956; LaBar 2016:175-774).

However, emotion should not be demonised or painted as irrational, and emotion is a normal part of humanity. As emotions are often misused through narratives, it is essential to see their role. It is even more relevant to this study when one considers the powerful intersection between religion and emotion (Strydom 2021:178). Emotion is bound to play a role in studies focusing on digital narrative and religion. Fear is usually one of the leading emotions within propaganda and conspiracy theories (Nussbaum 2012:23; Jenkins 1975:158). Therefore, emotions can be used to manipulate the target audience of propaganda into acting, following the will of the content creator. The abuse of emotion to potentially manipulate should be pointed out and illustrated in religion studies classes. The human mind is more biased toward spreading negative information than positive (Fessler et al. 2014:2; Soroka et al. 2019:1).

Fessler et al. (2014:3) explained negative bias in the following way:

Negatively biased credulity can thus be understood as the output of a functional mechanism that enhances credulity toward socially transmitted information concerning hazards relative to the baseline level of credulity with which the individual approaches socially transmitted information concerning benefits.

Similarly, Schmid (2021b:572) stated that fear-inducing narratives trigger a survival construct in the human mind, making fear-inducing news more relevant. This can also be seen in the work of Boyer et al. (2015:3); they stated that:

Individuals usually face a trade-off between false alarms (e.g., inferring the presence of a predator, when none is present) and misses (e.g., failing to infer the presence of a predator, when one is present), where false alarms are much less costly than misses.

Therefore, it might seem less risky to forward potential misinformation and not send it if the information is correct. It is essential to see and understand that people who create misinformation, conspiracy theories, or propaganda use negative emotions such as "fear, anger and disgust" to dehumanise others to further or justify their cause (McCauley 2021:143). These narratives increase the likelihood that an outgroup is perceived as a more significant threat (McCauley 2021:142-146). Again, this is detrimental to tolerant multi-religious societies; therefore, showcasing and educating people on negative bias credulity is essential when working with a religion education class incorporating digital narratives. Narratives are often created to counteract propaganda and conspiracy theories. Any narrative created to counter misinformation should be emotive, as this will help spread and create a better acceptance of the message (Zeiger & Gyte 2021:375), as emotional narratives have a higher impact on narrative consumers (Clore et al. 2018:3).

One must not assume that people who fall prey to conspiracy theories have a low intellect or that the cause is mental illness, as this is most often not the case (Gottschall 2012:99; Robertson 2015:5). By joining in the conspiratorial news, one becomes the protagonist, even the story's hero, by combating or exposing the antagonist in the hidden narrative (Franks et al. 2013:8; Nussbaum 2012:23). Furthermore, each person will differ on whether they are likely to pass on information that contains a threat (Fessler et al. 2014:4). Conspiracy theories exist on many subjects (Gottschall 2012:loc 1424), including religion. The outcome is that people feel overwhelmed by the amount of conflicting information they receive (Bazelon 2020:2). Bazelon (2020:2) stated that the mass amount of misinformation leads to questions regarding freedom

of speech and whether it should not be more regulated, especially regarding social media. Franks et al. (2013:10) stated that:

Once a CT [conspiracy theory] is normalized, it becomes an incontrovertible, taken-for-granted part of common sense. The CT [conspiracy theory] narrative can then function as an interpretive template for other threats. Conspiratorial thinking is therefore mutable and portable across threats and domains.

Misinformation and conspiracy theories can be installed into affective realism, making one even more vulnerable to conspiracy theories in the future. However, it should be stated that not all affective realism is misinformation or conspiratorial. Religious extremists (violent and non-violent) use digital narratives to spread their propaganda and recruit new people to their cause (Samuel 2021:170; Zeiger & Gyte 2021:359). Extremist groups adapt in the same way that any other human group adapts to new technology to make communication more effective (Zeiger & Gyte 2021:359; Todorovic & Trifunovic 2021:602). Therefore, unforeseen adverse effects can arise from technological advances, as there will always be those who abuse the systems (Todorovic & Trifunovic 2021:603). Misinformation is more likely to be shared on social media than reliable content (Vosoughi et al. 2018:1147; Tarant 2020:120). Vosoughi et al. (2018:1149) stated that:

When we estimated a model of the likelihood of retweeting, we found that falsehoods were 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth.

Emotional provocation, morality and novelty of the misinformed narratives contribute to the successful spread of misinformed narratives (Vosoughi et al. 2018:1150; Bazelon 2020:6; Brady et al. 2017:7313). A conspiracy theory focusing on the threat to ethics, morals and a way of life can easily lead to conflict (Franks et al. 2013:5; Nussbaum 2012:23). The term Social and Moral contagion is used concerning the spread of conspiracy theories or misinformation (Brady et al. 2017:7313). Within this phenomenon, "the other" is painted in an immoral, undesirable and even dangerous light (Kogan 2017:380). The illustration of groups in this way can be detrimental to building tolerant societies if the narratives are believed. Emotion and morality are naturally spread among people in a social structure (Brady et al. 2017:7313). Brady et al. (2017:7316) gave the following statistic:

The presence of moral-emotional words in messages increased their transmission by approximately 20% per word.

Given that morality and emotion also intersect with religion (Strydom 2021:178; Ubani 2013:42), it is worth considering when investigating misinformed digital narratives on religion. Pointing these concepts out to students can help encourage the identification of these harmful narratives in the future. However, this is not a foolproof way of testing a narrative. For this

thesis, the term propaganda is more connected to an extremist group. Extremists use propaganda to recruit, intimidate and further their cause. Propaganda will include misinformation; however, not all misinformation is necessarily propaganda. In the scholarly world, propaganda is often used concerning fundamentalist, terrorist or extremist groups. Therefore, conspiracy theories and misinformation differ from propaganda, although they may have some of the same trades, like falsehoods combined with facts to create narratives to further a cause.

4.4.2 Working definitions

The researcher constructed the following definitions with the current study in mind. The format difference indicates the contours of the definition and should not be confused with a quote. The following definition is used for misinformation:

Misinformation is a construct that is simulated through the spread of inaccurate information. Misinformation is showcased as the mimetic (truth) and is not the same as fiction, which works with the synthetic in mind. However, fiction may contain misinformation about real-world constructs. Misinformation works on a scale or spectrum. On the one hand of the spectrum, one finds misinformation where the information will not significantly impact the audience. One finds conspiracy theories and propaganda on the other end of the spectrum. These constructs have more potential for harm. Therefore, conspiracy theories and propaganda intersect with misinformation. However, not all misinformation is propaganda or conspiracy theories.

The authors' intent for the misinformed content is essential, as misinformation may occur unintentionally and may not be meant to harm. However, this does not make it positive and may still have negative implications. Misinformation may be created intentionally to harm or further a cause with violent and intolerant implications. Misinformation intersects strongly with digital narratives but can be found within non-digital narratives and other information. Misinformation can intersect with any subject; however, the intersection focused on here is religion, specifically the representation of different religions. Therefore, generalisations, caricatures, prejudices, and othering will intersect here. Misinformation may have an impact on people's affective realism. Furthermore, misinformation may be spread because it is believed and forms part of people's affective realism. This makes the detection of misinformation in an era of multiple truths complex.

The following definition is used for conspiracy theories:

Conspiracy theories are constructs that are simulated through secret or hidden narratives within society. Conspiracy theories intersect strongly with misinformation, manipulation, plausibility, facts, morality, ethics, threat and survival. Conspiracy narratives can profoundly impact people's affective realism. Therefore, the impact of conspiracy narratives on people's affective realism forms and impacts real-life simulations and constructs. Conspiracy theories intersect with the protagonist, antagonistic and us-versus-them phenomena. Conspiracy theories intersect with identity formation concepts, including but not limited to religion, culture and nationality. Conspiracy theories have the potential to lead to intolerance, conflict, blame placement, and scapegoating. Conspiracy theories manipulate through negative emotions and survival mechanisms such as fear, anxiety and hopelessness. However, this does not imply that they do not occur in reality.

Conspiracy theories are often narrative-based and are found among digital narratives, although this is not its only facilitator. Conspiracy theories may be seen as modern myth-making narratives; these narratives help make sense of unexplainable phenomena. However, it should not be limited to myth or be confused with religious mythology. Conspiracy theorists often manifest from public figures and societal leaders at different levels. However, conspiracy theories are not limited to politics or leaders, especially not in the digital age. However, leaders should be held to a standard of transparency. If leaders spread conspiracy theories, the mentality will grow and fester, especially if they are political leaders who try to reinforce a nationalist ideological conspiratorial narrative. Nationalist ideological narratives and conspiracy theories intersect; however, they are distinct phenomena and should not be limited to each other.

The following definition of propaganda is used for the thesis:

Propaganda is a construct that intersects with misinformation and conspiracy theories. Its simulation is much the same as that of conspiracy theories. The main difference is that the authors of the narratives are fundamentalists, extremists, and terrorists who want to further their cause. Therefore, propaganda intersects more with recruitment, violence, and fear. Propaganda is very complex to control on channels like social media and counts as an abuse of the original intent of technology. Propaganda is created to alter or

manipulate the affective realism of targeted groups, either for fearmongering or recruitment-based purposes.

The following definition is used for counter-narratives:

Counter-narratives are constructs. Counter-narratives are generally simulated by countering conspiracy theories, propaganda, and misinformation. They should ideally be emotive and have identity formation concepts embedded, including but not limited to religion; showcasing different intersections of identity can have a more significant humanising effect. They intersect with digital narratives and can benefit people's affective realism if utilised.

This concludes the subsection on *conspiracy theories, propaganda misinformation and counter-narratives*. The definitions help clarify words often used in the thesis and the definition of narrative at the end of the Chapter.

4.5 Religious narrative

The meaning of the term religious narrative is vast and can have many interpretations. As this thesis works with religious narrative to aid religion education classes, it is essential to clarify what the term means. This section gives a *Discussion and semantics* of the term religious narrative. A subsection discussing *Religion education and religious narrative* can be found in this section. Lastly, a *Working definition* for the term religious narrative is given.

4.5.1 Discussion and semantics

Religious narratives include holy books; this might be one of the first things that come to mind when the term religious narrative is used. However, this study will not include holy books in the religious narrative. Instead, religious narrative refers to narratives that do not form part of a religion but discuss, reflect or comment on religion. Therefore, it can be applied if a narrative refers to a holy book. For example, if a film references a holy book like the Bible, Quran, or Tanakh, it references a religious phenomenon. However, applications on one's mobile phone that enable the user to read holy books are not a part of the discussion. Holy texts hold an exceptional place in many religions. One must also consider that some religions work with oral traditions and do not necessarily have a written text (Sukdaven 2018:1). Therefore, it is necessary to try and broaden the conversation to include these traditions (Sukdaven 2018:6). There are those who feel their rituals are more important than their literature, as is the case in Buddhism (Moyaert 2019:212). Some traditions may also specify who may handle a holy book;

for instance, the need to be purified by a ritual washing before handling the Quran (Moyaert 2019:211).

The problem with using holy text in a religious studies classroom is that it might be easy for people who believe in a set holy book to be defensive to protect their faith as it is usually a high authority in religious contexts (Moyaert 2019:213). Alternatively, if people feel they are not being heard, they can retract from the conversation (Moyaert 2019:213). People who do not believe in the set holy book can be dismissive of the narratives in the book when they do not correlate with their beliefs (Moyaert 2019:213). Therefore, holy texts might be an explosive subject in the first steps of religious education. This being said, holy texts are essential in teaching and learning religion. Most of the writers of holy books used narratives to educate people about religion (Carr 2013:12; McGrath 2019:11; Gottschall 2021:91; Gottschall 2012:loc 1467). This is not to say that the works are regarded as fictional by the believers of the set religion but instead written in narrative form (Carr 2013:12). Narrative is an effective way of teaching people how to act and impart moral and ethical concerns (Carr 2013:12, 13). Therefore, holy narratives teach people how to act and believe within religion and construct an alternate reality (Gottschall 2012:loc 1474).

Furthermore, as stated earlier, sacred religious texts hold a high authority within some religious communities (that do not follow oral traditions). Scriptural reasoning, for instance, can be a valuable tool for interreligious learning (Moyaert 2019:210; Sukdaven 2018:1, 2). Therefore, the scrapping of holy books in religious education is not being proposed. It is being proposed that religious representation in protagonist characters in narratives, not in their nature religious (popular culture narratives), be investigated as a point of interest for religious education. Furthermore, the noticing of religious concepts like symbols within narratives is encouraged. A healthy curiosity toward concepts embedded in narratives can lead to lifelong learning. The same can be said for constructs like myths. Myths form part of religions, especially religious narratives (Ngcobo & Beyers 2013:2). *Mythos* is the ancient Greek word that the word myth is derived from (Ngcobo & Beyers 2013:2). However, as with holy books, myths will only be discussed in this thesis if they are referred to or illustrated in digital media that was not meant to be a religious myth in itself. This does not mean that myth as a narrative has no academic significance. Instead, it is just beyond the scope of this thesis and can be an interesting topic for future research. Furthermore, if such a study were to be implemented, one should try not to reduce myths only to narratives of falsehoods but rather see them as part of religious experiences (Ngcobo & Beyers 2013:8).

Semi-authoritative religious narratives like sermons and books written by religious leaders that are accessible through digital technology are also investigated. These narratives are not seen as highly normative as holy books, as not all people who subscribe to a set religion will view the religious leader as authoritative. Discretion should be used as this is not always the case; some religious leaders may be seen as highly authoritative. The narratives can still be used within religious education settings if the religious leader is seen as a complete authority. Religious leaders are not immune to bias, spreading false information, and creating intolerant narratives. They have an immense responsibility, and their work has been broadcasted widely in the digital age. This being said, these works can also benefit many people if created and used responsibly. Using segments of semi-authoritative narratives can help illustrate theoretical points within religious contexts. However, the warning must be heeded that these works are confessional; therefore, they should rather not be used if there is a possibility of indoctrinating students. This type of work should be viewed both respectfully and critically, especially in the case of misinformation.

Gottschall (2021:62) discussed a principle in narrative writing called "show don't tell". He demonstrates how the human mind fills in the blanks that writers leave in narratives (Gottschall 2021:63). This method explores indirect means of getting one's point across rather than yelling it at the audience (Gottschall 2021:63). In this method, people respond better to the message than the prominent blunt concepts (Chen 2015:21, 25). Therefore, if one uses narratives that are not religious but have religious protagonists, one can use Gottschall's "show-don't-tell" concept. When narrative and dialogue surrounding religion in the digital world are often encountered, it has more to do with belief, ultimate values, and the spiritual world than reflecting blunt academic concepts (fact-based learning) (Plate 2021b:101). Digital narratives have brought many different contexts into conversation or contact with one another. However, this also gives a broader audience to religious narratives that might have been local and remote (Pratt 2013:241). The digital world, therefore, creates a larger broadcasting field than before the digitalisation of narrative.

4.5.2 Religion education and religious narrative

Narratives have been used since the beginning of humankind. One of its key objectives was to relay knowledge (Sugiyama 2021:8). Gottschall (2021:20) stated that "[...] story is a precious tool for teaching and learning. But this also makes it a perfect tool for manipulation and indoctrination". Gottschall (2012:loc 413) further emphasised, "[...] stories delight in order to instruct ". While rejoicing in knowing that narrative can be used for education, care should be taken not to use narrative irresponsibly. Mar and Oatley (2008:185) stated that responsible and engaging narratives should be used. Only using narratives with accurate information is not always possible, as misinformation and propaganda will cross one's path. Therefore, showcasing inaccurate information in a narrative may benefit a class (depending on the age group). One must, however, be sure to point out the inaccuracies, as education in the responsible use of narrative is critical (Tarant 2020:119); this includes choosing and working with narrative responsibly. Taking into account that there is not always a clear-cut line between responsible and irresponsible, so grey areas may exist. The article by Reuber (2011:7-18) illustrated how to use narratives with misinformation in an educational setting in a responsible manner.

Religious studies courses can help students develop critical thinking abilities when evaluating narrative. Students will inevitably encounter inaccurate information in their use of digital media. Religious education courses can help students develop the tools to work with these narratives and become lifelong learners. There are scholars like Valaskivi and Robertson (2022:155) who asked what information is considered responsible or legitimate. This is a complex question that cannot be resolved within the margins of this thesis. What should be stated, however, is that responsible knowledge may differ from context to context. It is the responsibility of educators not to present groups in a stagnant way. This thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context, so responsible and legitimate knowledge will depend on existing curriculums. The context of the students may have a very large effect on how narratives impact their context. For example, a country that struggles with acute Islamophobia should be extra hesitant to showcase antagonistic Muslim characters to a religious education class, as this will be anti-productive.

Educators must ensure that the narrative does not alter students' constructs irresponsibly. Mar and Oatley (2008:186) conceded that narratives do not have to alter constructs negatively but state that it is possible. Unfortunately, the wrong use of narrative can encourage immorality and reinforce prejudice and intolerance (Gottschall 2021:20; Ford 2022:311). It is essential to

see the pitfalls of narrative and engage it with caution, including fiction and non-fiction (Gottschall 2021:22). Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly clear that people struggle to differentiate between what narratives are true or false (Tarant 2020:119-120). Teaching people how to separate fact from fabrication is very important. As with religious education, narrative, if taught incorrectly, can also lead to indoctrination (Hill 2013:36). Therefore, the goal is not manipulating and indoctrinating but helping learners see the value of narrative and helping them engage their critical thinking abilities. Narratives are one of the best tools at the disposal of humans to strengthen morality and empathy, introduce different views, and build teams (Gottschall 2021:20; Gottschall 2012:loc 413).

Para-social interaction and narrative transportation are essential effects of narrative and can significantly benefit a religion education class. One can leave prejudice behind while listening to the narrative (Slater et al. 2014:445). Humanisation toward people with disabilities has been shown through analysing films such as *Margarita With A Straw* (2014) by Bose (Chopra & Pannu 2018:15, 16, 18). Another example is how acceptance has risen toward the LGBTQ+ community by using LGBTQ+ protagonist characters in narratives (Schiappa et al. 2005:98, 104, 105, 109, 110; Murrar & Brauer 2017:4). In their work, Murphy et al. (2013:8) showed that narrative can be a functional tool to better relay health information education to adults (who are not medical practitioners). Similarly, Patel et al. (2017:9, 10, 11) showcased how medical practitioners in training can gain empathy for patients through digital narrative, leading to a better bedside manner. The work of Murrar and Brauer (2017:1-10) was relevant to the current study. They showcased that minority religious groups (in this case, Muslims were the minority group, and white Americans were the test groups) within protagonist roles within a digital narrative can change perceptions positively (Murrar & Brauer 2017:1-10). They made use of the series *Little Mosque On The Prairie* (2007-2012) by Darling and Donnell to show their test subjects (Murrar & Brauer 2017:6). The positive effects of the narrative lasted even weeks later (Murrar & Brauer 2017:10).

It is possible to interact with narrative characters that would not necessarily be easily accessible in the physical world (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:557; Murrar & Brauer 2017:3). One can gain an empathetic view of the other through narrative (Nussbaum 2012:145; Mar & Oatley 2008:181); therefore, influencing constructs and predispositions or biases formed within the brain (Murrar & Brauer 2017:4). Religious tolerance can be increased if positive exposure to literary characters is used as a teaching method. That said, not all people learn the same way, and students benefit from various teaching methods (Uzunöz et al. 2018:83). The researcher

does not propose that the current systems be scrapped altogether. Instead, this thesis showcases the importance of narrative within religion education as an additional teaching tool. This does not imply that many educators do not already utilise digital narratives. Instead, this thesis serves as a guide for those who want to know more about the importance of digital narratives in religious education.

Engaging narrative characters is almost like engaging with real people (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:559; Appel & Richter 2007:117; Murrar & Brauer 2017:3). People can form emotional attachments to narrative characters, making them feel like relationships in the physical world (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:559). It is not always possible to bring in a person to have contact with a religious studies class from all walks of different religious paths (Murrar & Brauer 2017:3). However, narrative characters might engage in a class with people with different belief systems. Characters who share the views of the consumer, such as a religion, but act in a tolerant way toward others can also have a positive para-social effect on the consumer (Murrar & Brauer 2017:4). One of the functions of a narrative is to act as a simulator, practice skills like social interaction and acquire new knowledge (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:559; Mar & Oatley 2008:173). Therefore, narrative as a social simulator will make sense within a science of religion classroom. Fictional characters are often written to inspire empathy toward the protagonists, creating a better chance for learning through para-social interaction (Gottschall 2012:loc 884).

It should not be assumed that only modern narratives can increase tolerance. Pre-digital narratives like *Nathan The Wise* (2015) by Lessing, which "was written in 1779", have great potential for increasing interreligious tolerance (Beyers 2023:1-6). These classical narratives are often available as eBooks (see Chapter Five) and are readily available. Furthermore, the researcher does not discourage actual human contact with someone of a different religion. Interactions with other humans in real life can be very beneficial to religious tolerance, especially when one is not just interested in speaking but genuinely hearing what the other has to say and learning from them (Vaezi 2018:1; Tolera 2017:58). Rather, this researcher proposes that para-social interactions should also be included. Because of the simulation effect, that narrative helps one get more insight into a narrated being than an actual human (Mar & Oatley 2008:183). Digital narrative with a visual and audio representation is significant to diversity training as it can help increase tolerance toward people perceived as different (Murrar & Brauer 2017:6). This is considered against a concept such as a book that does not include visual or

audio representation. In that case, the consumer might imagine someone closer to their comfort group (Murrar & Brauer 2017:5-6).

Another critical question is how one goes about choosing narratives for curriculums. Ford (2022:304) stated that one can either start with a video game and try to find the myth therein or start with a myth and find video games that illustrate the myth. This statement by Ford may be taken even further by including narrative mediums beyond video games. The latter may work best if one is working with an existing curriculum. However, the hope is also that narratives will receive more attention from scholars as they are consumed. Therefore, the former may be appropriate in that case. Elements of religion, like symbols or myths, may be encountered within narratives without fully explaining or depicting the religion. People belonging to the religion may be depicted in minimal terms or omitted, as concepts are sometimes taken from their original context through narrative. In that case, para-social interaction may be limited. However, this does not make the narratives less valuable to a religion studies class. Through narratives with fragments of religion, students can learn to be curious about concepts encountered, becoming lifelong learners. Students should be encouraged to investigate such phenomena and evaluate if they are being used responsibly. Opinions may vary among students regarding whether a phenomenon is responsible, but the main task is to get them to engage their critical thinking abilities. This can be achieved through assignments on specific narratives that ask engaging questions.

An essential element to remember is that most humans find narratives intriguing and fun. Therefore, choosing appropriate and enjoyable narratives for the audience will play a role in its effectiveness as a teaching tool. Hegy (2023:2) stated, "Motivation is a key factor in learning". Making sure students are motivated, that they enjoy the course, and that they find it worth learning is one of the most important factors when teaching. Traditional fact-based learning is less effective in its longevity and comprehension than the effects left by education through narrative (Green & Brock 2013:336; Appel & Richter 2007:18; Murphy et al. 2013:8; Murrar & Brauer 2017:16; Gottschall 2021:59). The emotional link to the narrative is one factor that makes people retain facts longer (Gottschall 2021:59). Narrative transportation and suspension of disbelief can help religious education courses be more effective in their training (Murrar & Brauer 2017:19).

Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. (2014:557) stated that some risks involved with real-world human socialisation, like rejection, are not so prevalent within the narrative world. This is a way in which people can learn without necessarily feeling the pressure of their constructs as much as

in the physical world. The narrative simulation allows people to alter and expand their constructs in a way that may feel less threatening (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:557; Djikic et al. 2013:19). Learning about cultures and religions other than one's own, especially in the beginning, can feel threatening to one's own constructs, simulations, intersections, and affective realism. For many people, narrative can be a much safer way to learn about others. This does not mean that real-world contact should be avoided; instead, one needs to see the positive and negative results of such interactions (Moyaert 2017:16). With practice, the skill of tolerance can be developed. This will enable the person to understand that constructs, simulations, intersections, and affective realism that differ from theirs are not necessarily threatening their own.

Educators must be prepared to teach learners how to work responsibly with information found within narratives, as not all information found in narratives is good, reliable or helpful. Here, again, are the echoes of Barrett's (2018:286) call to curiosity against affective realism. Curiosity will also be a good tool against constructions created when in the mindset of narrative transportation. Does this mean one should not be transported by narrative and enjoy it? Not at all. When returning to one's simulations of the world, it is vital to allow critical thinking and curiosity about what was heard from the narrative. Information, especially at the increased rate of digital narrative, should be used responsibly and not just taken for granted. Gottschall (2021:64) referred to retrospective reflection; this is usually not a conscious process. Instead, narrative concepts are integrated implicitly within the human mind after leaving the narrative (Gottschall 2012:64). This researcher thus encourages the concept of retrospective reflection on a conscious level. By doing this, consumers can increase the value gained from the narrative and prevent bad propaganda and misinformation concepts from taking root through narratives.

4.5.3 Working Definition

The researcher constructed the following definition with the study in mind. The contours of the definition are showcased through the formatting. Therefore, the formatting should not be confused with a quote. Here follows the definition of religious narrative for the use of this thesis:

A religious narrative is a construct that is simulated by depicting religion in narrative form. Although holy texts intersect with religious narratives, the two terms are not mutually exclusive. Religious narrative, therefore, includes any depiction of religion. Semi-authoritative narratives, as created by religious leaders, are also considered

religious narratives. As these are confessional narratives, care must be taken not to indoctrinate students. Human phenomena are depicted within narratives. Religion is no exception and is often exhibited within narratives. These exhibitions can be accurate or inaccurate. Fragments of religion might also be viewed rather than entirely constructed religion. These fragments can also be used within digital narratives for teaching and learning. The depictions of religions in narratives can impact the affective realism of the narrative receiver.

This definition helps clarify a term often used within this thesis and clarifies the definition of narrative found at the end of this Chapter.

4.6 Different scholarly definitions of narrative

In this section, different scholarly definitions of the term narrative are given. This showcases scholarly opinions on the term, thereby lending a greater understanding of what is meant within academic language when utilising it. Gottschall (2021:19-20) gave the statement on narrative that can be used as a definition:

Stories function as mental tools that we use not to modify the world around us so much as the people around us. A storyteller asks, How can I sway people? How can I get their money? How can I gobsmack them with the beauty of life? How can I convert them to my worldview? How can I make them laugh so they'll like me? How can I win their vote? How can I bring them together as a team? How can I change the world? And story—fiction, narrative non-fiction, and everything in between—is the natural lever used to move an audience into harmony with these goals [...] narratives are the primary tools we use to make sense of the world.

This statement was not meant as a definition; however, it can be used as a broad definition. The statement focuses on meaning-making and the influence that narratives have. The definition takes the narrative creator and the narrative receiver into account. The statement shows the power of narrative and its function as a tool. The definition has a broad scope that has the potential to show intersections of narratives with other phenomena, such as worldviews. However, the definition may not consider all aspects of narratives, like narrative composition. van Laer et al. (2013:799) defined narrative in the following way:

We define "narrative" as the story receiver's consumption of the story through which he or she does not just read the story but also makes it readable in the first place.

This definition shows the scholars' construct of narrative versus story. The story is what is being delivered through narrative in this definition. Although this definition has merit in showing the relation between story and narrative, it is limiting in explaining what narrative is

as a construct. It furthermore begs whether story and narrative can truly be separated. Braddock and Dillard (2016:447) defined narrative in the following way:

The narrative is a cohesive, causally linked sequence of events that takes place in a dynamic world subject to conflict, transformation, and resolution through non-habitual, purposeful actions performed by characters.

The definition shows some of the characteristics of a narrative, like plot and character. It could have gone further by explaining concepts such as protagonist and antagonist. This definition does not extend to narrative function or how it impacts consumers. Green and Brock (2013:320) defined narrative in the following way:

In essence, a "narrative account" requires a story that raises unanswered questions, unresolved conflicts, and/or depicts not yet completed activity. A storyline, with a beginning, middle, and end, is identifiable.

This definition reduces narrative to plot, thereby missing many characteristics and functions of narrative. Phelan and Frow (2022:257) gave the following two contrasting definitions of narrative:

[...] theory takes as a first principle the idea that narrative is a structure or a mental model that has identifiable elements—narrator, plot, character, focalization, temporality, space, and more—and that the task of narrative theory is to investigate these elements and their modes of combination [...]

Rhetorical poetics by contrast takes as its first principle the idea that narrative is not primarily a structure or mental model but an action, a way of doing things in the world. It is this principle that underlies the (default) rhetorical definition of narrative: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purposes that something happened.

These two definitions differ significantly. The one tries to deconstruct narrative into its many different constructs. The second tries to show the purpose of narrative as information communication (discourse). Both these types of definitions show an element of narrative. Nevertheless, neither one is complete without the other. Furthermore, it shows only minimally the function of narrative without any explanation of how it works within the human mind. This concludes the section on *different scholarly definitions of narrative*. Narrative is often written about in academic work. However, many use the term without adequately defining it, making this section brief.

4.7 The working definition

This section provides the working definition of narrative to navigate the rest of this thesis. The terms used in this definition take the terms used in the thesis and their definitions into account. Therefore, it should be read in the context of this thesis and Chapter. The difference in formatting indicates the contours of the definition and should not be confused with a quote, as the researcher constructed the definition. The definition of narrative is as follows:

Narrative is a construct that is simulated in different forms. Narrative intersects with the digital world and technology (termed digital narratives). However, narrative has long superseded the digital world and is a distinctly human phenomenon at this time in history. Therefore, narrative intersects with most human constructs, such as emotion, morals, ethics, justice, good, evil, us-versus-them, day-to-day tasks and relationships. It furthermore intersects with different human simulations, including but not limited to political-, ideological-, cultural-, and religious narratives. Common phenomena found within narrative include characters (protagonist, antagonist, neutral, anti-villains, and anti-heroes), plot (problem, resolution, us-versus-them), discourse, fiction and non-fiction. However, narratives may omit some of this structure and are not limited to them. Narratives can range from passive to active.

Narratives may have the following effects on the human mind: simulation, transportation, sympathetic pleasure, empathy, escapism, para-social interaction, suspension of disbelief, cultivation, persuasion, identification, retrospective reflection, active and passive participation, trigger memories, and plot prediction. These are not the only effects narrative can have on the human mind. Furthermore, a phenomenon does not have to trigger all these effects to be considered narrative. Narratives can be blunt or can use subliminal messaging. Narratives can have both accurate and inaccurate information. Narrative may contain misinformation, conspiracy theories, propaganda and counter-narratives. The digital divide can impact who receives narratives and how well-equipped they are to check if the information is accurate. Narrative can have a significant effect on one's affective realism. It can influence constructs and simulations in the physical world. It can impact how different groups and their intersections are perceived. Narratives are usually aimed at specific target groups regardless of their intent. Narratives can be both beneficial and destructive in multi-religious and multicultural societies. Ensuring the responsibility of both the narrative creator and narrative receivers is upheld is paramount.

The definition designed for the thesis is broad. The broadness of the definition is functional within the current study.

4.8 Chapter themes

The following themes were addressed in this Chapter:

- Factors to consider (SQ1; RG8; PC11)

One of the significant things that educators should consider when utilising narratives in education settings is narrative theories. Narrative theories explain how narrative works within the human mind and show its function toward humanity, therefore showcasing why narrative is essential and should be taken seriously. Narrative theories can be added to coursework, especially in tertiary education. The narrative theories that were discussed in this Chapter included (i) simulation, (ii) transportation, (iii) sympathetic pleasure, (iv) escapism, (v) para-social interaction, (vi) suspension of disbelief, (vii) cultivation, (viii) persuasion, (ix) identification, and (x) retrospective reflection. As new theories and understanding of the human mind emerge, educators should expand on these concepts in class settings. This can be taken further by illustrating theories to students through assignments.

Students can be asked to keep a log of the narratives they consumed in a specific period (week, month, semester). Alternatively, specific narratives can be given to students to engage with once a week if a more controlled environment is desired. The theories mentioned are just examples, and care must be taken not to overwhelm students; not all of these theories need to be used for them to be effective in enlightening students on narrative theories. Students can be asked to report what they could potentially learn from the simulations (narratives that they consumed) by looking for specific phenomena like religious groups and religious or (in)tolerant phenomena (e.g. ritual, myth, symbol, spirituality, secularism, nationalism, fundamentalism, extremism, terrorism, Islamophobia, Antisemitism and minority-majority relationships, to name a few). This can make students aware of the amount of religious and (in)tolerant narratives around them in their daily narrative consumption. This can train students to become lifelong learners through narratives.

While logging the narratives, students can be asked to rate specific aspects of narratives out of five. This can include how much transportation they experienced during the narrative. Students can be asked to rate how sympathetic or empathetic they felt toward characters in the narrative that they consumed. Students can be asked to rate their para-social interaction experiences and overall identification with the characters. Students can be asked to rate any potential cultivation

or influence to reflect on whether this has a positive or negative effect on their pro-social experience of the world. Students can be asked to explain how they feel the narratives differ and are similar to reality. By reflecting on these concepts, students may engage in a conscious retrospective reflection. Students can be asked to report whether they used narratives for escapism purposes and if they felt more or less transported when using them for escapism. This can help students understand their relationship with narratives better. These are just some examples; educators are urged to use creative ways to incorporate narrative theories into assignments.

Narrative composition is one of many factors that educators can consider when utilising narratives within educational contexts. For this thesis, this included (i) Character's protagonist and antagonist, (ii) Plot, (iii) Passive and active narrative, (iv) Discourse, and (v) Fiction and non-fiction. This can be utilised both within class settings or as part of instructions for pre-class reading and assignment questions. Specific narratives can be used to illustrate these points to students. Character can play an essential role in the understanding of narratives. Therefore, educators can ask questions regarding the characters to help students analyse the narrative. This can involve asking students to identify characters (e.g. protagonist, antagonist, anti-villain or antihero). Students can, after that, analyse what makes the characters likeable or unlikeable. In a religion education class, choosing narratives with religious phenomena is vital. Students can be asked how us-versus-them phenomena are illustrated.

Furthermore, students can be asked how the characters influence their understanding of the phenomena (a religion or fragment of religion). Students can be asked to identify the thematic concepts connected to characters that may cause caricatures and stereotypes (if present) that might have harmful consequences in the physical world. Furthermore, any concepts the character intersects with can be used as an analysis point of interest (as found in the definition). Character and plot are deeply entangled with one another. Students can be asked to identify essential elements of plots that influence the phenomena being studied. Students can then be asked to identify harmful or helpful concepts embedded in plots that may assist or inhibit tolerance and humanisation. Students can, for example, be asked to analyse an event that contributes to specific emotions toward a character (e.g. sympathy, empathy, remembered emotion). Students can also be asked to analyse whether plot twists were plausible and how this influenced the studied phenomena. Furthermore, any concept that the plot intersects with can be used to analyse the plot (as found in the definition). Asking students if they would

change something in the narrative composition if they were creative editors can also engage their critical thinking abilities.

Active and passive narratives may affect individuals differently, as they may impact transportation. By asking students to rate transportability in the narratives they consume daily, they can learn what narrative impacts their transportability more. This can be different for each individual. However, higher transportability means more cultivation and, therefore, a more substantial effect on the affective realism of the consumer. If students know what narratives have greater transporting potential for them, they can evaluate the narratives more critically in their conscious retrospective reflection. One of the factors that students can be asked to consider is discourse. How does the discourse within the narratives influence how specific phenomena are viewed? Furthermore, discourses are often very contextually bound; something can be considered offensive in one context and not in another. How does this impact how narratives are understood? Students can be asked if narrative creators acted in good faith or if they should have known that something could have been considered offensive. Furthermore, the different intersections (as found in the definition) with discourse can create questions, e.g., how does the discourse influence the emotionality of the narrative?

Educators should highlight memetic and synthetic concepts in fiction and non-fiction. This can be achieved by giving students narratives as part of an assignment after fact-based learning in class. After the fact-based learning, they should be able to see mimetic and synthetic components in the narratives. Giving the students a more fictional and non-fictional work will be ideal. This will help them to see that mimetic and synthetic components are found in both. However, this will all be contextually bound to curriculum themes and the available narratives. Narrative and religion both have the potential for indoctrination. Educators need to consider this. Non-confessional religious education is the focus of the thesis, always seeking to educate and never to indoctrinate or teach confessional education (the two terms are not mutually exclusive). Therefore, instructors should always work critically with digital narratives and ensure that the students engage critically with the narratives.

- Digital narrative as a creative source (SQ5; RG5; PC6)

Students are utilising digital narratives in their daily lives. What narratives are consumed may differ and may depend on the digital divide. More on different types of narratives can be found in Chapters Five and Six. Regardless, the narratives that students utilise daily can be used as part of assignments for creative teaching material. This can primarily be accomplished through assignments and reports. Educators can use specific narratives to create a more controlled environment (in and outside of class). Educators should consider different misinformed narratives within education settings (misinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda). In doing this, educators must be sure that students understand why the narratives are misinformed and how the content creator uses them to manipulate the audience. It is equally as essential to utilise counter-narratives, as bland facts may not always be as effective.

Narrative compositions can simulate real-world beliefs, such as typecasting certain groups in antagonistic roles. Furthermore, students can have para-social interactions with protagonistic narrative characters, hoping for a positive pro-social interaction between students and the narrative protagonist. Para-social protagonist interactions can benefit religious education classes and potentially reduce prejudices. Plots and discourses within narratives may play a significant role in understanding groups and religious phenomena. Furthermore, making students aware of their transportability may impact how they view narratives in the future. Making students aware of both memetic and synthetic components in fiction and non-fiction can help them develop critical thinking abilities. Furthermore, curiosity about religious phenomena (fragments of religion) may be a resource for lifelong learning. Thereby, students learn through the simulations of narratives rather than just looking at bland facts.

- How religious studies and media studies can benefit each other (RG4, PC7, PC8, PC9)

Religious education can benefit digital narrative consumers by teaching people about narrative theories and making them conscious of the information available around them. This is one of the ways narrative and religious studies can benefit each other. Narrative theories can be critical thinking tools, and religious studies gain creative teaching methods. Narratives and the physical world influence each other (for better and worse). Breaking narratives into different components can help showcase this to religion education students. Religion is often (although not always) one of the themes of conspiracy theories and propaganda. This situates religious studies in a unique position to educate people on these narratives. Furthermore, as religious education usually aims to create better functioning tolerant societies, and these harmful narratives often seek the opposite, it is essential to take on the task. If religious educators utilise

both positive and negative narratives to teach people how to use them responsibly, narrative users can benefit from religious education. Explaining concepts such as negative bias to classes may be beneficial as propaganda and conspiracies utilise this to spread their messages.

People can learn from narratives and religious education. However, combining the two creates a more potent teaching tool. Fact-based learning is essential but can be complex and abstract. Learning through narratives can make complex phenomena more understandable. However, narrative learning may have fragments of concepts and not showcase full simulations. Therefore, fact-based learning also benefits narrative education. Students will inevitably encounter narratives with embedded topics of religion. Making students aware of both the positive and negative information is beneficial. If students become more aware of the information in the narrative, they can begin to ask more questions. If one can motivate students to be curious and ask if what they receive through the narrative is accurate, they can learn from true information and make sure that misinformation does not negatively affect their affective realism. The other benefit is the "safety" of learning while suspending disbelief. This can help positively alter students' construct without having the pressure of interreligious interaction with a human in person. The emotionality of narratives can lead to emotions such as empathy toward groups other than one's own. The variation in teaching methods between fact-based and narrative learning may benefit students as individuals learn differently.

- The responsible and ethical use of narratives (SQ2, RG2)

Conspiracy theories, propaganda and misinformation often utilise concepts such as threats to specific ethics as part of narratives. Thereby, the narratives want to evoke a response from the narrative receiver where "they" are perceived as a threat to "our" concepts, simulations, affective realism and intersections. Therefore, showcasing these concepts to classes and tolerance theories showing that differences do not imply threat can be beneficial. The benefit lies in that the students may be less prone to fall prey to these narratives. Furthermore, sympathy and empathy play an essential role within the normal human emotional range and the functioning of societies. Narrative consumers can have an empathetic and sympathetic response to narratives. This can be very positive when a narrative that may humanise others is utilised. However, it may be detrimental when sympathy and empathy are used to manipulate and create strong us-versus-them phenomena. Therefore, students must learn to recognise these effects from narratives and evaluate their emotional responses.

- Critical thinking abilities and digital narratives (SQ6, RG3, PC5)

Narrative theories may be a tool that can help students practice critical thinking. This can be accomplished by having students think about how specific narratives impact them in narrative theory terms, as discussed under some of the previous themes. By breaking narratives down into specific compositions, the different parts may be studied to analyse the whole. Encouraging students to think of narratives this way can activate their critical thinking abilities.

- Tolerance and the responsible use of digital narratives (SQ7, RG6, PC4)

Tolerance can be increased through positive encounters with para-social interactions with different groups through narratives. Furthermore, highlighting harmful stereotypes and negative plots can help students not negatively change their affective realism when they encounter such narratives. Encouraging curiosity about religious fragments found in narratives can help students become lifelong learners. Through these simulations, better understanding and tolerance may arise.

- Narrative quantity in daily use (RG1, PC1)

Narratives form a big part of human lives and are even more prominent and accessible through the digital world. People do not necessarily consciously consider the mass amount of narratives they receive daily. With this comes the need to use narrative with discretion and in a responsible manner. The number of available narratives may not seem strange to new generations as they grow up with narratives available at the touch of a button. Creating assignments that make students aware of the mass amount of narratives they encounter daily may be beneficial. However, access to digital narratives is still new, considering long and extensive human histories. Students may not have access to the same resources, which needs to be considered (digital divide). By asking students to evaluate the narratives they consume in the form of reports or assignments, they can become more aware of the number of narratives they experience daily.

- Content creators (SQ3, RG7)

The different effects of narratives on the human mind can be immense. Educators can ensure that students become aware of this impact by showcasing narrative theories in educational settings. This can encourage students to consider the information gained by narrative in a more serious light. Furthermore, students may be content creators as well as content receivers, especially as part of internet narratives (see Chapter Six). By making narrative creators aware of narrative theories, they may be more aware of the responsibility of creating narratives. Humans are responsible for the way they perceive reality. As narratives in their different

components may impact how reality is perceived, narrative creators should consider the potential impact of different narrative components on content receivers. Individuals may be transported more in specific narratives, which will be contextually bound.

- The creation of content (SQ9, PC10)

If religious studies professionals want to create responsible digital content, they can consider narrative theories to assist in the process. If religious studies professionals wish to create responsible content in the form of narratives, narrative compositions need to be considered for them to have the best possible impact. It will benefit religious studies professionals to stay well informed on the circulation of conspiracy theories, propaganda and misinformation. By being aware of what is circulating, counter-narratives can be created to lessen the potential harm the narratives can cause. The amount of conflicting information available to consumers can make them feel overwhelmed. It may ease the process if they have reputable places to go and check information, such as university websites; for this to be possible, universities should publish content that is accessible and understandable for the general public.

- Interpretation of narratives (SQ4)

When scholars evaluate narratives for articles or classes, different narrative theories may be considered to assist in the analysis. For example, if a favourable narrative character is present, para-social interaction may be utilised or pointed out. Alternatively, if a narrative received good ratings, it may indicate good transportability (this may not always be the case). Working creatively with narrative theories can help illustrate the vital influence of narratives. Furthermore, narrative compositions should be evaluated critically by educators; this can include both positive and negative elements. Religion education specialists can create catalogues of religious phenomena found in narratives and write articles on the phenomena. This can assist other educators in finding relevant narratives for existing curriculums.

- Well-informed or ill-informed digital narratives (PC2)

Narratives are not always created with good intent. Conspiracy theories, propaganda and misinformation exist and are available on digital platforms. These narratives often contain references to religion (not always). Understanding that these narratives are not always well-informed on religion is essential, instead, they seek to further specific ideologies or use specific groups as scapegoats. It is essential to note that these narratives often have thematic, synthetic and memetic components to further their cause. It should be noted that less important

misinformation may occur without the intention to harm. Conversely, counter-narratives seek to counter the harmful narratives that circulate.

- Providing new definitions to add to the ongoing conversation of scholarly definitions (PC13)

The following definitions were constructed by the researcher for use in the Chapter and thesis: (i) *Character*, (ii) *Us-versus-them*, (iii) *Plot*, (iv) *Passive and active narrative*, (v) *Discourse*, (vi) *Fiction and non-fiction*, (vii) *Technology* (viii) *Digital narratives* (ix) *Misinformation*, (x) *Conspiracy theories*, (xi) *Propaganda*, (xii) *Counter-narratives* and (xiii) *Religious narrative*. All these definitions contributed to the understanding of narrative and the creation of the definition of (xiv) *Narrative* for use in the thesis. This concludes the Chapter on *Narrative*. The following Chapter discusses *Digital entertainment*.

Chapter Five: Digital entertainment

In this Chapter, digital entertainment is discussed; for the use of this thesis, this includes (i) *Books in electronic mediums*, (ii) *Filmography*, (iii) *Video games and virtual reality*, and (iv) *Music*. Furthermore, (v) *The use of digital entertainment in religious education* is discussed. This involves a short segment as the thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context, and many aspects will be contextually bound. Lastly, (vi) *Chapter themes* give a general outline of how this Chapter contributes to the overall objective of the thesis. Digital entertainment can affect humans' affective realism; therefore, the responsible utilisation of these different narratives is essential. The different forms of digital narratives can potentially act as a teaching resource. However, each medium has different aspects that must be considered to facilitate its utilisation. The digital divide, for example, can impact the utilisation of these mediums in different ways within education settings. When considering different mediums, the balance of responsibilities may shift between content creators and content receivers. In Chapters Seven and Eight, examples of narratives that simulate religious and (in)tolerant phenomena are given; these narratives include the mediums discussed in this Chapter.

5.1 Books in electronic mediums

This section explores eBooks and audiobooks as simulations of books in electronic mediums. This section contains a *discussion*, *semantics*, and the *working definition* of books in electronic mediums.

5.1.1 Discussion and Semantics

Books have been a prime source of information and narrative for much longer than the existence of the digital world (Valentine 2012:viii). The written word had evolved from "clay tablets to e-books" (Valentine 2012:viii). In ancient times, it would have been a limited educated class who would have been able to read and write (Valentine 2012:13). Trying to pinpoint when most people (in a global sense) would have had access, and the ability to use literature might not be as easy as one would think, as human societies have a complex history with literature and literacy (Valentine 2012:ix). Valentine (2012:112) stated that:

Beginning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, there was an explosion of technological developments in printing and paper manufacturing that encouraged cheaper production of books, magazines, and newspapers.

The digital era superseded the era of high technological print. The digital era makes accessing and spreading digital information such as books more effortless than ever before (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:5). Valentine (2012:viii) described eBooks as a book "stored in a digital cloud

and available on an e-reader is the epitome of portability". Digital books are lightweight and portable, making them easy to access in different situations and easily accessed online through streaming services (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:6; Rizal et al. 2022:201, 211, 213). Audiobooks are the recorded replica of the written version (Warsihna et al. 2021:138). The most common technologies used for eBooks and audiobooks are tablets, kindles, computers, and cell phones (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:3, 6). The ease of portability and access may be an advantage in education settings, as the internet may not be needed after the initial download, and many different devices may be used to access the medium.

eBooks can often adjust text size, font, and screen brightness (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:6), making it customisable to consumers' needs. Furthermore, highlights, notes, and searching within the book may all be benefits of using eBooks (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:7). Audiobooks have the added benefit of utilisation while multitasking and speed adjustments are also advantageous (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:7-9). The performance of the narrator, however, can increase or decrease the likeability of a narrative, much as acting would in films (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:8). Audiobooks are gaining popularity against their visual counterparts (Singh & Alexander 2022:678; Rizal et al. 2022:203; Colbjørnsen et al. 2023:17). The popularity of one narrative over another can be taken into consideration by educators, as this can increase the likelihood of successful implementation. However, narrative preference may be influenced by context and individual preference. Narrative consumers often choose more particularly when using books because of emotional, time and energy constraints than when utilising shorter narratives (Mar et al. 2011:818-819). People who consume books, rather than other shorter narratives, may have a higher social, emotional, and moralistic impact from the narrative (Mar et al. 2011:829). This might be explained through more significant narrative transportation and para-social interaction that last over time. It would be the difference between having coffee with someone or getting to know them over weeks.

With books, one needs to participate more actively in one's mind than against mediums with more audio-visual content (Mar et al. 2011:821; Mar & Oatley 2008:186). Audiobooks may thus have fewer such effects than text-based eBooks, as they have a vocal aspect (Rizal et al. 2022:204). However, much interpretation from the brain is still needed to supply visual transportation. The narrative receiver thus has a very active role in contributing details left out by the medium (Bezdek et al. 2013:409, Gottschall 2012:loc 157). Consumers who prefer reading will have more control over what is conceived in image and sound than those who prefer more audio-visual content. Therefore, this medium may be detrimental to diversity

training situations, where the character may be imagined closer to what the reader is used to, for example, rather than someone who might speak in an accent or dress differently (Murrar & Brauer 2017:5-6). Books offer a high degree of narrative transportation and escapism (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:5-6). However, books are time-consuming, and their audio-visual counterparts are more likely to cause a quick, limited-time escape if escapism is the desired outcome (Mar et al. 2011:822). Therefore, the choice of medium may depend on the needs of the content consumer.

Moving from a hard copy book medium toward eBooks and audiobooks may be challenging and requires some adaptation (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:9-11). This can include improving listening skills to appreciate audiobooks or other "sensorimotor skills" for eBooks (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:9). Furthermore, using both mediums (audiobooks and eBooks) together can also take some adjustment as some might benefit from it, and others find it distracting (Singh & Alexander 2022:681). If these mediums are to be used, educators must consider these adjustment factors. Digital distractions may need to be mitigated more when the same digital device that is read on also contains one's communication forms like social media (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:10). However, the accessibility of digital books can lead to higher engagement time with the medium (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:12). Utilising books in electronic mediums, enables some users to mitigate toward healthy narratives (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:10-12).

However, not everyone has equal access or ability to use these technologies, as is evident from the digital divide (Ünver 2017:5). Not only a digital divide but literacy in terms of reading is also still a concern today, according to the UNESCO Institute for statistics (2023) "there are still 773 million illiterate adults around the world". Audiobooks may be a more accessible medium to people who cannot read; however, accessing audiobooks may still require reading in some form. Audiobooks may assist people who struggle with reading, such as people with Dyslexia (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen 2022:8; Singh & Alexander 2022:679; Cahill & Richey 2015:93; Rizal et al. 2022:204). Furthermore, it can be helpful for people who do not have the time to read or do not enjoy reading. However, someone with hearing impediments may struggle to access audiobooks. Audiobooks may be a form of more accessible knowledge if people have the technology and skills to utilise the medium. Books can be a source of good and positive information; however, they can also be a source of misinformation (Valentine 2012:viii).

Fact-checking ideas that are unknown in books is recommended. People write books, and all humans have some form of bias. Biographies, autobiographies and memoirs are types of books

thought to be only fact-based. However, the medium has more in common with fiction than a person's real-life story (Gottschall 2012:loc 193-201). For instance, clear-cut protagonists and antagonists are usually present within the medium (Gottschall 2012:loc 1953). Biographies have tended to bring fact and fiction together from very early on, as can be seen in historical biographies of early scientists focusing on works from the 17th century (Segre 2021:207, 208, 209). Writers may often add cultural cliches and religious trends to impress the importance of a person via their biographies (Segre 2021:210); facts are often mixed with myth, fiction and legends (Segre 2021:208, 229). This might include, for instance, the importance of a person's birth or early genius (Segre 2021:210). The problem is that most people would take up biographies and memoirs as pure facts. However, these types of books may be used to illustrate the theory of curricula toward lived religion within education settings. It is, however, essential that the synthetic and memetic be communicated to the class.

Religion in non-fiction can include semi-authoritative writings from religious leaders. The word semi-authoritative is used, as not all people of a set religion would necessarily agree with the religious leader. Furthermore, these texts are usually not seen as holy texts like the Bible, Quran, or Tanakh. However, they have a measure of authority because religious leaders wrote them. Religious leaders have a further reach than ever before. These books may assist many people around the world. The impact of these narratives is enormous if they utilise strong us-versus-them sentiments and even hate speech against others. This is not to say that they cannot profess their faith. However, modern leaders carry a global responsibility that the previous generations did not have to consider as much. The narrative receivers may have a vastly different context from the narrative creator. Furthermore, the narrative receivers should responsibly use these texts and try to consider the writer's context. It is important to note that these narratives written by religious leaders for public consumption (non-academic) should not replace curriculums. Instead, these books may illustrate a point within a curriculum and may help with humanisation. With this in mind, educators must be careful not to indoctrinate students with these works. However, they can help bridge the gap between theoretical and real-world understanding of concepts.

Fiction often utilises real-world concepts like religion to make it more realistic. Religion may be illustrated both correctly and incorrectly. Many fictional works illustrate strong us-versus-them concepts, and they do use stereotypes. Narrative creators should focus on creating responsible content. However, as literature has grown to its extent, narrative receivers must learn to see and use narratives responsibly. By evaluating information found in narratives,

narrative consumers can ensure that one's affective realism is healthy for the context in which one is found. The reality of eBooks and audiobooks is that older content is also available via these mediums. Many classical books, poems and plays are available electronically at the touch of a button. The writers of the content cannot be held responsible for their work anymore as they are separated from current society by sometimes hundreds of years. Responsibly using this content and understanding that it was written for a different time is very important. The responsibility, therefore, lies heavy with the narrative receiver. With fiction and classical works in mind, these works again do not replace curriculums but give them colour. Where misinformation may occur, this must be pointed out to the students. Educators may also consider that different groups within one religion may use different ways of doing things or belief systems. If one encounters information that might be true of one group but not another, these concepts must be noted to the students.

Cahill and Richey (2015:92) pointed out the positive effects of using audiobooks in children's education. It is especially beneficial for students who struggle with reading; it can assist in sparking an interest in reading and a better understanding of language and pronunciation in all students (Cahill & Richey 2015:93; Rizal et al. 2022:200). It can help aid critical thinking and can positively affect diversity understanding (Cahill & Richey 2015:92). Some companies give a reduced price on an eBook if the audiobook has been purchased or *vice versa*, making joint reading and listening economical as well. Warsihna et al. (2021:137) emphasised the need for audiobooks at the University level of education, especially regarding distance learning. They emphasised the need for multiple forms of media within University learning while focusing mainly on audiobooks (Warsihna et al. 2021:137). Adding media to coursework makes a more "interactive" experience with better information retention possible (Warsihna et al. 2021:138).

Warsihna et al. (2021:139) focused more on creating audiobooks as lectures for distance learning. This is a wonderful idea and is worthy of pursuit. However, the current study focuses on utilising existing audiobooks and eBooks within religious education (narrative fiction and non-fiction). The books recommended here are more inclined to narrative than fact-based learning. A book that works well within the coursework can be chosen, or parts of books can be used to illustrate the coursework to students. If the goal is to utilise the narrative in class, parts of audiobooks may be played to illustrate a concept. If one wants to utilise a book with blended learning in mind, with the distance learning part, eBooks or audiobooks can be prescribed. What narratives will be chosen and how much is utilised will depend on the

educator, the time available, and the type of coursework. The socioeconomic standing of the institution, instructor and students must also be considered (digital divide).

5.1.2 Working definition

The researcher created the following working definition for books in electronic mediums for the use of this thesis:

Books in electronic mediums are constructs simulated as eBooks and audiobooks. eBooks are considered passive narratives but can have active components within the human mind. eBooks intersect with electronic devices, including but not limited to cell phones, tablets and personal computers. eBooks can require internet access to acquire the books but may be used offline. Audiobooks are similar to eBooks but can be accessed through audio rather than visual text. Books in electronic mediums intersect strongly with narrative and human phenomena such as religion and culture. Books in electronic mediums may intersect with but are not limited to, modern fiction, non-fiction, biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, spiritual growth books, and classical narratives. Books may be time-consuming and significantly impact the consumer's affective realism. Books in electronic mediums form part of digital entertainment.

This concludes the subsection on books in electronic mediums.

5.2 Filmography:

In this subsection, the concept of filmography is explored. This includes the *discussion and semantics* and the *working definition* of filmography.

5.2.1 Discussion and Semantics

The predecessor of the film would have been live theatre-like performances. However, this does not mean the medium of live performances was extinguished by film. Plate (2017:x) stated that:

Films were created by running a photographic substrate through a camera recorder, then developing that film, printing it, and running it through a projector that represented the scene captured by the camera.

Thereby, films were called "moving images" or moving pictures (Kozlovic 2023:2). These films started without sound or colour and were not accessible at home (Kozlovic 2023:2; Plate 2017:ix). Now, the medium is much more technologically advanced and digital (Plate 2017:x). It was made accessible on televisions in home settings, and currently, it can be streamed from most computers, cell phones or tablets (Kozlovic 2023:2). Gottschall (2012:loc 209) stated that

television is a "fiction delivery technology". As with most terms, the term filmography has some semantic entanglements. Plate (2017:xi), for example, preferred the term cinema rather than the word film. However, the word filmography will serve this thesis well as it can encompass many concepts.

Filmography has compelling simulations of the world (Plate 2017:ix, 3). However, filmography can differ in its interpretation of the content creators' and content consumers' understanding of the world (Plate 2017:12). Filmography, in its many forms, may act as a temporary affective realism shared between the content creator and the content consumer. While neither need believe in the affective realism with complete certainty, a synthetic component remains. The affective realism is put in place through narrative transportation. Filmography is entangled in several human phenomena, including "cultural, political, social, artistic, and religious technologies" (Plate 2017:xi). Filmography as a medium is visually inclined (Chiu & Chu 2019:206). However, modern filmography should be interpreted as an audio-visual medium (Plate 2017:ix). Films enable the content consumer to have a measure of escapism (Plate 2017:2), as is the case with most narratives. Escapism, in terms of film, may take up less time than a book; however, it may be more time-engaging than social media. Filmography is a form of passive content. Filmography includes news; however, this will be discussed under the heading *news*, as many mediums contribute to its broadcasting.

Reuber (2011:7-18) wrote an article titled *Voodoo Dolls, Charms, And Spells In The Classroom: Teaching, Screening, And Deconstructing The Misrepresentation Of The African Religion*. This was written in the context of the USA. The article by Reuber (2011:7-18) gave examples of how narratives in different forms, especially those focused on film, were incorporated into classes to teach both media literacy and a course on voodoo as a real-world concept. Reuber stated that the religious practice of voodoo, as found in New Orleans, is often stigmatised in modern media, including novels (e.g. "*Voodoo Season* (2006)") and films (e.g. "*The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1987)") (Reuber 2011:7). Reuber suggested using these media forms in class when teaching curriculum that includes Voodoo. She specifically suggested that the film "*The Skeleton Key* (2004)" be used, as it can simulate the concept of voodoo to students while also showcasing some of the modern misconceptions of the religious movement (Reuber 2011:7). Reuber suggested using non-fictional illustrations such as photographs of symbols and rituals be used in tandem with fiction and fact-based learning (Reuber 2011:10-12).

In another article, *How To Use The Pop-Screen In Literary Studies* Reuber (2010:25-41) demonstrated how film could be used within a class to demonstrate Freudian theories. Reuber

demonstrated this through the film "*Secret Window* (2004)". The film gives a simulation of Freud's theories that often involve theoretical, abstract concepts such as repression, dreams, super-ego, ID and ego (Reuber 2010:25). Reuber (2010:25-41), utilised narratives in class and engaged the students mainly through individual analyses (by the students) and class discussions. Reuber (2010:26) used a combination of fact-based learning and media analysis. Barnhouse (2023:1) wrote an article titled *Sex, Politics, Religion: Teaching Challenging Medievalisms with Becket (1964) and The Lion in Winter (1968)*. This article showcased how to use film in undergraduate programs on religion in medieval times. The article was written in the context of the USA. Barnhouse (2023:1) suggested using the "films *Becket* (1964) and *The Lion in Winter* (1968)" to demonstrate "medieval sexuality, politics, and religion". These films can challenge commonly held conceptions often held by students, for example, that the period was "strictly hierarchical and inescapably oppressive". These fictional films have inaccuracies that form part of the analysis in class discussions. The primary teaching method included watching and analysing the films through writing exercises, class or group discussions (Barnhouse 2023:2).

Kozlovic (2023) wrote an article titled *The Cinematic Christ-figure: From Everyman to Antihero-antichrist*. This article was written from an Australian point of view. Kozlovic (2023:2) pointed out the use of film in educational settings; however, the article seems to focus more on confessional religious education. Kozlovic (2023:2-4) focused on religious sub-texts that can be seen in films, specifically on Jesus figures that can be seen through these sub-texts. This article did not focus on one such simulation of a Jesus figure but on multiple films and forms (Kozlovic 2023:4). Knauss's (2020) book *Religion And Film: Representation, Experience, Meaning* focused on film and religion. This book was written from a USA point of view. This book can be used as a potential resource for identifying religious concepts (e.g. rituals and values) for educational purposes (Knauss 2020). It can also act as a resource for the history of the evaluation of religion in film. Examining film and religion is vast and new, and much work is still to be done in the field (Knauss 2020:2). Different individuals and their convictions may impact reactions to films and their content (Knauss 2020:3). It is essential to understand that a multi-religious class might have differing opinions on the same narrative, which may lead to interaction and debate.

Filmography includes other live performances, such as religious instruction (e.g. sermons), which are often recorded and can be repeatedly broadcasted. These may be available on social media sites like YouTube or broadcasted through filmographic streaming services. The reach

of these life performances is immense as they reach local and global consumers; the content creator's responsibility is heavily burdened. Content consumers should be urged to consider the content creators' context and evaluate the information received. If sermons are utilised in education settings, it should be noted that these narratives are intended to be religious rather than commenting on or reflecting religion. As with religious books, these are semi-authoritative narratives and do not necessarily reflect a group's full religious conviction. Furthermore, it should be stated that religious leaders are not immune to bias, affective realism or the spread of false information. By evaluating the narrative created by religious leaders, the consumers may encourage a healthy affective realism for their context. These narratives may be used cautiously to simulate some of the curriculum content as this may breach the theoretical understanding of a simulation of real-world beliefs. However, it is essential not to indoctrinate through these narratives, and critical evaluation is needed.

Documentaries for the sake of this thesis will include historical, scientific, and biographic documentaries. When it comes to historical concepts, one can expect dramatised versions focusing on problems of the time rather than a historically accurate concept of the everyday lives of ordinary people (Gottschall 2021:115). Documentaries that are constructed responsibly can increase tolerance and understanding of the other (Sakr & Steemers 2022:291, 300). A balance must be found between how religions are the same and different in documentaries showcasing humanisation in the process (Sakr & Steemers 2022:296). When working with living subjects, a balance of power between the crew and the people being documented must be considered when viewing documentaries (Sakr & Steemers 2022:292). Ashraf (2020:214) made the following statement:

The discourses in documentaries are not a mere reflection of reality, but a form of constructing reality with the aim to suit the needs of documentary film.

As with most narratives, one needs to avoid making the subjects (if one works with other cultures and religions) a token or seen as exotic. To help avoid these problems, co-participation in the creation process is essential for documentaries (Sakr & Steemers 2022:293). Furthermore, the word "pseudo-documentaries" is used for films using a documentary style; however, these documentaries are not entirely unbiased and contain more synthetic than memetic components (Stein & Salime 2015:379). Documentaries can be classified as both active and passive narratives as interactive documentaries are becoming more of a reality (Aburghif 2022:35). Interactive documentaries may be more useful when working with individuals who prefer active narratives like games and do not find passive narratives engaging

enough to engage their attention for extended periods (Forceville 2017:225). Documentaries can be used within religious education settings where appropriate within the curriculum. Making students aware of power relations and biases that can be present in making documentaries is of great importance when the medium is utilised within education settings.

Stand-up comedy is a form of filmography that sometimes utilises religious humour and is usually deemed a dark comedy because of its probability of offending (Hawari et al. 2022:44, 50). It is often seen that comedians use symbolic language within their performances (Hawari et al. 2022: 50). Stand-up comedy should also be explored and analysed for the implications on the audience and the possible social-cultural concepts that might need to be addressed. Humour tends to comment on issues within society that are frequently ignored. When teaching a class on similar material, utilising these digital narratives as part of the class and class discussion can be helpful. Filmography also includes animated content. This can be suitable for both children and adults within educational settings, with the use of discretion. It should be noted that animations may be more appealing to children than adults and should especially be considered when working with children with Autism (Martins et al. 2020:3098) in an educational setting. Segments of animations should not be excluded entirely from educating adults if an applicable narrative section should occur. However, one should be very careful not to integrate entirely age-inappropriate narratives. Crosthwait (2020:182) stated:

In this section I wish to convey two aspects regarding the potential of animation: firstly, its ability to transcend and negate issues of verisimilitude and realism, and secondly its highly effective capacity to invoke emotional responses in audiences [...] Watching animation places us in a comfort zone separated from realism/naturalism. Generic and medium expectations precondition us to treat the fantastic and surreal as routine (but not necessarily mundane).

The transportability and emotive response from animated films make them good tools for teaching and learning. Furthermore, animated documentaries are also a reality, whereby animation as a medium is not just lent to fiction (Ehrlich 2021:20, 21). The fact that animations are often associated with children's content and fiction may make it less likely that people will evaluate the narratives for their factual value (Ehrlich 2021:21). Regardless, a critical analysis of how concepts are simulated is of great importance (Ehrlich 2021:31, 32, 36). Therefore, it should not be disregarded altogether when educating adults. Understanding contextual culture is needed in each education scenario to ensure it will be an effective tool in a specific context.

Series also forms part of filmography. Sitcoms with religious content have been shown to help propagate greater religious tolerance (Murrar & Brauer 2017:10). In educational settings, full episodes may be prescribed if time allows. However, a series takes more time than, for example,

a film, an excerpt of a film or series, or a short film. This needs to be considered when looking for narratives to assist curriculums. Educators can encourage students to watch narratives that may increase humanisation outside the curriculum. Reality television alludes to real-world people with real-world problems; it is highly dramatised and primarily fictional (Gottschall 2012:loc 209). In other words, although some of the concepts on reality television shows are real, like the people, the script is written up, fictionalised and the content is often edited and directed to create specific effects (Gottschall 2012:loc 2221; Blouet 2019:281). Students should be aware that not all reality television information is always helpful and may contain stereotypical and wrong depictions of people based on specific aspects such as race and religion (Blouet 2019:276). Reality television and social media are often linked as people comment on episodes and follow their favourite programs (Blouet 2019:280-285). The article by Blouet (2019:273-285) encourages using social media and reality television as educational tools to promote critical thinking and lifelong learning. The article focused on race rather than religion; however, the two concepts intersect and should be transferable.

Short films have been shown to work well as an advertising strategy and educational tool (Chen 2015:21). Narrative transportation plays a significant role in whether a short film will be successful (Chen 2015:21). Short films are ideal for educational settings as they are compact and not necessarily as time-consuming as their counterparts. Longer narratives have the added benefit of possible better narrative transportation and longer para-social interaction. What medium will be most helpful will depend on time constraints, curriculum, resources, and fair use of the medium. Many groups are depicted with biased and stereotypical viewpoints in filmography. Putting a person of a specific nationality, religion, sex, or ethnicity in a type cast antagonistic role can help enforce negative biases. If people are aware of these typecastings, they can use conscious retrospective reflection to ensure that the content creators do not fuel negative biases. Much responsibility lies in the hands of content creators. However, content consumers are the majority. Putting control and responsibility only in the hands of the few, potentially influencing and manipulating the many, is dangerous. Therefore, educating the general public on the responsible use of narrative is very important.

Filmography as a medium is often analysed for its religious content. This can be seen through the book *A Matrix Of Meaning: Finding God In Pop Culture* (2003) by Detweiler and Taylor, although they go beyond only filmography. The website and book series *Theology, Religion, And Pop Culture Series* (2017-2023), edited by Harwell et al. is a large book series that works with popular culture and religion. Harwell et al. (2017-2023) put a significant focus on

filmography, although they do focus on other media, such as comic books. The book *Antisemitism In Film Comedy In Nazi Germany* (2021) by Ashkenazi focuses on films in Nazi Germany. The *Journal Of Religion And Film* (2013-2023), hosted by the University of Nebraska, boasts many publications on religious phenomena and film. Much work still exists to analyse and showcase how film can be used as a teaching tool. The resources that are already available can act as inspiration for religious educators. Filmography as a medium is not complex to insert into learning environments, given that the technology is available, therefore considering the digital divide. Parts of films can be inserted into the class presentation, or if there are options for blended learning available, parts of filmography may be utilised online. It can, therefore, be part of class debates or assignments.

5.2.2 Working definition

The researcher constructed the following working definition of filmography for the use of this thesis:

Filmography is a construct simulated by passive narrative given through audio-visual content. Modern filmography can be enjoyed through streaming services and is accessible as opposed to its predecessors. Filmography can intersect with movie theatres, televisions, cell phones, tablets, and computers. An additional satellite or internet connection may be needed to access the medium. However, it may be downloaded and utilised offline as well. Filmography intersects with film, series, life-streamed performances (on non-social media platforms), and animation. Many platforms, such as Netflix, Amazon, and Disney Plus, are available for streaming. However, these are only some of the major streaming sites; many more exist, which may vary significantly from context to context. Filmography is deeply entangled with narrative (fiction and non-fiction), and therefore, it intersects with human phenomena such as religion and culture. The use of filmography can affect the user's affective realism. Filmography as a medium forms part of digital entertainment.

This concludes the subsection of filmography.

5.3 Video games and virtual reality

Video games and virtual reality are considered in this subsection; they are grouped together because they are very active narrative mediums. This section gives a *discussion and semantics* and *the working definition* of video games and virtual reality for this thesis.

5.3.1 Discussion and semantics

Gottschall (2012:loc 3015) described video games as "[...] increasingly story-like video games that allow a player to be a character in a virtual reality drama". Horbiński and Zagata (2021:271) made the following statement about video games: "Video games constitute complex technological systems that combine numerous spatial, physical, and social issues". This statement can be taken as a definition. One of the interesting aspects to note is the term social issues. This can denote any social-cultural aspect of human interaction that has been written into games. There is a considerable difference between video games and virtual reality versus other narratives because they are very active narrative forms. Knutz et al. (2012:3) made the following statement:

Compared to drama or the world of film, one can say that in film one "lives with the hero" whereas as in gaming "you are the hero". And the player always plays the leading role: He or she takes a privileged and unique position, from which she creates her own game experience. The player is not any longer an observer (or reader) of a dramatic story - she gets a role assigned in it. And in that way the player transmits her intentions into the game world.

Through this quote, it is clear that games simulate a form of affective realism in which the narrative receiver finds themselves as a character. The human mind predicts what will happen if different courses of action are taken in video games (Ford 2022:307); these predictions are seen as part of affective realism (Fridman et al. 2019:3). The realities that narrative creators construct are not necessarily a full representative of reality; instead, they create a framework of what is allowed in set reality and what is not (Ford 2022:307). Mythology is one of the many building blocks used to form these realities (Ford 2022:309); it should be stated that this can expand to religion or even to ideologies in general. These mythologies affect how the content receiver interprets and understands the reality of the narrative (Ford 2022:299). Virtual reality and video games have a strong intersection. Pimentel et al. (2021:4) stated that:

VR [virtual reality] is inherently an interdisciplinary platform, informed by the fields of psychology, computer science, game studies, architecture [...]

Virtual reality usually requires a headset that transports the user into an audio-visual narrative that can be viewed from all angles (Bujić et al. 2020:1408; Pimentel et al. 2021:2). Virtual reality incorporates videos that may have interactive qualities or at least a 360-degree view (Chan et al. 2021:3) and video games. The narrative receiver can often control the movement of what is viewed. This was facilitated previously through a mouse or controllers (Chan et al. 2021:3, 4; Pimentel et al. 2021:4). New technology can use one's actual movement, like walking and talking, and is adaptable to people with different abilities (Chan et al. 2021:3, 4;

Pimentel et al. 2021:2). The availability of these new technologies is not always a reality on the market (Pimentel et al. 2021:4). Virtual reality is classified as an immersive and active visual-audio medium (Chan et al. 2021:3, 11). Virtual reality can have much the same effect as real-world experiences and, therefore, has the probability of high transportation levels (Pimentel et al. 2021:2; Chan et al. 2021:12). Different levels of immersive experiences are possible through virtual reality depending on how active the person needs to be for the narrative to continue (Shen et al. 2021:2).

Video games and virtual reality can be very interactive and convincing narratives within education systems (Moallem & Raffe 2020:305). Martins et al. (2020:3099) stated that children who have Autism might learn with more ease from games. Furthermore, children and young adults who have Autism have been shown to learn with more ease through virtual reality (Park et al. 2019:5; Kandalaft et al. 2013:34). People living with Autism can struggle with social ques such as emotions; virtual social interactions have shown to increase their social learning (Park et al. 2019:5; Kandalaft et al. 2013:34). Learning social concepts through narrative can lead to non-threatening alteration and expansion of concepts that can take place during narrative transportation and para-social interaction (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:557; Djikic et al. 2013:19). The fact that narratives are often fun and one can learn without something being overly educational also assists with the learning process (Martins et al. 2020:3096). For younger children living with Autism, learning from digital narratives is aided by the fact that they can consume the same narrative repeatedly, which assists with learning (Martins et al. 2020:3096).

However, learning through games and virtual reality has potential in many different groups. "Serious games" are created with specific less-entertainment purposes in mind like "health, education, economics, industry, military and politics" (Majid et al. 2020:367). Serious games do not always focus enough on narrative and fictional concepts that may aid learning (Knutz et al. 2012:1). However, this does not mean the medium is devoid of entertainment or narrative; instead, this was not the primary purpose of their creation. Virtual reality has been utilised for training people in workplaces, especially involving physical tasks (Shen et al. 2021:1). Video games and virtual reality have also been shown to help educate people with illnesses on their condition and improve their mental health and physical symptoms in the process (Majid et al. 2020:367-375). Virtual reality may have various effects on the narrative receiver's affective realism. Virtual reality has positively affected mental health (Chen 2015:1; Park et al. 2019:1-9). Furthermore, utilising avatars in virtual reality that differs from the user bias toward other

groups can be lowered (Praszkier 2016:8; Peck et al. 2013:779). This was demonstrated by testing implicit bias after utilising dark-skinned avatars on light-skinned people (Peck et al. 2013:779, 787). Furthermore, religious tolerance can increase through games designed explicitly for the purpose (Chakim et al. 2023:1, 4). Video games have been shown to be an excellent tool for cultural sensitivity training among medical professionals (Pimentel et al. 2022:1, 7).

The article by Johnson (2018:235) indicated how virtual reality can be used within religious studies classes to illustrate course material practically. This article was written in the context of the USA. The students could utilise virtual reality technology at the library, as the narratives were used primarily as assignments (Johnson 2018:232). The virtual reality videos were gathered from YouTube (Johnson 2018:232). Virtual reality videos were seen as a positive, immersive teaching tool (Johnson 2018:233, 234). One of the most significant limitations is content availability (Johnson 2018:235). Virtual reality immerses individuals into simulative situations (e.g. religious rituals) and places (e.g. holy places) they would otherwise not have experienced or would have been expensive to achieve (Johnson 2018:228, 229). In other words, it allows students to experience the phenomena taught in class, thereby increasing their understanding (of phenomena) and empathy (toward a person or group) (Johnson 2018:228, 229). As with most other narratives, students can engage with the medium more than once, which can assist them in focusing on different aspects of the simulation (Johnson 2018:230). While immersed, students do not have to feel the social pressures accompanying an in-person visit toward a group different from theirs (Johnson 2018:230). The assignments were created to foster empathy and critical thinking (Johnson 2018:231). The videos that were utilised are listed in Chapter Seven.

Virtual reality also includes "Immersive journalism" and has been shown to increase empathy and support of human rights above that of other two-dimensional mediums (Bujić et al. 2020:1407, 1418). Virtual reality includes virtual journalism, where content receivers can, through the headset technology, be transported to the "virtual scene" (Bujić et al. 2020:1409). These concepts can be utilised in educational settings; however, teaching students that these narratives can have these effects is also essential. Furthermore, students should critically evaluate information, as video games and virtual reality, like most narratives, can have misinformation and stereotypical views (Myers et al. 2023:56). The moral influence of video games has been questioned, especially on their impact on youth (Gottschall 2012:loc 1634; Sestir & Green 2010:273; Kissel 2021:177). The larger conversation on the moral implications

of video games can be viewed in the article by Kissel (2021) as an in-depth conversation is beyond the scope of the thesis and can be an interesting topic for further research. How much a person is influenced will depend on many factors, only one of which is identification theory (Kissel 2021:183). Furthermore, cultivation theory, the amount of transportation, and time spent in the narrative can all play a role. Evaluating the information gathered and actions performed in video games and virtual reality is just as necessary as any other narrative to maintain a healthy affective realism.

The amount of experience that narrative receivers have with virtual reality may impact the effectiveness of the narrative as a teaching tool (Shen et al. 2021:11). As expressed earlier under *eBooks and audiobooks*, new technologies may have a learning curve before they are beneficial and comfortable as educational tools. Furthermore, games developed for education should not be overtly focused on information only but should pay close attention to narrative and emotion as this will have a more significant empathetic effect (Aylett et al. 2006:44; Knutz et al. 2012:1). The current thesis focuses on using existing narratives; however, it does not discourage the creation of narratives created as educational games. Välisalo et al. (2022:578, 580) showcased that non-educational games have the potential for content, interpersonal and motor skill learning, regardless of the user's intent. However, not all users will purposefully learn the same concepts from narratives (Välisalo et al. 2022:580, 583). In the study conducted by Välisalo et al. (2022:578), the intent of the narrative receivers was not necessarily to learn but rather to enjoy games as entertainment. It is essential to teach people to engage with the narratives critically and evaluate the information they receive. This being said, not all games have strong narratives, and this needs to be considered when educating people on the medium. By doing this, people will gain the ability to become lifelong learners (Välisalo et al. 2022:578).

From a social perspective, it has been shown that interacting together in a narrative world can engage and grow relationships (Knutz et al. 2012:9). Future research should investigate the impact that gameplay can have on interreligious relationships and whether this can be utilised as an educational tool. Inequalities and social disparities may be showcased in games to strengthen understanding and empathy for marginalised groups (Myers et al. 2023:60, 68, 96). However, this is not always the case, as stereotypical and offensive concepts may arise in the medium (Myers et al. 2023:56). Active narratives like video games are more profitable than their passive counterparts (Gottschall 2012:loc 2149). Virtual reality is becoming more affordable and, therefore, more utilisable in households (Chan et al. 2021:1). Video games and virtual reality can still be expensive and not accessible to all (Pimentel et al. 2021:3). The digital

divide needs to be taken into consideration before attempting to implement this technology into educational settings. However, these are increasingly popular active forms of narrative entertainment. The need to showcase these narratives' responsible use as they emerge is significant. As technology becomes more accessible and affordable, it should be considered a viable teaching and learning option.

Virtual reality products are not yet at their highest potential for public use (Pimentel et al. 2021:3). Many studies have been done, for example, on mental health and other positive effects of virtual reality, yet the technology is mainly used for entertainment and gameplay (Pimentel et al. 2021). Using video games and virtual reality in educational settings will depend on context and the digital divide. Students may not have personal access to the technology that can facilitate the medium. Similarly, institutions may also not have access to these technologies yet. It can be utilised if computer labs are available and some games can assist with curriculums. Of all the mediums, however, this might be one of the most complex to work in educational settings because of time and resources. If time and resources are a problem, but using videos is possible, it is advised that platforms such as Twitch and YouTube be used. On these platforms, viewing how other people play games is possible. These videos may be given as part of assignments so students can evaluate the narratives and the concepts they portray. Alternatively, it can be utilised as a film to illustrate concepts and stimulate class discussion. Therefore, the use of these mediums will vary significantly from context, resources, time, and curriculum needs. It should, however, not be disregarded for future innovation and teaching tools as they can be beneficial mediums to utilise.

5.3.2 Working definitions

The researcher created the following working definition for video games for the use of this thesis:

Video games are constructs simulated as active, audio-visual digital narratives created for entertainment. Narratives in video games can be elaborate and well-written or very minimalistic. Video games usually need a host technology to function; they, therefore, intersect with cell phones, computers, tablets, the internet, game consoles (e.g., PlayStation, Xbox or Nintendo), and game controllers. Some games depend on the internet, but not all require this. Video games can intersect with many human phenomena; the more complex the narrative, the more human phenomena will be encountered. These intersections can include, but are not limited to, religion and culture. Video games as an

active narrative affect the user's affective realism to a greater or lesser degree. Video games fall under the category of digital entertainment.

The researcher created the following working definition of virtual reality for the use of this thesis:

Virtual reality is a construct simulated through active, highly immersive audio-visual narratives. Virtual reality is very host-dependent and needs more technology than most mediums. Virtual reality intersects with the internet, audio-visual headsets, controllers, and motion-detecting technology. Virtual reality intersects with games, videos, and socialisation. Virtual reality may thus intersect with many human phenomena, such as religion and culture. Virtual reality may vary in how active the narratives are; however, it may range from more active to less active. Virtual reality can affect narrative consumers' affective realism. Virtual reality falls in the realm of digital entertainment.

This concludes the subsection on video games and virtual reality.

5.4 Music

In this subsection, music is discussed. This section contains a *discussion and semantics* and the *working definition* of music.

5.4.1 Discussion and semantics

Music is easier than ever before to acquire, as it is available digitally (Maidaniyk et al. 2023:289). Humans do not have to go to a store, concert, or socio-cultural or religious event to enjoy music; they can enjoy it in the comfort of their homes. Like other digital narratives, music is consumed in mass amounts in contrast to what previous generations accessed (Maidaniyk et al. 2023:290). On a theoretical level, music has many components, including but not limited to composition, rhythm, tempo, melody, cords, word setting, and harmony (Robert et al. 2023:19, 24, 25, 31). The main focus of this section is not on the theoretical concepts of music; instead, the focus lies on the end product that content receivers enjoy. Music can be appreciated with little to no knowledge of theoretical concepts. However, one must not see this as a commentary or diminishment of the importance of musical theory.

Not all music follows a narrative, but much is narrative to the core (Gottschall 2012:214). The narrative consumers of music often have a strong emotive reaction to the medium (Johnson-Laird & Oatley 2022:1, 3, 5). Narrative transportation has been noted in music and is termed "musical absorption" (Faran et al. 2021:1527). One of the effects of transportation is strong

emotive responses (Faran et al. 2021:1527; Maidaniyk et al. 2023:287). Music as a narrative is strongly linked to memory and often invokes past emotions and places (Crosthwait 2020:189; Faran et al. 2021:1535). Music has the same benefit as audiobooks, as it can be used while conducting other activities (Maidaniyk et al. 2023:293). Furthermore, music benefits one's mental health and can act as a mode of escapism (Maidaniyk et al. 2023:293). Music can be part of narratives within multiple intersections of human life, such as culture, politics, ethnicity and religion (Pereira et al. 2022:8; Dionyssiou & Douskalis 2022:130). One can, therefore, also learn about different contexts through music (Maidaniyk et al. 2023:293).

Music is not just an essential narrative on its own but can also act as an enhancer of other narratives like filmography, video games and internet narratives like social media. Crosthwait (2020:179-190), for example, showcased its importance in animation. Bente et al. (2022:1, 2, 10) showcased the importance of music as a suspense builder in films. Music can play a significant role in the success of advertising (Mirvaisi & Kaffashpoor 2023:1). Music should be seen both as an essential narrative in its own right and an enhancer of other narratives. Pointing this enhancing effect out to students is vital to interpreting narratives. Music is a complex phenomenon. The words used within music are not always evaluated and processed (while taking into account that not all music has words). Music is an easy medium to utilise in educational settings, as it is very easily accessible and does not take much time to integrate into a class or assignment. However, some concepts discussed in this section need to be considered.

The question then is, how much does musical narrative influence human concepts? Especially if that narrative is listened to over time and time again. Johnson-Laird and Oatley (2022:9) stated that poetry and music can affect how one views oneself (identification and cultivation theory). Furthermore, music has been shown to affect one's mental well-being and can be experienced spiritually (Faran et al. 2021:1526, 1527, 1536; Lauzon 2020:30-37). Music can have a meditative effect on the human mind (Inglis 2023:2). Music has been shown to both induce and reduce drug cravings for people living with addiction (Pasqualitto et al. 2023). Thereby, music shows a myriad of effects on humans' affective realism. Music can form part of myth and ritual (Hill 2019:163). Furthermore, religious concepts like myths transmitted through music may have ritualised functions (Hill 2019:164). Music often forms part of religious rituals and religious pilgrimages (Bănică 2016:460; Heimarck 2022:43). Music (if present) has a significant effect on the people who partake in the ritual or pilgrimage, as it has a way of binding communities and the narrative evokes human emotion (Bănică 2016:460, 462, 463; Heimarck 2022:54, 55).

Music can aid cognitive processes like learning (Maidaniyk et al. 2023:288). Music and music videos have been shown to aid religious education scenarios (Murrar & Brauer 2017:17). Gottesman (2017:1, 4, 7, 10, 14) stated that by utilising music creation in educational settings, students can find their voice and hear different voices (the other). This can relay students' experiences and help to empower their voices while equally empowering the voices of others (Gottesman 2017:1, 4, 7, 10, 14). Music has excellent meaning-making potential for both narrative creators and consumers (Lauzon 2020:33). Gottesman (2017:1) stated that writing music can:

[...] develop critical thinking, and to reimagine their role in society as active participants and stakeholders in transforming conflict.

This thesis does not explicitly work with creating narratives in a class setting. The focus lies within already existing narratives. However, creating music can strongly affect critical thinking and humanisation (Gottesman 2017:1, 7, 9). It is, therefore, not discouraged; further research and creative approaches are always encouraged. Concepts like music can help facilitate a better functioning society; however, it is part of the solution, not a quick fix and can have its own challenges (Gottesman 2017:13, 14). Gottesman (2017:16, 19) further emphasised the need for students' voices to be heard beyond the classroom through social media platforms. Shaping musical narratives and hearing different voices may lead to a healthier affective realism, empowerment, and a better understanding of lived narratives. Partti (2017:267) made the following statement:

Although digital technologies have enabled new possibilities for creative activities and interactions that reach beyond geographical, cultural, and various other borders, merely bringing people together and exposing them to diversity will hardly generate tolerance and respect.

Music's ready availability online and its ability to be readily shared emphasises the responsible use of digital media and the encouragement thereof within classroom settings (Partti 2017:257-276). However, the question must be asked if educators are equipped to work with media as a part of their curriculums (Partti 2017:263). Pereira et al. (2022:9) put much emphasis on using music from different communities within educational settings. Therefore, one does not just utilise majority groups, instead also equally valuing minority groups' music (Pereira et al. 2022:9). When using minority music, one must guard against presenting the music as "different", "exotic", and "tokenised" (Pereira et al. 2022:9; Dionyssiou & Douskalis 2022:132). Furthermore, a minority group's music should not be viewed only from the lens of the majority group but valued in its own right (Pereira et al. 2022:9). By translating the article into the context of religious education classrooms, one would find it necessary to use music

from different religious traditions. The respect with which the music is to be handled is equally essential. As students outside the context may see it as strange or exotic, it is the educator's job to showcase neutrality and value within all musical narratives. Western music still dominates curriculums in many different contexts, which does not lead to the inclusive value of different musical traditions (Ehrlich & Badarne 2020:37, 38, 40, 41, 44).

Music and identity can be very intertwined (Dionyssiou & Douskalis 2022:128; Yang 2021:3). Therefore, the concepts of identity and intersectionality of identities need to be taken into consideration within multi-cultural education settings (Dionyssiou & Douskalis 2022:128:3). Furthermore, how these musical identities form within different contexts are significant (Dionyssiou & Douskalis 2022:128). Dionyssiou and Douskalis (2022:131) made the following statement:

Music has a special role to play in order to unite people, helping them to experience and understand their identity as 'lived experience'.

Cembranel et al. (2023:54) also pointed toward music as a phenomenon of lived reality. Furthermore, music is not just an individual narrative but has a way of becoming a community narrative (Dionyssiou & Douskalis 2022:132; Yang 2021:3). The narrative creators have a significant burden, as the narratives that they create become narratives of communities. Furthermore, communities need to be aware of the influence that music as narrative has on their identity. Music's immense amount of sway needs to be stated within educational settings. Music as narrative is interpretative; the narrative receiver's intention with the words of a song may differ entirely from the content creator's intent. Thereby, communities may interpret music differently from the narrative creator; this may also be significantly influenced by the context of the narrative receivers (Dionyssiou & Douskalis 2022:132). Individuals and communities must understand that they influence how musical narratives are formed and understood. The narrative creators' and receivers' interpretations, reactions and intentions should be considered in educational settings (depending on the education level).

Musicians have a greater responsibility than ever before to create responsible content. Since most music is available in many contexts, this responsibility may differ from the pre-digital era. Content receivers have so much music that they can enjoy. This comes at the price that these narratives were not necessarily created for their context, and the original context is not necessarily considered (Maidaniyk et al. 2023:289). The narratives, therefore, need to be analysed to ensure that they do not negatively impact one's affective realism. This does not mean that music may not be enjoyed; instead, thinking about the information received through

music may be necessary in the phase of retrospective reflection. Music can work well as a teaching aid in class, as part of an assignment or as pre-class preparation. Many higher education classes have pre-reading exercises where students can prepare for the class. Digital media, like music, is easily shareable over applications that facilitate distance or blended learning.

5.4.2 Working definition

The researcher created the following working definition of music for the use of this thesis:

Music is a construct simulated through audio narratives and traditions primarily created for entertainment and socio-cultural purposes. Music is simulated through myriad complex tones, rhythms, instruments, and vocals that may differ significantly from context. Some music can contain little to no narrative; this will be seen in the context of words present in the music and the words' capability to compile a narrative. When music contains words, weak or strong narratives may be present. These narratives may be inspired by non-fictional occurrences in the physical world, personal experiences of the author, or fictional narratives that the author created. When non-fictional occurrences inspire narratives in the physical world, they are a reflection of a larger narrative. Therefore, the context of the narrative behind the music may be an important point of investigation.

Music as a medium can be very active or very passive. Narrative receivers may join in with the narrative by singing, dancing, enacting the music through instruments or having a strong emotive response. A person may be passive with music as narrative, without much interaction or involvement, such as background music in public spaces. This will depend on the content receiver and the context in which the music is received. Music is not limited to the digital world; however, the digital world has spread different musical traditions globally. Music falls under the category of digital entertainment. Music can intersect strongly with communities, their narratives and lived experiences; however, it is not limited to it. These communities may include but are not limited to nations, cultures and religions. Music can be accessed digitally through the radio, applications and streaming services, such as YouTube, Spotify, and Apple Music, to name a few. The internet may be required for access to be obtained; however, content may be downloaded and enjoyed offline. Music affects humans' affective realism, with or without a strong

narrative. Music may also influence the effectiveness of other digital narratives, thereby significantly impacting the users' affective realism.

This concludes the subsection on music.

5.5 The use of digital entertainment in religious education

How digital entertainment can be utilised within class settings will depend on the educator, the narrative, and the curriculum. Therefore, how a narrative is utilised can be very contextually bound. As the thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context, some ideas will only be discussed briefly. Three general layers exist within education settings: (i) pre-class reading, where the student prepares for the class; (ii) in class, which can be online classes or in person; and (iii) post-class, which involves homework, reflections and assignments.

Students can be given narratives as part of their pre-class reading. The narrative can be provided with specific instructions for students to reflect on particular aspects, for example, narrative composition (e.g. character, plot, active and passive narrative, discourse, fiction and non-fiction). It can involve their experience of the narrative as found in narrative theories in Chapter Four (e.g. transportation, simulation, cultivation, identification, emotional engagement, and para-social interaction). Furthermore, segments of religions can also be used as focal points (e.g. ritual, myth, symbol, and spirituality). Depending on the medium, particular focus should be drawn to, for example, audio or visual aspects of the narrative, as this may impact how the narrative is interpreted. Students can be asked to evaluate any emotional engagement they experienced while consuming the narrative. These concepts can equally apply to assignments.

After the students utilise the narrative as part of a pre-class reading, the narrative can then be used throughout the class to showcase the phenomena in the narrative. The narrative acts as a type of hidden curriculum (when utilised in pre-class reading) that becomes part of the normal curriculum (when utilised and evaluated in class). The concept of a hidden curriculum rests upon soft skills such as critical thinking and attitudes toward others that are gained with the curriculum (Basyirah et al. 2024:51). A hidden curriculum is much the same as the “show don’t tell” concept as suggested by Gottschall (2021:62) (discussed in Chapter Four). Educators can potentially encourage humanisation through para-social interaction before fact-based learning by utilising narratives within pre-class reading. Humanisation, tolerance, and critical thinking are the soft skills that are implied in the hidden curriculum. Educators can showcase accurate and inaccurate information within the narrative (that was given in pre-class reading) when discussing it in class. Students can be asked what they observed and what they already know

about the phenomena. Focus groups may be utilised within the class where students can discuss their findings within the group. Otherwise, the narrative can be used as a class discussion.

Educators can use fact-based learning within class settings while working segments of narratives into the class to simulate the concept at hand. Asking questions about the narrative can lead to class discussions and debates. Focus groups may be utilised within these instances. With complex phenomena, educators can ask students to split into groups, and a class debate may help students understand different perspectives of phenomena. In these instances, educators may need to manage time constraints and ensure equal time for both sides of an argument. Students should be encouraged to consider how the medium portrays the specific phenomena. Some classes may need more encouragement to interact, which may be very contextually bound to year groups or individuals, as some groups or students may be more shy or outgoing. Encouragement may include asking specific questions. Examples can be found in the following paragraph; however, what questions may best serve the situation may be contextually bound.

Students can be asked to identify terms or concepts they did not understand or are unknown to them. Students can be asked to identify specific character traits and how they influence the understanding of the narrative. Similarly, students can be asked how the narrative's plot influenced their understanding of phenomena. From fact-based learning, students should be able to discern concepts such as the accuracy of the narrative. One could ask how they can make the narrative more accurate if they were a creative editor for the narrative (Reuber 2011:17). That is, if the students feel the narrative segment needs to change. They can be asked to reflect on what they gained from the narrative, encouraging conscious retrospective reflection. Students can be asked to reflect on specific symbolism within narratives. Students can also be asked to point out biases, caricatures, and tolerant or intolerant concepts within narratives, creating a potential for them to see these phenomena in the future.

The type of questions that can be asked may depend on the medium used. Some mediums like music and audiobooks are audio-forward. With that in mind, questions will be very sound-centric (e.g. asking what students heard). This question should be elaborated on as music, for example, may use very symbolic language; asking students how the words can be interpreted may be necessary. With audio-visually inclined narratives like filmography, video games and virtual reality, both the audio and visual aspects need to be considered. Asking students questions on how lighting, clothing choice, posture and other visual elements influence the understanding of the narrative may be of great importance. As seen under the subsection music,

background music may significantly impact how people view narratives. If music is present in audio-visual narratives, it can be a point of interest for questions about the narrative.

Narratives can be used within post-class settings as part of individual assignments, group assignments, or short reflections. If the narrative lends itself to it, students can be asked to compose a definition of specific phenomena (e.g. ritual) found within the narrative to practice that academic skill as part of an assignment. Digital entertainment can showcase the lived religious experience after fact-based learning. For this to be possible, strong protagonist characters from the desired group must showcase the needed phenomena within the narrative. Furthermore, when working with segments of religion, students can be given narratives that showcase the phenomena. They can be asked to illustrate how these concepts are simulated, whether done with the original religious intent, secularly or through implicit religion.

Implementation will depend on digital resources available to the institution, educator, and students (digital divide). Downloadable content that is not internet-dependent may be advantageous at institutions that do not have internet connections or where internet connections are unstable. Audiobooks, eBooks, and music may be very accessible if downloaded, and one only needs a laptop, smartphone, or tablet to play the audio. If the class is large, it may be necessary to have additional speakers so that everyone may hear; this may be available at the institution. It should be noted that cheap portable Bluetooth speakers can have excellent quality and should be viewed as a viable option if needed. Filmography, on the other hand, can be accessible if a screen and projector are available. A tablet may be used for small classes if projectors are not an option. The film or clip may be downloaded before class if the narrative provider (e.g. streaming service) allows the function, thereby mitigating the need for internet use in class if this is problematic.

If blended learning is utilised and projectors are unavailable, video clips may be sent via appropriate channels as part of pre-class reading to discuss the narrative later in class. Because of their high resource need, video games and virtual reality may be more complex mediums to implement in education settings. Not only are audio and visual devices such as speakers and some form of a screen needed, but additional devices are also needed, including but not limited to gaming consoles, virtual reality glasses, and controllers. Because of this complexity, implementing these narratives is not always possible (digital divide). Many institutions have computer labs that may assist if computers are needed, and some institutions have virtual reality devices that can be utilised.

5.6 Chapter themes

This section showcases how the Chapter connects to the overall themes of the thesis:

- Factors to consider (SQ1; RG8; PC11)

Educators should consider that digital entertainment does not just involve one medium. Educators are urged to note the cultural norms of the society where they work, as specific mediums may find more traction in one society and less in another. Using relevant mediums may increase the chances of transportation and the enjoyment of the narratives, increasing the learning potential. This being said lesser-used narrative mediums should also be encouraged. Educators may need to estimate learning curves and adaptations between the mediums. One of the factors that educators need to consider is that different mediums require different resources. Educators should consider how the digital divide may impact their specific context on a personal, institutional and student level. Some mediums, like virtual reality and video games, are much more resource-demanding than mediums like audiobooks and music.

The different mediums may have various benefits in terms of transportability, active and passive narrative, and triggering of different senses. It may be worth using resource-demanding mediums if they are available. One should, however, consider that less resource-demanding narratives can be equally beneficial depending on the individual. The size of the class (number of students) and the resources available may harshly impact what narratives can be used and to what extent. The digital divide may lead to high resource-demanding narratives not being used. The digital divide may impact where the mediums are used within education settings, for example, as part of pre-class reading, in-class or post-class assignments. Some assignments may involve students needing access to digital technologies and the literacy to use them. Ensuring students have access to the resources they need to accomplish a task is very important, even in societies where the digital divide may be less prevalent.

Educators teach individuals, even in a group context. Individuals may differ in their preference for digital entertainment and what narrative may cause better transportation. With this in mind, educators are urged to use more than one type of medium to cater to individuals. This may assist in the effectiveness of classes regarding learning if narrative theories like transportation, simulation and cultivation are considered (see Chapter Four). If students are required to utilise narratives on their personal devices, distractions such as social media may make them less prone to concentrate on the task (see Chapter Six). Educators may need to consider how different forms of narrative intersect; this can include, for example, music combined with other

audio-visual content. These intersecting narratives may influence how the information is viewed and received. The strong ties people may form to a narrative need to be understood and explained to students; this is especially true for narratives like music but may occur in different mediums.

- Digital narrative as a creative source (SQ5; RG5; PC6)

The portability of modern digital technology makes it a resource that can have great potential in education settings (taking the digital divide into account). Digital entertainment that is not resource-demanding, like books in electronic mediums and music, that can be downloaded beforehand can assist, especially in places where the digital divide may be prevalent. Not only can digital narratives be a creative resource, but throughout the Chapter, it seems that neurodivergent students (students with symptoms of Dyslexia, Autism and ADHD) may benefit from using these digital resources. The true impact of digital narratives on neurodivergent and neurotypical students can be an interesting topic for future research. Digital narratives may contribute to different teaching styles that can help most students. Different teaching styles may include making fact-based learning more engaging by simulating the taught phenomena. Alternatively, narratives can be used as part of active learning activities, such as debates or class discussions. However, discussing different teaching styles in detail is beyond the scope of the thesis. A detailed account of how narratives can be utilised with different teaching styles can be an interesting topic for future research.

The subsection *The use of digital entertainment in religious education* gave some practical ideas on utilising digital entertainment. However, as this thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context, the section only gave some general ideas. The physical implementation may depend on the context of the curriculum and available narratives. Educators should find creative ways to implement digital entertainment in pre-class, in-class, and post-class activities (Reuber 2010:25). The age of the students may impact the type of questions that can be asked, as more abstract and engaging concepts can be used within tertiary education settings. Furthermore, the student's engagement level may impact the level of engagement the educator needs. In other words, getting an extroverted group to engage with the narrative may be easier, while a more introverted group may need more prompting through specific questions.

- How religious studies and media studies can benefit each other (RG4, PC7, PC8, PC9)

Digital narratives can expose students to people who may dress, speak and act in a manner that is different from their context. However, this is only possible if narratives with apparent human diversity are utilised. As stated under *Books in electronic mediums*, more active participation may be needed from people who consume e-books rather than more audio-visually inclined mediums (Murrar & Brauer 2017:5-6). This may have the probability of increasing transportation (depending on the individual), but people may be less prone to truly grasping the diversity found in the narrative. Audio-visual content may be resource-intensive but can also trigger more human senses to better understand the diversity in the narrative. Furthermore, these diversities may be encountered in narratives and people's everyday lives. Exposing students in religion studies classes to diversity and giving them the tools to evaluate and understand narratives can significantly impact their interpersonal relationships.

- The responsible and ethical use of narratives (SQ2, RG2)

One of the ethical concerns that may be pointed out to students is how time constraints may influence one's narrative choice. The section on *Books in electronic mediums* stated that people consider their narrative choice more carefully if it is more time-consuming. In other words, it is much faster to watch a video on social media than it would be to read a book. The longer time spent on a narrative, the higher the probability of transportation, simulation, and para-social interaction having a cultivation effect. This being said, consuming short narratives over time with similar content may have the same effect as one longer narrative (this may be a good point of interest for future research). It is critical to point out to students that all narratives may influence their affective realism and that they must consider their choices in what they consume regardless of the medium. Furthermore, evaluating what was heard and seen in a narrative may help to learn and mitigate possible adverse effects of narratives. Assessing emotional responses evoked by narratives is a significant ethical concern that should be considered.

- Critical thinking abilities and digital narratives (SQ6, RG3, PC5)

Educators should not demonise some narrative mediums and glorify others, as accurate and inaccurate information may be found in any medium. Students may have preconceived notions that specific narrative mediums may be less prone to misinformation than others. For example, it may be possible that students believe that books are less prone to bias and false information than other mediums or that specific content, like those set out by religious or political leaders, may be less inclined to bias and misinformation. However, students must learn that any narrative may have misinformation and biases embedded in it, and critically evaluating all

information is important. When utilising digital entertainment in their different mediums, it would be important to point out synthetic, memetic and thematic concepts within the narratives.

- Tolerance and the responsible use of digital narratives (SQ7, RG6, PC4)

Not all mediums are equally effective in exposing students to diversity, as seen *under Books in electronic mediums* (Murrar & Brauer 2017:5-6). If a narrative user needs to contribute much information to the narratives, as with e-books, the tolerance that may be gained from the narrative may be less effective in truly understanding diversity. Furthermore, students should be made aware of misinformation and variances in traditions. By doing this, educators ensure that narratives do not contribute to stereotypes and stagnation of ideas within students' minds.

- Narrative quantity in daily use (RG1, PC1)

The predecessors of modern narratives were less accessible and not necessarily available within people's homes. Now, narratives in their many different forms are available on demand. This constant availability creates a greater need for narrative consumers to evaluate the information found in narratives, as it constantly changes and affects how humans view, construct, simulate, and intersect different phenomena. It also affects how they perceive other humans that may not follow their understanding of the world. Furthermore, not only are narratives easily accessible, but they are also easily sharable, making the need to analyse them even more crucial.

- Factors to consider (SQ1; RG8; PC11)

Content creators are responsible for creating content that does not contain misinformation and does not perpetuate us-versus-them and negative biases. The responsibility of content creators may differ depending on the platform on which the narrative is broadcast and the socio-political context. Narrative creators may be ungoverned depending on the context, in such cases, the personal conscience of the content creator plays a more significant role. In a pre-digital era, the spread of a narrative may have gone abroad in time; however, many narratives may not have spread far from their point of origin. Today, many narratives can spread across the world in a very short timeframe compared to pre-digital narratives, influencing responsibilities. Modern narrative creators can not take every human culture, civilisation and simulation of constructs globally into consideration. Therefore, it is just as crucial for narrative consumers to consider the creator's context to understand the narrative's content. Something that, for example, may be considered offensive in one context may not be offensive in another. There is, therefore, a very fine balance between the responsibilities of the narrative consumer and the narrative creator.

The narratives spread through the digital world may also involve older and classical narratives. These narratives were not written for the modern context, and modern norms can not judge the writer, nor can the writer take responsibility for their writings as they have passed from this world long before the modern context. Modern adaptations and recreations of classical narratives need to consider their audiences. However, sometimes older works are available, for example, in e-book form, and they are not adaptations of classical narratives but rather just reproductions. Audiences need to consider the origin of such narratives and evaluate them critically. The original narrative creator may not be responsible for the modern understanding of these narratives, but narrative receivers are responsible for maintaining their constructs in a manner responsible for their context.

With this in mind, educators may want to include information about the narrative creator to better inform students on the origin of the narrative. Furthermore, asking students questions on how they think the context of the narrative creator could have potentially influenced the narrative can affect how students think about narratives in the future. Content consumers need to be made aware of trends such as typecasting so that they do not thematise these depictions in their affective realism. For example, if narratives utilise a person of a specific group negatively or violently, this may affect how people see the group. Asking students questions on the presence of stereotypical and typecasted constructs in narratives and reflecting on how this lets them think about the group or person may be beneficial.

- Interpretation of narratives (SQ4)

Religion studies professionals are urged to evaluate narratives before presenting them to students. By doing this, different aspects of narratives can be pointed out to students and questions that may lead students to such answers may be considered beforehand. This being said, students have their own context and may notice constructs and simulations that educators miss. Space and open questions should be given to students so that they may learn to explore and interpret narratives from their understanding. However, a pre-analysis may aid educators in seeing beneficial and harmful constructs that should be pointed out to the class. A pre-analysis may be beneficial if the students are more introverted and less prone to interact. Furthermore, educators can utilise such an analysis to write articles. This can be beneficial as it can help other educators plan for their classes and help expand the understanding of such narratives between educators and students. Narratives can act as a temporary affective realism shared between content creator and content consumer; this expands the concept of simulation

theory. The understanding of narratives as temporary affective realism makes the analysis of narratives essential.

- Content creators (SQ3, RG7)

Content creators must take the people and traditions showcased in the narratives seriously and treat them and their traditions respectfully. Thereby, narrative creators should not stereotype, tokenise, dehumanise, typecast, or exoticise a person or group. The best way to achieve these ideals is to work with the groups represented in narratives. It would be beneficial if religion studies professionals could work with content creators and help facilitate channels between the content creator and those represented in the narratives if such channels do not exist.

- Providing new definitions to add to the ongoing conversation of scholarly definitions (PC13)

The researcher contributed unique definitions for the following terms: (i) books in electronic mediums, (ii) filmography, (iii) video games, (iv) virtual reality and (v) music. These definitions enhance the definitions of digital narrative and, in turn, narrative in Chapter Four. Examples of digital entertainment narratives are given in Chapters Seven and Eight, and the definitions within this Chapter clarify those terms. This concludes the Chapter on *Digital entertainment*. In the following Chapter, *Internet narratives* are discussed.

Chapter Six: Internet narratives

In this Chapter, internet narratives are discussed. For the use of the thesis, this includes (i) *Websites*, (ii) *Social media* and (iii) *News*. The Chapter also gives a short subsection on (iv) *The use of internet narratives in religious education*. The Chapter concludes with the (v) *Chapter themes*. The creation of the internet has changed the behaviour of humanity considerably. Todorovic and Trifunovic (2021:594) made the following statement:

The internet has become an indispensable tool for human communication, offering an abundance of information and a great variety of applications.

The abundance of information on the internet is the primary concern when working with the internet and religious education. Bezrucka (2020:151) stated: "People seem not to realize this, in that the www.net seems to act as a new Bible". This is a very strong statement; not everyone sees internet narratives as so authoritative as their holy literature. Bezrucka also does not overstate things for everyone; the amount of misinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories available online makes Bezrucka's statement hair-raising. The narrative mediums discussed here are more dependent on the internet, yet they are not devoid of entertainment. The responsibility between content creators and content receivers may shift within internet narratives. It would be essential to showcase these different concepts within education settings. When utilising internet narratives within education, one should be clear on what specific terms mean. Examples of the narrative mediums discussed in the Chapter with religious and (in)tolerant phenomena are given in Chapters Seven and Eight.

6.1 Websites

This section discusses the concept of websites through the *Discussion and semantics* and the *Working definition* subsections.

6.1.1 Discussion and semantics

Websites give narrative creators the "opportunity to represent themselves" (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:212). This is done in a way that would have been very difficult before the digital era and that might have taken much effort and social and financial capital to achieve. Websites can have multiple functions, including "medical, educational [...] governmental", advertising (Schmutz et al. 2019:103), promotion of religious views (Golinski & Petersen 2012:244, 246), and the promotion of ideologies. Websites usually allow the content creator more creative control than the content receiver, burdening the narrative creator with much responsibility while not dismissing the responsibility of narrative receivers. Social media also forms part of

websites; however, there can be a separation between the two concepts. Websites are more driven by one user toward many users, and social media is the conversing of many users in a communication system. Some sites are more complex to classify, such as question-and-answer (Q&A) websites (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:211). These sites may function between very directed topics and information and discursive simulations between users; they may fall between websites and social media.

Social media and websites do not exist in a vacuum; the two concepts often influence one another, as one can share links to websites via social media (Guess et al. 2020:472, 475). Guess et al. (2020:472, 475) used Facebook as an example of a social media platform that has facilitated the sharing of misinformed websites. Similarly, websites often provide links to social media pages. When working with narratives in an educational setting, pointing out the different links between narratives would be essential. Websites have created new spiritual virtual spaces where users can, for example, experience pilgrimages (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:215). These spiritual spaces may not always feel as authentic to people who prefer in-person participation (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:215). These online environments may replace in-person religious practices or enhance offline communities' experiences (Pavić et al. 2017:241, 245).

Some websites cater to specific religious groups and their trading commodities, such as halal clothing for Muslims (Krisjanous et al. 2022:1125-1142). However, some non-speciality sites also cater to concepts such as halal clothing but sometimes miss the mark because of insufficient research on their target group (Krisjanous et al. 2022:1125-1142). Another aspect to consider is that information-based websites that seek to educate the public on specific matters (e.g. on health) sometimes utilise language that may be too academic for their target audience (Painter et al. 2023:5). Thereby showcasing that content creators should not just create responsible content but also comprehensible content if they genuinely want to make a difference with their information. Information found on websites may not always be limited to one theme. For instance, African American churches often utilise information regarding physical and mental health content on their pages rather than just focusing on religion with the hope of benefitting the target audience (Campbell & Wallace 2015:557-564).

Humans have also been shown to seek answers to religious questions online (Pavić et al. 2017:241). Q&A websites are available on different subjects, including religion (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:211). Unacquainted users utilise these sites to find discussions from insiders' and outsiders' perspectives (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:211). Scardigno and Mininni (2020:211) used Stack Exchange (2023) as an example of such a Q&A website with, among other topics,

religious discourses. Users who answer questions regularly on Q&A sites may get a rating that gives them a measure of authenticity (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:218). One should consider that while learning and gaining valuable information from different sources on Q&A sites is possible, they may also contain misinformation. Polarising views may be found on Q&A sites (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:218), giving users a diverse understanding or overwhelming them. However, the forms enable users to showcase their lived experiences mixed with authoritative concepts such as holy texts (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:212-228). If such sites are used within religion education classes, it will be essential to emphasise the concept of bias and affective realism that may come into play.

Websites mainly function not only in their country of origin but are often available in many countries, if not worldwide (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:212). This phenomenon of globalised information through the internet creates the problem that content creators and content receivers are not always within the same context. Websites may be very narrative-based, or they can be more information-based. However, information-based websites may still be seen as narrative, even if not blatantly obvious. Websites are often created by one or more narrative creators (characters or personas) with a specific topic they wish to promote or demote (both discourse and plot can be classified here depending on the context of the website). The topic at hand may be promoted toward a specific group or ideology; as the internet is a global phenomenon, content creators cannot just consider their target market but also what is responsible globally—making the responsibility of website creators immense. Through internet utilisation, narrative creators can often become influential without using traditional authorising concepts to be considered an authority (this may depend on the content receiver's perception) (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:214). An important point to emphasise within a class would be perceptions of authority and how the internet has drastically changed these perceptions.

Content consumers are not exempt from responsibility regarding websites. If possible (availability of information may influence this), consumers should consider the context of narrative creators. Narrative consumers should not take everything online at face value. Instead, the information needs to be considered critically and evaluated for its accuracy and possible

biases that may be embedded in the narratives. Harmful content, such as conspiracy theories and propaganda, exists online. Tarant (2020:118) wrote the following statement:

Editors of conspiracist websites are also journalists, businessmen, doctors, former elite politicians, but also small artisans, entrepreneurs, and even Christian priests [...]

Yablokov (2019:296, 305) made a similar statement regarding leaders in society (religious in different forms and political) and media specialists. People with a more significant influence have a greater responsibility for not spreading misinformation or conspiracy theories. This responsibility is not always taken seriously. Community leaders are not exempt from affective realism; they might not think the information they share is false. The list given by Tarant of community leaders and skilled people makes it easy to understand how these well-crafted, misinformed narratives can affect people. If they believe the misinformed narrative they are presenting to the world, it becomes even more challenging for the audience to resist. While considering the narrative creator's responsibility to create reliable content, it is also essential to note the narrative receiver's responsibility. Information needs to be evaluated and checked so that their affective realism is not altered negatively.

Through their pluralism project, Harvard University (2023b) gave an interesting idea of using "case Initiative", or multi-religious social dilemmas, as a learning tool in educational settings. This is a site¹⁰ worth exploring for more information on the method. They use specific case studies already designed for the purpose; however, one can go beyond their designed cases, work with different forms of narratives, and use them as case studies. Multi-religious societies often showcase social dilemmas as humans adjust to non-homogeneous communities. With this in mind, current events and contextually relevant cases may be used within education settings. How and where websites are used within education settings will be contextually bound. This will depend on the physical resources available to educators, institutions, and students. Distance and in-person learning may affect how and where websites are utilised within education settings. The available narratives and curriculum may influence how much time is spent on the medium. Furthermore, it is not suggested that websites replace current curricula. Instead, educators are encouraged to see websites as a possible teaching tool. However, this does not imply that educators are not utilising the mediums. Instead, the thesis can help inspire those wanting to know more about the subject.

¹⁰ For quick access, follow this link for the home page <https://pluralism.org/home> and <https://pluralism.org/case-initiative> for case initiatives.

6.1.2 Working definition

The researcher designed the definition for websites with the current study in mind:

Websites are constructs simulated through passive non-social media narratives using domains on the internet. These sites are usually created by an individual or entity (e.g. a business) to share information with many other entities. The targeted entities are not in a reciprocal position and can not change or create content on the site. If the site contains contact information, it can be used to contact the entity through other forms of communication, such as email. Sites that include but are not limited to websites religious and irreligious, blogs, business sites, and online magazines. Websites must be accessed through a host technology and intersect with cell phones, computers, or tablets. The internet, web browsers and search engines are also needed to access the medium. Websites are, therefore, classified under internet narratives. Therefore, multiple constructs need to be in place. Websites are at the tips of most people's fingers today. Websites can be used for leisure, promotion of ideologies, advertising, news or learning. However, websites and the functions named are not mutually exclusive or limited to these constructs. One of the main problems that needs to be remembered is that anyone can create a website that looks professional. Therefore, not all websites are trustworthy and helpful. Websites may add to content seeming to be legitimate, affecting people's affective realism.

This concludes the subsection on Websites.

6.2 Social media

This subsection gives a brief overview of social media through *Discussion and semantics* and the *Working definition* of social media for the use of the thesis.

6.2.1 Discussion and semantics

Social media refers to "online virtual social spheres" (De Vuyst et al. 2022:5) and is described as "a space without place" (Khan & Aytes 2021:14). Zeiger and Gyte (2021:358) made the following statement on social media: "In the age of selfies, snaps, likes and shares, the internet and social media have transformed the way in which people communicate". Gottschall (2021:198) defined Facebook as: "a narrative distribution platform". Social media is often used as a news platform, although much information that is not news-related is spread on social media (see the subsection titled news) (Bail et al. 2018:9216). The mixture of entertainment, personal communication, and news has the potential to confuse users on what information is

accurate and what is not, creating more opportunities for spreading misinformation (Valaskivi & Robertson 2022:155). Social media is very popular because one can paint the perfect self without constantly regulating a live persona (Slater et al. 2014:441). Social media is a convenient, cheap and reliable form of communication (Zeiger & Gyte 2021:360). How far the digital and physical are separated is complex, especially regarding social media. De Vuyst et al. (2022:2) gave the following statement on the divide between the physical and the digital:

Bodies, expressions of affect and emotions, and intimate experiences are increasingly entangled with digital media, technologies, and various technoscientific objects. The digital realm has long been celebrated for offering endless possibilities to connect with others via social media, allowing subjects to experiment with various forms of digital self-representation and self-transformation and transgress the body's offline materiality [...] This has created a striking paradox: the digital has seemingly disconnected itself from the material lifeworld while at the same time also dominating the latter.

This statement shows that as a construct, digital media and the physical world may be separate; however, as a simulation, it is not. The boundaries between the two constructs are becoming more difficult to estimate (Veldsman 2020:6; Scardigno & Mininni 2020:212). The intersection between the digital and spiritual is also complex, to the point where people may experience religion equally online or offline, depending on personal preferences (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:215). Thereby, it becomes even more complex, as the simulation of religious experience online and just interaction with religion online can be challenging to estimate as this depends on the user's intent (Scardigno & Mininni 2020:216-117). As these experiences may be subjective, individuals can be urged to evaluate how significant the effect is on their affective realism. Social media is a very active medium when considering content creators (Sarmiento et al. 2020:393). However, even if consumers do not create content, their reactions to social media through comments, likes, shares and following individuals and posts can also make it a very active medium. Some people do not utilise these functions, making it a more passive form of narrative (Sarmiento et al. 2020:393). However, the impact on one's affective realism should be noted regardless of how active or passive the consumer is.

Social media does not just involve the individual; instead, constructed communities may also be found (Syahputra & Hafiar 2019:59). Communication on social media may vary from one content creator communicating toward many content receivers (for example, Facebook or Tik Tok) or it may be more conversation based, depending on the platform (for example WhatsApp) (Paganini 2021:26-28). Power relations between narrative creators and receivers must be considered when evaluating narratives on social media. A contextual understanding of the content receiver's and content creator's responsibilities comes into play. De Vuyst et al.

(2022:1, 2) pointed to the intersectionality of digital media. Social media platforms have increasingly undermined constructs of intersectionality, only duplicating already existing power inequalities in the physical world (De Vuyst et al. 2022:3). This is seen where people who experience hate offline also experience hate online, as existing biases duplicate in the online world (Kaakinen et al. 2018:13). However, these ingroup connections online can, in turn, lead to positive support networks (Kaakinen et al. 2018:15). Baig et al. (2023:183) made the following statement:

The debate centers on whether social media primarily serves as a "safe haven" for the creation and maintenance of alternative discourses or if it serves instead as a "online amplifier" that reflects and supports pre-existing ideology discourses, which may have even more polarizing effects on public discourse.

Although discrimination is frequently encountered (De Vuyst et al. 2022:4), many policies are in place to ensure that discrimination is, at the very least, discouraged. The discriminatory patterns may have an us-versus-them attribute or can perpetuate stereotypes and negatively impact affective realism, creating intolerant societies. Social media has been shown to affect users' affective realism. Sarmiento et al. (2020:281) showed different correlations between social media use and "internalizing symptoms—depression, anxiety, and loneliness" in adolescence. Concepts like cyberbullying will also affect users' mental health (Sarmiento et al. 2020:394; Kaakinen et al. 2018:3). The effects of social media are not just adverse; these platforms can help identity formation, which can be positive or negative depending on how the technology is used (Sarmiento et al. 2020:398). Social media also has a range of other influences on one's affective realism, like advertising of goods (Mirvaisi & Kaffashpoor 2023:2, 3) and the influencing of voters (Enjolras 2014:1; Adriani 2019:12). One of the most troubling problems is violent extremist (groups and individuals, of any demographic) using social media to further their cause (Samuel 2021:183; Todorovic & Trifunovic 2021:596). Zeiger and Gyte (2021:359) made the following statement:

Furthermore, the sheer volume of terrorist propaganda published on an assortment of platforms has made it particularly challenging to contain their online presence. Despite this, there are a number of potential legislative and policy measures to address this challenge, including: blocking online content and access; filtering and removing content; empowering online communities to counter the narratives of violent extremism and terrorism; the promoting positive and alternative messages; as well as building digital resilience and media literacy [...]

More relatable content should be created to counter extremist groups, especially for youth (Samuel 2021:183; Zeiger & Gyte 2021:371). Telegram is the most popular App for spreading conspiracy theories and propaganda, as they are less proactive in removing and banning content than other platforms (Robertson & Amarasingam 2022:197). Educating students that not all

social media apps are equal in managing propaganda and misinformation is essential while not demonising them as only harmful. Thereby, educators can encourage critical thinking and the responsible use of narrative without diminishing resources that could and do have positive uses. Many religions have taken up social media platforms not to replace the physical realities but as an additional way of reaching their communities (Cheong & Ess 2012:3, 12). During the Covid-19 pandemic, many religious institutions were said to temporarily close for gatherings because of public safety from the virus (Majumdar 2022; Chukwuere et al. 2023:108; Isetti et al. 2021:1). The use of social media by religions in the pandemic included conducting "counselling (consultation), prayers, church services, offerings, and other activities" (Chukwuere et al. 2023:112). The quote is very Christian-orientated and should be adjusted as the context dictates. Isetti et al. (2021:1) made a similar statement:

Turning to faith for comfort during a crisis forced many religious practitioners to find creative ways to minister to their communities: podcasts, social media, virtual ceremonies and meditation, prayer hotlines, message boards and many other tools are being used more extensively.

The digital divide impacted the effectiveness of this strategy, as everyone does not have equal access to technology and knowledge on how to utilise it (Chukwuere et al. 2023:112). With the broadcasting of religious teachings, religious leaders reach a broader audience that cannot be read accurately (as with a live audience), increasing the chances of an unfavourable response (Hawari et al. 2022:51). Thereby, the responsibility of both the content creators and content receivers are immense. Religious leaders should not fall into the trap of a social following but should genuinely seek to connect with their communities (Cheong & Ess 2012:13). The probability of encountering other religions, their beliefs and practices has increased with the creation of the online world; thereby either increasing the risk of people becoming offended or gaining an understanding of others that can lead to greater tolerance. However, it might not be as clear-cut as the previous statement. People do not always consider that all public forms do not resonate with their religion, and there could be etiquette breaches. Students must be aware of all these different factors when engaging with social media. Concepts such as social media make the work of religious leaders (and religious people) complex as they need to navigate the spiritual, physical and digital realms (Cheong & Ess 2012:15).

Is social media a private or a public domain, or both? This depends on the user settings, as a post that is available for the public to see is considered public, whereas if a user only posts to friends or oneself, it falls more in a private domain (Brady et al. 2017:7317). Mass private messages with political and ideological propaganda have led to mass orchestrated violence

(Bezdek & Gerrig 2017:8). The responsibility concerning content creators and the platforms that enable them is a complex discussion. Who decides what is allowed, considering the global problems caused by misinformation and propaganda (Bazon 2020:8)? Can these networks be regulated, and by whom (Bazon 2020:11)? Are content creators being held accountable for their content on social media? What responsibility do social media companies have concerning their algorithms (Bazon 2020:11)? Where does the responsibility of the content consumer lie? Most platforms have a function where misinformation or harmful content can be reported. Does sending along misinformation make one culpable? These are essential questions to bring to students' attention, as conflicting parties' responsibilities may need to be considered when utilising these narratives. Japee (2023:61) stated: "Social media has become the largest ungoverned space in the world, and the power now lies in the screens of individuals".

Piotrowski (2015:53) worked with the concept of YouTube documentaries and their accompanying comments in mind. Within the comments, content receivers create new content that can be seen as an "educational dialogue" and act as "inter-personal education" (Piotrowski 2015:54, 63). Piotrowski (2015:55) went as far as to say, "Hence viewers' comments are as important to the analysis of a film as the film itself". Thereby, different people's affective realism and simulations of the world may be experienced on the topic. These different affective realisms often clash, and people express who may or may not have an opinion on the topic based on their understanding (Piotrowski 2015:55-69). One should, however, consider that not all comments are relevant, helpful, or well-informed and can even be fuelled by conflict. The sheer mass of information found within comments may also feel overwhelming to the person reading them (Japee 2023:61). The human mind cannot function as purely rational but has a myriad of biases and affective realism that work together. Veldsman (2020:11) stated:

Our successful evolutionary history is deeply driven by passions (affective dimensions such as empathy, compassion and attachment). Not only are we biologically woven together affectively (feelings, moods, emotions), but our affectations represent core elements of being a societal human being in community, in relationships.

Many factors may come into play when viewing social media narratives and their comments. Students should be encouraged to learn from comments and view them critically. However, they should also be made aware of the pitfalls of the medium, like online bullying (Oksanen et al. 2022:541-544). One of the main things to remind students of is that social media applications are usually quite a global platform where different contexts meet. Influencers are non-traditional celebrities who contracted their fame through social media (Baig et al. 2023:182). The content receivers are not necessarily in the same context as content creators;

therefore, even if the content was created responsibly, it may not be responsible for all contexts. Many people treat public social media as a personal diary. Social media is an online space where people construct their clean life story (in other words, what they want the world to see) (Gottschall 2012:loc 315). These narratives that people create about their lives are no different than informal biographies with both synthetic and memetic material used (see section on *Books in electronic mediums*). Constructing a narrative of oneself that only includes what one wants the world to see becomes synthetic and mimetic. Content consumers must consider a balance between the memetic and synthetic within social media content. The perfect lives illustrated are not necessarily as accurate or perfect as they seem.

Social media users utilise hashtags to form part of more extensive conversations through individual posts (Zuraida 2023:23). Hashtags started in 2007 on Twitter (now X (Ivanova 2023)) but have since spread far beyond their origin (Powell et al. 2023:1-3). Hashtags are often used to find information on social media, including activism (Zuraida 2023:21, 22, 23), identity, politics (Powell et al. 2023:1-3), religion and current events. One of the most well-known hashtags is the "#BlackLivesMatter" (Zuraida 2023:21; Powell et al. 2023:1-3). However, as seen in Chapters Seven and Eight, many hashtags exist, forming part of the way of navigating the complex and immense amount of information. Examples of phenomena within Chapters Seven and Eight on narratives in social media, especially narratives found on YouTube, are given. However, hashtags are provided to help educators navigate these complex systems to find information. In Chapter Eight, concepts of intolerance in digital narratives are discussed. Extremist content is ever-changing on these forms as they are reported and taken down. Therefore, hashtags can better ensure that educators can find the phenomena on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. This can also mobilise the use of new and current narratives within classrooms. Social media as a narrative is easily accessible and can be utilised within religious education settings if contextually possible.

6.2.2 Working definition

The researcher designed the definition of social media with the current study in mind:

Social media is a construct simulated through electronic platforms used for communication and socialisation and is an active personal narrative built through digital technologies. It can also be simulated by viewing and engaging with these narratives through comments, likes, emojis, shares, and hashtags. Social media usually involves many users who can create content on a platform like an application or website. This

digital technology depends on a host technology, including but not limited to computers, tablets, or cell phones. Social media usually also intersects strongly with the internet so that it can function. Social media, therefore, forms part of internet narratives. Today, social media makes communication from anywhere in the world instantaneous for the users of these platforms. Social media platforms include but are not limited to Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Skype, Tik Tok, YouTube, Signal, Telegram, Viber, Zoom and Instagram. Some of these technologies are text-based, while others enable users to send voice notes, real-time video feeds, and pictures. As these technologies are utilised by humans, phenomena such as culture and religion will intersect with these communication technologies. Social media has the potential to connect many people with various opinions across many contexts and can affect the users' affective realism.

This concludes the subsection on social media.

6.3 News

In this subsection, the concept of news is discussed. News is found on many narrative distribution platforms, so a separate section was needed to show its influence and integration. This is accomplished through two subsections *Discussion and semantics* and *the working definition* of news for the use of the thesis.

6.3.1 Discussion and semantics

News has one of the largest digital footprints of all digital media, as it occurs on radio, filmography, social media and websites; however, they are not limited only to these mediums, as they may appear in non-digital forms as well. This creates a vast influence. In the technologically advanced era, many interesting new facets emerge within news delivery. As technology evolves, different media forms are available for reporters to create engaging, immersive narratives. These technologies include virtual reality videos that create an interactive effect with the news narrative (Bujčić et al. 2020:1409). Live blogs on forms like news agencies' websites and social media simulate current events and, for example, court cases in a live fashion (Flower 2023:4; Avinesh et al. 2021:33-34). News stories that inspire a strong negative response, such as fear, are more likely to be seen as relevant by the public (Fessler et al. 2014:1-2; Schmid 2021b:572). Gottschall (2021:118) stated that news stories often lead to the readers experiencing emotions such as: "paranoia, hopelessness, and emotional deactivation". Gottschall does not intend to demonise the news by saying this but points out that negative concepts can arise from the news as a narrative (Gottschall 2021:118). Schmid

(2021b:572) similarly stated that news can desensitise people toward gore and violence or lead to "anxious, fearful or even terrorized" emotions. Therefore, the narratives created by the news, especially if the focus is overtly negative, lead to fearmongering (Schmid 2021b:572).

The researcher also does not seek to make the news out as an evil entity. Instead, there is a need to point out the struggle that news systems have to create trustworthy, relevant news and the pitfalls, such as the free promotion of propaganda. When looking at the description of emotive words used by Gottschall and Schmid, it is essential to note the negative emotions often inspired by the news. These emotions are the ideal medium to spread the adverse emotional virus that violent extremists seek to spread. When working with news as a medium in classes, questions about the emotions that students experience while consuming the narrative can be relevant, as such questions may help them explore the effect that such narratives have in the future. News (journalists) seek the negative in the world (Soroka et al. 2019:1) and twist it to the author's bias into convincing narratives (Gottschall 2012:loc 197). Researchers such as Bazelon (2020:10) pointed out that European news is generally more reliable and has less propaganda than American news. These statements show that much of the news is memetic; however, synthetic components are simulated through the biases and affective realism of the narrative creators (reporters, journalists and news editors).

Schmid (2021b:567) pointed out that there is a symbiotic relationship (however unwilling) between terror attacks and the media. The relevance of negative news, as pointed out by Fessler et al. (2014:3), is very high against a blander counterpart. News agencies find these stories to be valuable because the public responds to them, and this spikes their economic gains (Schmid 2021b:567,571; Merizalde et al. 2021:971). One of the recommendations to counter this problem is to ensure news agencies do not profit from extremist violent events (Schmid 2021b:575). However, this is an unlikely solution as the payments usually come from advertising, and news agencies will want to profit (Schmid 2021b:575). Mimicry is also a problem when reporting on violence, and this can be from rival groups or lone actors that have nothing to do with the original violent act (Schmid 2021b:573). Mimicry and recruitment fall under the term persuasion; although not all persuasion is necessarily harmful, it is overtly destructive in this case. News that is displayed visually has a more significant impact than news that is only audio or text-based (Schmid 2021b:573). News can also include peace journalism,

which can take many forms, including documentaries (Ashraf 2020:215). Ashraf (2020:215) stated that peace journalism can promote the following:

Promoting empathy and humanization, sensitizing towards proactive approach for the prevention of violence, trying to uncover all cover-ups, giving voice to voiceless, giving name to all evil-doers, highlighting sufferings of all and sundry, bringing resolution and hope.

The responsibility of journalists to work with communities, rather than stereotyping marginalised and vulnerable societies within the media, also falls within the realm of peace journalism (Freear & Glazzard 2021:1-30). Journalists need to shift their focus from "*violence-oriented journalism to conflict-sensitive journalism*" (Freear & Glazzard 2021:18). News can dictate what narratives are foremost in the minds of the public and the political realm (Schmid 2021b:572). This discourse dictated by the news has a lot of sway and responsibility. What is being done to help journalists be responsible content creators or providers? Governmental censorship has been seen as a possible solution but can lead to human rights violations, especially the right to freedom of expression (Schmid 2021b:574; Zeiger & Gyte 2021:369; Todorovic & Trifunovic 2021:598). News companies usually have rules and regulations as they are mostly privately owned, however, they are not necessarily strictly enforced (Schmid 2021b:574, 575). Fearmongering media is generally frowned upon, and humanisation of the victims and non-glorification of the violent extremists are prominent points of interest (Schmid 2021b:575). A big problem is a lack of accountability for reckless reporting (Schmid 2021b:575).

News, when working responsibly, can aid in keeping the public calm amid a potential fear-inducing event (Merizalde et al. 2021:966). Responsibly enlightening the public and reminding them of active ways in which they can help respond to the crisis can lower some of the panic responses that may occur (Merizalde et al. 2021:967, 971). There needs to be cooperation between the government and news entities in situations of crisis (Merizalde et al. 2021:970). Both entities need to ensure that effective, quick, and reliable information that is not biased is distributed calmly to help the public function within the situation (Merizalde et al. 2021:970). Not having information or an array of conflicting information can be more likely to spread panic (Merizalde et al. 2021:970). In an age of misinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda, the public must deem these two entities (news and government) trustworthy enough to see their information as reliable (Merizalde et al. 2021:970). The responsibility that news agencies have not to use fearmongering tactics to have better financial gain is immense (Merizalde et al. 2021:971). It has been shown that the abuse of news agencies has been applied

by extremists and politicians seeking to gain attention and debunk their rivals (Merizalde et al. 2021:971). Prusa and Brummer (2022:21) made the following statement on Donald Trump:

Second, Trump calls the media "scum" and "enemy of the American people", but it was precisely the media exposure (The Apprentice in particular) that facilitated Trump's election. Besides, Trump likes to attack the "vicious press" and its "fake news", but he cannot help producing countless fake news himself [...]

This is an example of the interactions between politicians and media; many accounts of political agendas and the media can be found. Stagnant constructs of religions within the media can also be found, rather than painting people as humans with multiple intersections, leading to harsh pictures of religious identities that can cause discrimination, such as Islamophobia (Banton 2011:1250, 1251). Schmid (2021b:575) stated that the significant reach of the news makes its unbiased nature improbable. The news has one of the broadest markets today, through multiple platforms, and their responsibility is substantial (Schmid 2021b:577). Many people feel that the news is an accurate form of information where they can learn about unfamiliar phenomena (Politzer & Alcaraz 2023:356). Instead, specific perspectives are given on phenomena, often in a narrative form, to create a particular understanding for the content consumer (Politzer & Alcaraz 2023:356). The fact that news is often seen as pure mimetic rather than containing synthetic and thematic elements is problematic. Students should be educated to recognise bias and misinformation within all narratives, including news (Merizalde et al. 2021:972, 973).

Students should be made aware of fact-checking websites such as "PolitiFact.com and Factcheck.org" that can be used to discern between genuine or falsified news (Scheufele & Krause 2019; The Poynter Institute 2020). This can be achieved by making these websites available to students; the links can be sent to them through the proper channels (contextually bound). Educators may want to consider presenting how these websites work in class. This can be achieved by picking two news articles beforehand, one that is more accurate and one that is less accurate. It would be best to run the news articles through the websites beforehand to ensure the presentation showcases how the website works. It would be very beneficial if the articles could be relevant to the curricula (contextually for the thesis on religion studies). This can demonstrate to students how to utilise these technologies and may motivate them to use them in the future when encountering information that makes them uncertain of its factuality. It is essential to note that these websites may have more information on specific geographical regions than others. How news should be integrated within education settings will be contextually bound depending on factors such as the educator, current- or recent events, and the curricula.

6.3.2 Working definition

The researcher designed the definition of news with the current study in mind:

News is a construct simulated as passive narratives about the world that can be verified or assumed to be accurate and produced by news agencies. The information may be presented in a biased way. News can be delivered through websites, Apps, social media postings, television news stations and radio. News is classified as part of internet narratives, although it can be available through other mediums. Some examples of news stations include but are not limited to News 24, The New York Times, ABC News, and BBC News. News is also referred to as mass media. News intersects with many human phenomena, including but not limited to religion, politics, culture, and current events. Because news is often perceived as purely mimetic, it greatly affects content receivers' affective realism.

This concludes the subsection on news.

6.4 The use of internet narratives in religious education

How internet narratives can be utilised within education settings will be contextually bound. Concepts such as the digital divide and the type of learning (e.g., in-person, online or blended) will significantly impact how and if it can be utilised. The current study is not a curriculum for a specific context. As the utilisation of narratives is very contextually bound to the available curricula and narratives, only a brief discussion is given here. Internet narratives serve as a teaching resource rather than a replacement for current curricula. Furthermore, the researcher does not suggest that educators do not utilise internet narratives as part of their teaching method. Instead, the thesis can assist those who want to know more about digital narratives and religious education. There are three main layers of learning within education settings: pre-class, in-class, and post-class, which act as potential spaces to implement narratives (Reuber 2010:25).

As part of pre-class reading, educators can provide specific internet narratives relevant to the next class by sharing links to the narrative. Educators can give instructions to the students to help them evaluate the narratives. This may include but is not limited to narrative composition (e.g. character, plot, active and passive narrative, discourse, fiction and non-fiction), narrative function/theories (e.g. transportation, simulation, cultivation, identification, emotional engagement, and para-social interaction) and focus on specific phenomena such as religious fragments (e.g. ritual, myth, symbol and spirituality), on potential us-versus-them phenomena

(e.g. extremism, fundamentalism, terrorism, Islamophobia and Antisemitism), and other ideological constructs (e.g. nationalism and secularism). These concepts will be relevant for assignments as well. Pre-class reading can prepare students to see lived realities before engaging with fact-based learning concepts. This can be through curiosity created by concepts embedded in the narratives or para-social interaction with characters. Educators can mention the narrative again in class if narratives are used as part of pre-class reading. By doing this, the educator can showcase relevant points of interest and ask questions that may engage the student's curiosity and critical thinking abilities. The digital divide must be considered, ensuring that students have access to the materials in pre- and post-class settings.

Educators can showcase specific points within the curricula by including internet narratives in class. Internet narratives can simulate current events, ideologies and public opinions. Educators can encourage class discussions through different opinions and simulations found online. This can be part of a general class discussion, debates or focus groups. Educators can encourage lifelong learning by showcasing how students can integrate fact-based learning and internet narratives within their understanding. Educators may ask questions to prompt student engagement (see Chapter Five). More focus may be given to social justice and current events within questions as these narratives may focus more on these concepts. Internet narratives may be utilised in classes as case studies to demonstrate current social dilemmas. Any emotions evoked by the narratives may also form part of class discussions. The digital divide may also play a role in utilising these narratives in class. Depending on the resource intensity of the narrative, audio and visual technologies and an internet connection may be needed. It is possible in some cases to circumvent the need for the internet when utilising these narratives in class settings if it is not available. This can be achieved by taking screenshots of text and stagnant picture-based narratives. Some social media platforms like YouTube allow users to download videos to access them offline. Furthermore, websites can often be printed to a PDF version that can be utilised offline.

In a recent public discourse event, Shunmugam (2023) asked the audience to use search engines on their mobile devices to search for a specific phrase that led to a photo he wanted to share with the audience. The public event did not have a screen for the speakers to use. Asking the audience to use their search engines created an interactive moment, and he could still use the visual content needed. Asking students to utilise search engines may be a viable option in classes if most students have a mobile device and an internet connection. Usually, personal devices like cell phones are discouraged in classes as they can easily cause distractions that can

lead students to not concentrate on the class. However, it may be an underutilised resource that can create interactive classroom moments. It would be advantageous to know beforehand what the students should search for; looking up the phrase the day before may help educators know what would appear when it is searched. When working with narratives, educators can pick out words that may be foreign to students beforehand. After consuming the narrative, educators may ask the class what words they did not know, and when they point them out, ask them to use a search engine to find a definition. This can instil the thought process that if they encounter unknown terms connected to religion in the future, they will be more willing to look them up.

The other advantage is that phrases searched appear in students' search history if they want to view the content again. This should be pointed out to students while they are busy with search engine interactions. If students have a group chat, for example, on WhatsApp, one student can search for the phrase and share it directly with the group so that all the students can view the content later. Another concept to consider is that some websites have barcodes that link directly to them. If scanned with a cellphone's camera, the user is taken directly to the website. Adding such barcodes to PowerPoint presentations may also cause an interactive learning moment. However, the class size may be problematic in this case; if students sit too far from the screen, they may be unable to scan the code. Internet narratives may lead to a different interactive experience than digital entertainment if students can use them in class.

All these implementations should come with the crucial warning that not all information on the internet is correct and should be viewed cautiously. As with digital entertainment, educators must be prepared to point out misinformation or bias. Not all information found in internet narratives is accurate and should be handled cautiously, consciously and with critical evaluation. This can be achieved by visiting multiple sites or advising students to more credible sites. Furthermore, asking engaging questions can assist students to truly think about what they experience through these narratives rather than taking them at face value. It is not the purpose of this study to showcase indefinitely what information is correct and what is incorrect. Rather, it is encouraged that students learn to work with all information critically. Therefore, students' critical thinking abilities (see definition in Chapter Four) should be expanded and encouraged when working with narratives. Furthermore, when educators encounter situations where information may be ambiguous, this should also be pointed out to students. Situations with ambiguous concepts may lend themselves to interactive moments like class debates (contextually bound), which could also help expand students' critical thinking abilities.

Lastly, internet narratives can be given as part of assignments and post-class reflections. Within this, students can be asked to look for specific phenomena through hashtags (if social media) and terms in search engines (websites and news) to find specific phenomena relevant to the class online. Specific social media platforms, news articles, and websites may be prescribed if a more controlled environment is preferred. After experiencing fact-based learning in class, students can then analyse the narratives they encounter for their religious value and potential bias. Thereby, students can be asked to evaluate if a narrative is accurate. If they feel it is biased, one can ask them how they would change the narrative to make it more accurate. Otherwise, they can be asked what they feel people can learn from the narrative. This concludes the sub-section on *The use of internet narratives in religious education*.

6.5 Chapter themes

This section showcases how the Chapter connects to the overall themes of the thesis:

- Factors to consider (SQ1; RG8; PC11)

Internet narratives have multiple mediums, and this is one of the factors that educators need to consider when utilising these narratives in education settings. The three mediums discussed in this Chapter were (i) *Websites*, (ii) *Social media*, and (iii) *News*. Educators should consider how these different mediums are utilised and what medium may be more popular contextually before working them into curricula. Internet narratives can be instantly spread to a broad audience. If one can find some context on the narrative creator, it may be beneficial in interpreting the narrative. The multiple intersections of humanity are sometimes showcased in internet narratives like websites with multiple themes. Websites may have multiple functions; they may not be purely religious while having religious content. Furthermore, websites may be created with religious intent, creating digital spiritual spaces. It may be important to point out the original intent of the website, as context may make a difference in how content is understood. This may teach students to focus first on the broader picture before focusing on the phenomena.

Social media will have a lot of social characteristics of narratives, such as characters (participants and narrative creators on social media) and discourse (comments and reactions). Although social media content often has plots, these may be less developed than in digital entertainment. This may be a factor that educators need to consider when working with this medium in education settings. A significant amount of mixed information, from news, building skills, misinformation, propaganda, or more traditional narratives, may be present in social

media, causing probable confusion of credibility in content consumers. An important factor when considering news involves the big footprint that news has. Consumers can enjoy news on the radio, as filmography, as a website, and as part of social media (also available in non-digital forms). News is instantly shareable and spreads far and wide instantly. News is also seen as largely memetic without synthetic components. Care should be taken not to demonise the news or create mistrust in news systems, as this can have harmful effects. Nevertheless, showcasing the memetic, synthetic, and thematic concepts that arise in the medium is essential.

- Digital narrative as a creative source (SQ5; RG5; PC6)

Relevant (contextually bound) internet narratives can be used as case studies to showcase physical-world social phenomena and their complexities to students. Educators should keep an eye open for narratives that can work within their context; this may promote an understanding of social phenomena, social justice, lived religion, and current events. Using new and socially relevant phenomena would be beneficial (if available). Asking students engaging questions (dictated by context) on these narratives can be beneficial and can get them to engage critically with the phenomena. On platforms where interactions from narrative consumers are available (e.g. comments), they should be considered part of the narrative and public opinion, leading to a general understanding of the diverse discourse. In this Chapter, the subheading *The use of internet narratives in religious education* gave a generalised idea of how these mediums can be implemented in education settings. This section was brief as the thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context, and implementation may be contextually bound.

- How religious studies and media studies can benefit each other (RG4, PC7, PC8, PC9)

Internet narratives may be experienced religiously or viewed as learning about religion; educators should encourage students to reflect on their online experiences. These experiences will be deeply individualised but can teach students to view their relationship with narratives critically. Educators need to consider existing social inequalities when working with internet narratives, as these intersections of inequalities may be duplicated in internet narratives. Pointing out these duplications of inequalities may create a better awareness of the phenomena for students so that their affective realism is not affected negatively in the future by this phenomenon. Websites and social media may showcase lived religion and different perspectives on phenomena, therefore acting as a source for positive para-social interaction. News influences the dominant narratives in society regarding current socio-political concepts and the relevance of specific events. Religious studies may benefit digital narrative users by using news narratives and discussing these topics from multiple angles. The hope would be to

encourage students to broaden their thoughts regarding social issues within society. Internet narratives can also act as a case study that can benefit the creative teaching of religion.

- The responsible and ethical use of narratives (SQ2, RG2)

It is important to remember that some internet narrative creators receive economic gains because of their digital footprint; economic gains may not be as blatantly obvious as with Digital entertainment and may not be considered a factor by content consumers. This can be true for all three mediums, but it may not always be the case; for example, some social media users may not gain anything, and some websites may not be profit-based, while news is usually profit-based narratives. The profit gained through these narratives may influence what narratives are used and in what manner. Note that economic gains do not always indicate biased or unethical information, but this may be an ethical factor to consider. For example, if negative news spikes readership, then the news will be more prone to negative narratives. Content consumers are responsible for reporting and not sharing social media content that could be harmful or misinformed. These responsibilities should be emphasised when working with internet narratives in education settings.

- Critical thinking abilities and digital narratives (SQ6, RG3, PC5)

Internet narratives may all contain synthetic, memetic and thematic simulations. It would be ideal to point out these concepts to students in all internet narratives, not biasing one rather than another. Using multiple diverse narratives together and asking engaging questions may help broaden students' thought patterns.

- Tolerance and the responsible use of digital narratives (SQ7, RG6, PC4)

As technology progresses, narratives like news also change. The impact can be immense when the concept of virtual reality news is already in simulation. This being said, these technologies may have positive and negative implications. Adding the virtual reality concept to news may result in greater humanisation, tolerance, and a more genuine understanding of current events. However, if the news is delivered in a biased way, this may also cause more significant prejudices and intolerance. As technology progresses, it would be paramount for educators to consider the possible influence of the potential for (in)tolerance. Peace journalism and counter-narratives may contribute immensely toward spreading tolerance; it should, therefore, be encouraged and utilised in education settings. Many internet narratives are available today from various perspectives. Some perspectives may be misinformed or biased. However, differing opinions do not necessarily mean one is correct and another is incorrect; instead, something can be learned from both perspectives. These differing perspectives can expand students' concepts while promoting tolerance for differing opinions. The hope is that students will search for different perspectives in the future to keep expanding their concepts and critical thinking abilities. Furthermore, social media narratives may display people of different belief systems in their everyday lives and may create a humanising effect.

- Narrative quantity in daily use (RG1, PC1)

Internet narratives are readily available and in bulk; this makes the overconsumption of these narratives a reality for many people (depending on the individual). With this in mind, it is possible to consume internet narratives without much discretion regarding what is being consumed. Social media can easily go from one narrative to another without much attention being spared for conscious retrospective reflection. Giving students assignments to reflect on their internet narrative use may make them more conscious of how much they consume and with what content. This may include asking them to reflect consciously on the time spent on internet narratives. Students can also be asked to catalogue concepts (contextually bound to the curriculum) observed in these narratives. Asking students to consciously reflect on what they might have gained or what might have been negative about the internet narratives that they consumed may encourage building the skill of conscious retrospective reflection.

- Balance of responsibilities (SQ10)

The balance of responsibilities may shift depending on the type of internet narrative used. Some internet narratives give voice to an author with little interaction from the narrative receiver and are, therefore, deemed a more passive narrative form. This is the case with news and websites. Websites can lend some credibility to institutions, businesses, or persons; it should be considered that websites are not complex to build. Authors of websites have a responsibility because of the seeming credibility response to these internet narratives to create credible and accurate information. Websites often support forms of ideologies (not all) or specific perspectives on phenomena and can contain bias and misinformation. Content receivers, therefore, should be conscious that these narratives do not always mean the information is credible. The narrative consumer, therefore, needs to view the information received with care, ensuring that constructs are not altered negatively.

News is often seen as purely memetic, with no synthetic or biased intent and with no misinformation present. This perspective on the news creates a tremendous responsibility on content creators (journalists) to create fact-based, unbiased narratives; journalists are human and have an affective realism that can compromise this unbiased stance. News can be misinformed or depict factual information in a manner that supports other agendas (this will be more evident in the following Chapters). News consumers must thus consider this when consuming these narratives. Furthermore, news has the potential for largely adverse effects on human emotions (this may be dependent on the individual). Considering these factors, content consumers must view these narratives critically to maintain healthy constructs.

Mediums like social media, on the other hand, can be very active depending on the user. Narrative creators and narrative consumers interact in a myriad of ways. Narrative consumers may also be narrative creators through their posts, sharing other people's content, and reacting to content through comments and reactions (e.g. likes). All these different functions built into social media platforms make it a very complex system regarding the responsibility between content creator and consumer. Some content creators may have more sway than others and are termed influencers. All narrative creators have a responsibility toward their audiences to create responsible content. However, the more popular the narrative, the more responsibility increases. Content consumers have a responsibility not to spread misinformation or blatantly biased information. Furthermore, content consumers have a responsibility to interact with the narrative (comments and reactions) in a responsible manner. Content consumers need to ensure that their constructs are healthy for their context.

All three mediums have one critical concept in common. Internet narratives can be forwarded with ease to other digital technology users. Digital entertainment is also easy to share depending on the platform, but internet narratives lend themselves more to the concept of shareability. The ease with which these narratives can be shared between users makes the responsibility of the content creator and consumer increasingly important. Internet narratives may have connections, such as social media pages linked to websites, that complicate understanding these narratives in each medium. The responsibilities of the narrative receiver versus the narrative creator also become more complex. The greater a narrative creator's footprint, the greater responsibility they have, while narrative receivers should not view a more significant footprint as more responsible but rather view these narratives critically. Some internet narratives are also deeply personal and representative of the person (character) who created them. This is true for social media, some websites, and, unfortunately, news in some cases. This deeply personal nature of these narratives creates a significant potential for biases and prejudices to come to light. Considering concepts such as freedom of speech, all these narratives become increasingly complex regarding the balance of responsibilities.

- Content creators (SQ3, RG7)

Narrative creators are not just traditional novelists and screenwriters in the digital age, although they do hold sway. Internet narratives (especially social media and websites) are not just an accessible medium for narrative consumers but also for narrative creators. When educating tertiary students (the focus of the thesis), there is a chance that some of the students may not just be content consumers but internet narrative creators (contextually bound). By emphasising the balance of responsibilities between content creators and their global audience, one can encourage more responsible narratives from the content creators (if present in the class). Journalists should be made aware of the destructive nature of some reports, like adding to the terrorised feeling of the general public and the encouragement of mimicry that may occur. It would be beneficial if content creators (journalists) and relevant scholars (contextually for the thesis religion studies professionals) could collaborate to create balanced, responsible content. As mentioned throughout the thesis, it may be beneficial if scholars can help content creators (e.g. journalists) contact the relevant groups to help get opinions on the narratives.

- Interpretation of narratives (SQ4)

As with digital entertainment, educators are advised to pre-evaluate internet narratives as part of class preparation. These evaluations may lead to critical concepts that need to be pointed out to students, questions that may engage the students, the cataloguing of narratives and the writing of articles. Educators should consider factors like the original intent of the greater narrative (e.g. social media page or general website) and the specific narrative. If utilised, educators should work critically with the narratives while understanding that some of the narratives may be deeply personal for the content creators.

- Providing new definitions to add to the ongoing conversation of scholarly definitions (PC13)

Definitions were given for the three internet narrative mediums discussed within the Chapter, including (i) websites, (ii) social media, and (iii) news. Examples of these narrative mediums are given in Chapters Seven and Eight; therefore, clarification was necessary. These definitions enhance the definition of digital narrative and, in turn, narrative. This concludes the Chapter on *Internet narratives*. In the following Chapter, *Terms relevant to religious education* are discussed, and examples of digital narratives are given.

Chapter Seven: Terms relevant to religious education

In this Chapter, the terms (i) *Ritual*, (ii) *Myth and Symbol*, and (iii) *Spirituality* are discussed briefly as they form part of the definition of religion and can be seen as fragments of religion. These terms are often used within religious education settings. However, religious education is not limited to these constructs. The constructs are instead used to illustrate concepts that often occur. The thesis does not prescribe these concepts as necessary for all religious education contexts, nor are they the only concepts that occur. These terms often function within religion but are not limited to religion. Each term has a (i.i; ii.i; iii.i) *Discussion and semantics*, (i.ii; ii.ii; iii.ii) *Working definition*, (i.iii; ii.iii; iii.iii) *Examples from digital narratives* and a (i.iv; ii.iv; iii.iv) *Narrative evaluation example*. The *Discussion and semantics*, and *Working definition* subsections of each term aided the researcher in finding narratives that contain the relevant phenomena in the *Examples from digital narratives* and the *Narrative evaluation example* subsections. Thereby aiding the reader in understanding both the broader conversation and the specific meaning that the researcher attributed to the phenomena concerning the thesis.

The *Narrative evaluation example* only gives one brief example of an evaluation of a narrative under each subsection. These evaluations act as condensed examples of the probable uses and evaluations of narratives within education settings. It should be noted that these evaluations are compact and can be expanded on as context dictates. Examples show that the phenomena occur in digital narratives under the heading *Examples from digital narratives*. The narratives in these sections are not evaluated for accuracy or stated how they could work in educational settings as the study is not a curriculum. Not all the narrative types mentioned in Chapters Five and Six are used within each section, as this is just a short illustration that these phenomena are found in different narrative forms. If an example is not given, this does not mean that there are no examples or that they are less important.

A narrative may fall into more than one category. In that case, the narrative is mentioned under the most relevant category, and the other categories are mentioned in the same section. Prominent narratives that other scholars have considered are used as examples, along with narratives known to the researcher. As made clear throughout the manuscript, the thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context. Educators at all levels of education should look for phenomena showcased in narratives that may work well within their curriculums. The narratives do not represent entire religious groups, as many interfaith differences may occur. Therefore, when using digital narratives to explain a specific context, educators should ensure that the narrative matches the context or that they explain the differences to students. The

examples given are not the only examples of the traditions mentioned. Religious traditions that are not used as examples in this are not less important. It is beyond the scope of the thesis to give examples from every tradition. Lastly, there is a (iv) *Chapter themes* section at the end of the Chapter that showcases how the Chapter relates to the overall themes of the thesis.

7.1 Ritual

For Sundermeier (2007:30), the concept of religion is inextricably linked with ethics and ritual. As ritual is found within religion and digital narratives, it can be a point of interest for creative learning opportunities. Caution must be taken, as not all digital narratives are accurate, and ritual phenomena must never be reduced to digital phenomena. Rituals as phenomena are dynamic and need to fulfil people's needs (Strydom 2019:153). Therefore, digital media illustrations used as educational examples should never stagnate rituals. In this section, a (i) *Discussion and semantics*, (ii) *Working definition*, (iii) *Examples from digital narratives*, and (iv) *Narrative evaluation example* can be found on the term Ritual.

7.1.1 Discussion and semantics

What rituals are, is convoluted in human language as it may include and exclude various things that are not always agreed upon (Bell 2009:loc 65). Humanity has been participating in ritual simulation for longer than the term exists (Grimes 2014:186; Bell 2009:1). Ritual is found throughout human history and geography (Bell 2009:loc 56) and refers to out-of-the-ordinary practices (Grimes 2014:187). Ritual does not exist as a construct on its own, but it depends upon specific actions carried out by people in a specific context (Grimes 2014:192), including religious, historical, and cultural contexts (Bell 2009:loc 65). Rituals are complex, whether one assumes it to be a metaphorical exchange or an interaction with an unseen world (Grimes 2011:9). Whether something can be considered a ritual is not always clear, but instead, one has different tones of ritual (Grimes 2014:193; Bell 2009:loc 65; Grimes 2011:12). Grimes (2011:21) stated that: "No activity is a ritual, but any action can be ritualised"; this statement shows the vast problem in defining rituals. Some common ritual traits include but are not limited to tradition, sacred value, repetition, specialisation, prescription, and a possible spiritual connection (Grimes 2014:193).

Rituals are known for their connection to a time, place, ritual enactors, myth, and transformative power; however, if some of these constructs are lacking, it does not exclude a simulation from being considered a ritual (Grimes 2014:6, 193). There is a strong link between myth and ritual; these elements keep religion thriving (Ngcobo & Beyers 2013:2). Grimes

(2014:195) offered the following definition of ritual: "Ritual is embodied, condensed, and prescribed enactment". Rituals include rites of passage, where a person is led from one stage of life to the next through ritual (Grimes 2014:202; van Gennep 1960:2-3; Bell 2009:loc 88). Rituals can also include the celebration or acknowledgement of the passage of time (e.g. the beginning of a new year) (van Gennep 1960:3). Rituals can also include inaugurations, the curing of ailments and sacrificial constructs (Bell 2009:loc 88). Van Gennep (1960:8) distinguished between direct and indirect rituals. Rituals that have an immediate effect are direct, whereas rituals that need the intervention of an unseen being may be seen as indirect (van Gennep 1960:8). Van Gennep (1960:11) broke rites of passage into: "Preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rights (rites of transition) and postliminal (rites of incorporation)". Rituals can also be seen according to their function. Grimes (2014:295), stated that:

a ritual's capacity to make things happen, prevent them from happening, or respond to things outside itself.

Rituals usually have meaning that accompanies rites of passage such as fertility and protection (van Gennep 1960:11). However, rituals are not limited to these accompaniments, and one ritual can have more than one accompaniment (van Gennep 1960:12). Van Gennep also admitted that not all rituals are clear cut on what category they fall under as they are dynamic (van Gennep 1960:12). Fragments of rituals can be present such as decorum, without a proper ritual being conducted (Bell 2009:loc 88). Ritual is not just one thing, and care should be taken not to minimise the construct (Bell 2009:loc 122). Rituals are subject to change as society changes (Bell 2009:loc 88). Bell (2009:loc 100) made the following statement on ritual:

Today we think of ritual as a complex sociocultural medium variously constructed of tradition, exigency, and self-expression; it is understood to play a wide variety of roles and to communicate a rich density of overdetermined messages and attitudes. For the most part ritual is a medium chosen to invoke those ordered relationships that are thought to obtain between human beings in the here-and-now and non-immediate source of power, authority, and value.

This statement by Bell can act as a broad definition of ritual. Lan (2018:11) suggested abandoning terms like ritual or rites of passage as they are too vague. As with religion, the suggestion of dropping the term is improbable as too many people use it in casual speech and academic language. Lan (2018:12) further suggested that rituals should be condensed and stated that rituals are only religious and not secular if they are not abandoned. In Lan's (2018:14) opinion, rituals are actions of humans that influence spirits. Although this can be a beneficial definition in the correct context, it is very narrow and will exclude constructs considered as rituals. Contrary to Lan's opinion, Grimes (2011:5) stated that although rituals

are a part of most religions, they are also found within the secular. Sundermeier's (2007:96) work distinguished between Rite and Ritual, where the first is religious and the second secular. Emotionality and rituals are complex, especially in multi-religious societies, where individuals' inter-group convictions might start to cause a clash in beliefs (Langer et al. 2011:94; Strydom 2021:170). Rituals bind groups and make distinctions between them (Bell 2009:loc 111) and can intensify or deteriorate conflict (Grimes 2011:3; Langer et al. 2011:93). Ritual is not in its nature good or evil but depends on the intent of the user and the view of interpreters (Grimes 2011:23).

Identity is intertwined in modern times with both ritual and digital media (Langer et al. 2011:95). Narrative, such as music, is often used within rituals; these narratives can contain myths (see the heading *Myths and symbols*) (Hill 2019:164). Different digital narrative mediums often contain rituals that can positively or negatively impact the world (Grimes 2011:4, 9-10). A positive impact example could be that people learn and gain greater respect for other people's traditions. A negative example can be hatred and anger toward a person for simulating a ritual in a way that clashes with one's constructs. Adverse reactions to rituals are usually a symptom of a bigger societal imbalance (Langer et al. 2011:94). Digital narratives can illustrate and preserve rituals and has the means to reduce and stagnate rituals (Grimes 2011:4). However, one must also understand that the world of digital narratives can be incompatible with ritual, as the old and new clash (Altena et al. 2011:134). When a phenomenon such as ritual or religion is encountered in the digital world, its impact can be complex and vast (Grimes 2011:6), bringing the effectiveness of digital rituals into question (Altena et al. 2011:134). Grimes (2011:15) stated:

Rituals are similar to plays insofar as they are constructions built on, or out of, ordinary life, but they are dissimilar in as much as theater announces its own fictionality, whereas ritual often denies or sequesters it. Viewed from the outside, other people's rituals may appear made-up or arbitrary. From the inside, however, ritual is experienced as correct, right, true, traditional, authorised, and believable. Because ritual is an especially vulnerable cultural activity, ritual traditions can grow fat with defensive structures—rationalisations, intractable hierarchies, theological mystifications, emotional double binds, moral evasions, and ensconced privileges.

This statement showcases the complexities of ritual, its similarity to narrative and its unique place in the human mind. Furthermore, ritual is more complex with its entanglement, not just in the physical and spiritual realms but in its footing in the digital realm (Grimes 2011:20).

7.1.2 Working definition:

The researcher designed the definition of ritual with the current study in mind:

Rituals are constructs that humans simulate. Rituals intersect with religion, secularism, emotion, celebrations, history, culture, geography, and politics; however, they are not limited to any of these constructs. Rituals can intersect both with the mundane and the sacred and are not limited to these constructs. Rituals can intersect with the passage of time, life cycles, myths, symbols, purity, identity, gender, ethnicity, and status but are not limited to these constructs. Rituals can intersect with the physical, spiritual, and digital realms; however, they are not limited to one realm. Rituals are narratives that communities or individuals conduct, sometimes over generations. Rituals can have a dualistic nature of dividing or uniting, potentially creating or breaking down us-versus-them phenomena. Rituals, or the lack thereof, are deeply connected with one's affective realism, influencing how the world is seen and understood.

This broad definition aided the researcher in finding narratives that simulated the construct.

7.1.3 Examples from digital narratives

Books in electronic mediums contain concepts and simulations of ritual phenomena. The novel *Outlander* (2004:20, 54, 58, 274, 397) by Gabaldon has marriage rituals, Scottish Pagan rituals (sacrificial and dance rituals) and the Roman Catholic "ritual of perpetual adoration". The novel *Shadow Of Night* (2012) by Harkness features an interreligious marriage ceremony. Rituals as constructs and simulations commonly occur in films. The film *North East* (2016) by Aluko features an interreligious "marriage celebration" with the various complexities that may arise in such situations (Layefa & Ezenagu 2023:2). Crosthwait (2020:184) stated that the animated film *Coco* (2017) by Unkrich illustrates the day of the dead, as celebrated in "Mexican culture". Mäder and Soto-Sanfiel (2019:100-113) used *Meet The Mormons* (2014) by Treu and *The Seven Wonders Of The Muslim World* (2008) by Kermani as examples of documentaries portraying both Mormonism and Islam, respectively, in a positive light. Both documentaries portray religious symbols, rituals, practices and lived religion (Mäder & Soto-Sanfiel 2019:100-113).

Rituals as constructs and simulations can also be found in video games. The game *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019) by Miyazaki and Hamatani contains religious rituals (de Wildt 2023:13). Grieve and Veidlinger (2021:40), furthermore named applications like *Buddhify: Meditation & Mindfulness App* (2018) by Whistle Studios LLC, as part of Buddhist rituals that

have changed to an online setting for some users. Lastly, they brought up *Second Life* (2023) by Linden Research, Inc. where "Zen Buddhist communities" gather to interact and perform rituals like meditation through avatars (Grieve & Veidlinger 2021:41-43). The game *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) by Levine showcases Christian baptism in a negative, forceful light (Wibawa et al. 2019:6; de Wildt 2023:81).

Music can play a significant role in rituals and has concepts of rituals embedded. Heimarck (2022:44) distinguished between "ritual music" and "musical ritual". A "musical ritual" is where the ritual is centred around the music; an example is the "arati" used in "Hindu, Buddhist, or yogic lineage", the music and chanting are enacted by the community as part of the ritual (Heimarck 2022:44, 45, 46, 47, 49, 50). Information on and performances of the Arati or Aarti chant can be found on YouTube. Examples include *Aarti / Why Do We Do Aarti?* (2021) by Gossain and *Arati - Om Jai Jagdish Hare* (2017) by IndianRaga. Where "ritual music" is music used during rituals to enhance the ritual but is not critical to the ritual itself, an example would be the "*gender wayang*" that is used in "rites of passage ceremonies in Bali" primarily found in Hinduism (Heimarck 2022:44, 48, 50, 53, 54). The music used in the ceremonies can be viewed on YouTube. An example includes *Sanggar Gangsa Dewa Denpasar - Gender Wayang Bali* (2011) by I Wayana Wardika Bali Ngelah. Inc.

Music as ritual, as stated by Heimarck, can be seen in "Kirtan Singing in American Gaudiya Vaishnava Hinduism" (Brown 2021:1, 6, 10, 16). Bands mentioned as playing this music are "Mayapuris" and "The Kirtanias" (Brown 2021:14). This type of music and dance is found in Bollywood movies. Brown (2021:15) used *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) by Advani as an example. The dancing and singing can also be found on YouTube; an example is *Hinduism In America* (2017) by Just Hari Naam. Bănică (2016:460) used music in "Romania's Orthodox Pilgrimages" as an example of music within pilgrimages. This pilgrimage music can be found on YouTube, for example, *Romanian Orthodox Byzantine Chant - Cherubic Hymn* (2019) by Orthodox Byzantine Art. Prayer chants are found within Jewish communities; however, they differ significantly from context, as the diasporic context influences traditions (Marks 2021:1-13). These prayer chants play an intrinsic role within the synagogue's gatherings and rituals (Marks 2021:2). Examples of YouTube videos with prayer chants include *'Listen: Mass Jewish Prayer At The Western Wall (Wailing Wall, Kotel, Jerusalem* (2022) by The Holy Land Channel by Zahi Shaked, and *Bendigamos, All Four Stanzas...* (2020) by Liturgy and Art - Rabbi Sjimon den Hollander.

Social media narratives also include religious rituals. The YouTube page elephantsbelly Films (2014-2023) is run by a South African film company that does wedding videos, and they have wedding videos showcasing many different religions, including Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. In the YouTube video *Muslim Wedding* (2021) by Faith Counts, the basic principle of a Muslim wedding is explained. The Jewish Bar/Bat Mitzvah is performed in person but can sometimes be viewed online to include family members who cannot attend (Lieber 2021:77). Information and examples of the Jewish Bar/Bat Mitzvah can also be found online *Attending A Bar Mitzvah? Bat Mitzvah? Learn What To Expect* (2015) by BimBam and *Torah Reading* (2013) by Arianna. Examples of Christian baptism can also be found online, including *What Is Baptism?* (2015) by Aspley Christ Church, and *A Very Cute Baby Baptism Video* (2017) by Top Choi's Productions. Examples of Islamic rituals found online surrounding babies include *Muslim Birth Ceremonies* (2020) by TrueTube and *Muslim Baby Name Giving Ceremony (Cape Town Tradition)* (2014) by Shihaam's View. On platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Tik Tok, hashtags can be used to find these phenomena in posts, for example, #Baptism #BarMitzvah # or #BatMitzvah and # (religion of choice) and #wedding.

Webpages also contain information and simulations of rituals. Grieve and Veidlinger (2021) explored Buddhism and how religion interacts with the online world. First, they (Grieve & Veidlinger 2021:38) pointed toward the broadcasting of the "33rd Kalachakra" in 2014, where:

his Holiness the Dalai Lama read from the second-century Indian Buddhist philosopher, Nagarjuna's Precious Garland (Ratnāvalī) and Letter to a Friend (Suhṛllekha).

This and other rituals are available from the website (The Office of his holiness the Dalai Lama 2023). The Jewish Virtual Library: A Project of AICE (2023) is a website that can be used to learn more about Jewish "practices and rituals" and many other concepts related to Judaism (Jewish Virtual Library: A Project of AICE 2023). The last example may be less narrative-based; however, it is not necessarily devoid of narrative, and it can still be an engaging digital educational tool. There are many ritual phenomena reported in the news. High holidays and pilgrimages are often documented. Pilgrimages are not always seen as rituals in themselves but often incorporate many rituals within the journey. Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam, is one of the pilgrimages that are published in the news; an example is the article by Sky News (2023) that explains some of the basic principles of Hajj.

Another example of rituals in the news includes an interreligious marriage ceremony between a Muslim woman and a Hindu man (Timesofindia.com 2023). Lobo (2022) wrote an article for The Times of India describing how more equal rights for women are changing marriage

ceremonies. The celebration of the "Hindu festival of colours" (holi) has been reported in Aljazeera (2023). Shelby (2022) wrote an article for The New York Times on the "the great night of Shiva" Hindu ritual in India. Another example is the Global News report on a Bat Mitzvah for an eighty-year-old woman. This ritual took place online, and many attendees attended on Zoom (Spector 2022). Articles by Berger (2020) and Fifield and Li (2020) in the Washington Post described the changing of religious rituals worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic. Krueger (2020) wrote an article for The New York Times on how female mohels (usually men fill this role) are becoming more prevalent in Jewish circumcision rituals. Ioannou (2021) wrote an article for The New York Times on a local northern Greek fire-walking ritual.

7.1.4 Narrative evaluation example

This section contains a compact analysis of a narrative that contains the concept of a ritual. This analysis can be expanded to fit different contexts (e.g. social-cultural and curriculum). The narrative is titled *Celebrating My Son's Bar Mitzvah* (2018) by Mayim Bialik¹¹. The narrative is an internet narrative, specifically a social media narrative (YouTube). It is a compact narrative, just under six minutes, and is ideal for education purposes in and outside of class (educators should consider the digital divide with this statement). The narrative is audio-visual. This non-fiction narrative can be classified as the sharing of a lived-religion experience. Therefore, this is a deeply personal narrative and should be considered in the analysis. Social media can be active or passive depending on the amount of interaction from the narrative consumer. The narrative author and character are the same person (Mayim Bialik). The character Bialik is an American practising Jewish person (Reformed Judaism) and a filmography actress, best known for her role as Amy in The Big Bang Theory (Bialik 2015; NCWIT.ORG 2024; Biography.com 2020). She is an activist, especially regarding Jewish rights and has degrees in Neuroscience and Jewish Studies (Bialik 2015; NCWIT.ORG 2024; Biography.com 2020). This background information should be supplied with the narrative by the educator as it can impact the interpretation of the narrative.

If students know her from her filmography history (this will be contextually and individually bound), this may affect the effectiveness of the narrative in an educational setting. Her Character, Amy in The Big Bang Theory, was a protagonist. If students found her to be a favourable character, this may aid the learning potential of the narrative, creating better identification and transportation. However, educators need to consider that taste differs, and

¹¹ For easy access to the narrative, please follow the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNw9-dg64P0>.

some students may not identify with her filmographic character; this may be detrimental to the current narrative. The narrative plot concerns a personal recounting of the characters' son's Bar Mitzvah (Bialik 2018). She used the narrative as an educational tool to teach the consumer what a Bar Mitzvah' is. In the discourse, she explained what the term (Bar/Bat Mitzvah') means, the historical implications, modern understanding, and modern practices (Bialik 2018). She also touched on the "party" aspect, which is, in a way, the commercialisation of the ritual (Bialik 2018). However, their experience was more focused on the religious and knowledge aspects of the ritual (Bialik 2018).

She addressed the financial obsession stereotype often attributed to Jewish people, specifically toward this ritual (Bialik 2018). The discourse further emphasised the practice of charity within the Jewish faith (Bialik 2018). She pointed to the emotionality of the ritual and the preparation beforehand (Bialik 2018). The narrative showcased many intersections as seen in the working definition, for example, historical, cultural, religious, emotional, time, life cycle, identity, gender, and status. These intersections can be used as potential questions. The narrative showcases communal and individual enactment and implications of the ritual. The narrative showcased the spiritual and physical demands of preparing for the ritual, enacting those two realms. The narrative is a digital recounting, adding the digital realm to the narrative. The personal nature of the narrative gives way to para-social interaction with a well-informed practising Jewish person. The narrative lends itself toward humanisation. The narrative also acts as a counter-narrative toward a Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a party and the financial aspects. This narrative can be used in tertiary education settings (which can differ contextually), for example, in Jewish studies, religion education or a science of religion class focusing on Judaism. This narrative is also appropriate for younger groups.

The narrative can be used in pre-class reading, in class, as part of an assignment, or in post-class reflection if the digital divide is not an obstacle. There is space for expansion on the information given in the narrative, and some questions can be asked. However, this will be contextually bound to the utilisation (pre-class, in-class or post-class) of the narrative, impacting how and when questions are asked. Terms that educators/students can expand on include Mazel Tov, Minyan, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Questions on how the character influences the view of the students can be asked. The ritual description in the narrative showcases many of the intersections found in the working definition. Questions regarding these phenomena may be asked, for example, how does the emotionality of the character influence the understanding of the phenomena or narrative? Students can be asked to compare the modern and historical

simulations of the ritual (if the assignment has extra references). Otherwise, educators can expand on the historical and modern understanding of the ritual (in class). Aspects of the counter-narrative (party and finances) may be interesting for class discussions.

Students should be made aware that lived religious experiences are memetic. However, these narratives can become synthetic if they are seen as thematic. In other words, every person may have a unique ritual experience. One person's experience should not become a stereotype or measuring stick for all experiences. For example, it is good that the narrative shows a counter-narrative (party and finances) to showcase that this is not how everyone experiences the ritual. However, if someone's experience reflects these simulations, it does not make their experience less authentic or valuable. As suggested by Piotrowski (2015:53-63), comments can also be examined. Many people of different religions have viewed this narrative and feel they have gained some knowledge (as seen in the comments). Students can be asked if they agree or disagree with the comments. Much more can be done concerning this narrative; however, considering this narrative in more depth is beyond the scope of the thesis. This concludes the subsection on ritual.

7.2 Myths and symbols

Myths and symbols have a strong intersection with religion and are often found within religious education settings as a topic of interest. It is essential to note their association with rituals (Ngcobo & Beyers 2013:2; Grimes 2014:29). Myths and symbols are often found within digital narratives and can be utilised for creative learning opportunities. In this section, a (i) *Discussion and semantics on Myth*, (ii) *Discussion and semantics on symbol*, (iii) *Working definitions*, (iv) *Examples from digital narratives*, and (v) *Narrative evaluation example* surrounding the concepts of myth and symbol are found.

7.2.1 Discussion and semantics on myth

Myth originated from the Greek word *Mythos* (Ngcobo & Beyers 2013:2; Lisiecki 2022:48). Myths are narratives that are transmitted between people from era to era (Beyers 2016:4; Lisiecki 2022:45). Myths are often seen as only being tied to ancient narratives (Lisiecki 2022:47; Ford 2022:iii). However, Lisiecki (2022:55) also advocated for studying modern myth. Myths form part of meaning-making narratives for humans (Lisiecki 2022:57; Ford 2022:iii, 299, 300). Myth may be seen as either a simulation to understand reality or interpreted as reality in itself (Ford 2022:308). This places myth very close to one's affective realism. Myths are linked to multiple factions of identity, such as religion and culture (Ngcobo & Beyers

2013:1; Beyers 2017c:7; Lisiecki 2022:52), while not limiting myth only to one human phenomenon (Ngcobo & Beyers 2013:1; Lisiecki 2022:50; Ford 2022:iii). Myths are narratives that may spread across different cultures; therefore, they can potentially impact more than one group (Lisiecki 2022:45, 55). Northover (2022:2) gave the following definition:

If myth is considered a story, it is a particularly enduring and profound one concerned with the nature of the world and humanity's place in the world, usually but not necessarily involving God or gods.

This is a reductionistic definition that can be useful in specific contexts. Myths illustrate an understanding of the metaphysical world and give an understanding beyond what is seen (Northover 2022:2). One of the reasons for this is the sacred nature of myths (Eliade 1991:57). Myth takes the narrative receiver beyond the profane (world, or time) into the sacred (world or time) (Eliade 1991:58). Myths show signs of narrative transportation and escapism as described under the heading narrative. This is evident from the work of Eliade (1991:59):

When he is listening to a myth, forgets, as it were, his particular situation and is projected into another world, into another universe which is no longer his poor little universe of every day.

Grimes (2014:256) noted transportation within rituals and myths. How myths act within narrative theories is complex, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, myths are narratives, and it is interesting to note that they share characteristics with other narratives, necessitating future research on the topic. A critical element that should be remembered is that belief in myths impacts human behaviour (Ngcobo & Beyers 2013:1), indicating an impact on humanity's affective realism. Myths are entangled with the world of ethics and morals (Northover 2022:2). Beyers (2017c:4) made the following statement on myth and identity: "This identity might be re-enforced by mythic traditions emphasising the uniqueness of a particular community". These identities and myths may be open toward others, or they might lead to fundamentalistic and elitist identities (Beyers 2017c:7). Therefore, myths have an impact on how the other is perceived (Beyers 2017c:8). Beyers (2017c:8-9) emphasised the need to understand myths that lead to radical identities, to understand different perspectives better. Understanding different perspectives can lead to more effective religious education practices. This identity formation and myth phenomenon showcases the power that narratives have within the human mind.

The word myth should not be confused with fiction or misinformation (see Chapter Four) (Ngcobo & Beyers 2013:1). However, Myth can also not be confused with non-fiction, completely factual accounts of historical matters, or a scientific account (Ngcobo & Beyers

2013:2, 3). Ngcobo and Beyers (2013:1) stated, "Myths are true stories, and they are as alive as the believing community". The term truth here does not necessarily mean a physical reality; instead, it refers to religious truths that religious communities believe. Myths, therefore, have their personal space of being different from other narratives. Myth becomes a truth that is understood in a specific way (Lisiecki 2022:48, 49; Eliade 1991:59). Most religions have myths; however, as the word myth has been connected to fictional, non-real or falsehood in modern times, most religious people will not regard their authoritative religious narratives as myths (Ngcobo & Beyers 2013:3). This use of the word has a western Christian origin (Ballentine 2022:1).

The term myth was used to differentiate between biblical narratives and other ancient narratives (Ballentine 2022:2). Although many do now recognise myth not as falsehood and as being contained within the Bible as well (Ballentine 2022:2). The notion of myth being only falsehood is problematic, care should be taken with the word in religion education settings. The hope would be to instil respect toward the concept of myth rather than advocating the meaning of falsehood. Lisiecki (2022:54) distinguished between "dead myths" and "living myths". In this, "living myths" are active myths that are utilised within current communities (Lisiecki 2022:54). Whereas "dead myths" do not contribute to current identities and meaning-making but had relevance in the past (Lisiecki 2022:54). Ford (2022:299) similarly stated:

The same myth today can look quite different to how it did in the past. Mythology is always in flux, a contingent process that reacts and adapts to contemporary conditions, or else dies or fossilises.

From these different academic voices, one can gather that myths are dynamic narratives that serve as a category of the truth of their own accord. This, however, is not meant to stagnate the concept of myth only to narratives. Durkheim (2016:39) made the following statement on religion:

[...] it is made up of parts; it is a more or less complex system of myths, dogmas, rites and ceremonies. Now a whole cannot be defined except in relation to its parts.

Mythology is, therefore, seen as one of the functioning parts of religion and is inextricably bound to the other functioning parts like dogma. With this in mind, myths form part of the affective realism of people; forming part of their understanding of the world and influencing their personal and interpersonal behaviour (Ngcobo & Beyers 2013:1).

7.2.2 Discussion and semantics on symbol

As with many terms, the word symbol has a Greek origin (Wagoner 2022:1). Eliade (1991:9) stated that "symbols are regarded as an autonomous mode of cognition". Symbols can either be "objective" or "cultural", as distinguished by Hegy (2023:1). The former is a simulated language through letters and numbers and has particular meanings (Hegy 2023:1). The latter is simulated as a more contextual understanding of many possible interpretations of a symbol (Hegy 2023:1). As the second category involves "interpretation in art, poetry and religion" (Hegy 2023:1), it is more appropriate to the type of symbol explored in the thesis. Wagoner (2022:1) stated that symbols are often found in "language, art, religion and science". Image and symbol are often used interchangeably, as seen in Eliade's work (1991:14). Eliade (1991:12) stated that a symbol "is consubstantial with human existence, it comes before language and discursive reason". In Eliade's remark, one can conclude that symbols act like constructs or concepts within the human mind. Constructs are the basic building blocks of understanding and lend meaning to what humans experience (Barrett 2018:28).

Symbols have the potential to have multiple meanings (Eliade 1991:9; Hegy 2023:1) for individuals or groups. Hegy (2023:4) worked from the point of view that symbols are simulations ("experiences"). As symbols are constructs bound to simulations, the missing piece here would be the part that affective realism plays within the meaning of symbols. A symbol may be a symbol because of what affective realism predicts based on past simulation and construction. Therefore, showcasing that symbols form part of meaning-making and future predictions (Moffett 2022:120). It is further complicated because individual intersections affect one's affective realism and how symbols are understood. Symbols function as part of revealed reality (Eliade 1991:12) and are representational (Wagoner 2022:1). Moffett (2022:111) stated that symbols have "a socially shared meaning that isn't obvious". Religions often exhibit symbols and have specific or multiple interpretations for each symbol (Eliade 1991:16; Suprianto et al. 2022:295; Hegy 2023:1). Examples of religious symbols include the cross in Christianity and the star of David in Judaism (Tokrri et al. 2022:94; Poljak 2011). Rituals also utilise symbols (Grimes 2014:26, 27); however, the relationship between ritual and symbol is beyond the scope of this study.

Symbols are not just found within religion but in most human phenomena, such as politics, culture and education (Startup 2022:54). Symbols are not always conducive to one phenomenon; for example, religion and government were (and are) not always separate and religious symbols are often found in national markers such as flags (Tokrri et al. 2022:94).

With many countries becoming more multi-religious, these symbols are being questioned for their inclusivity (Tokrri et al. 2022:99). Symbols often bind groups together, as can be seen in family crests and the flags of countries (Wagoner 2022:4; Makgopa 2019:160; Durkheim 2016:177; Tokrri et al. 2022:94). Symbols are also helpful to unite people behind a cause, and influence people's actions (Wagoner 2022:4). It should, however, be stated that when one is born into a specific context, sometimes symbols unite without the whole meaning being conveyed or understood (Moffett 2022:115). Therefore, confusion may be seen where the symbol is more important than its meaning (Startup 2022:54). An example of this is how immigrants often know more about national symbols after the naturalisation process than do the natives (Moffett 2022:115).

In a more religious context, this may involve making the sign of the cross a ritual without truly reconciling the meaning behind the gesture. Another example would be to wear religious symbols as jewellery (e.g. a cross) without having any religious connection to the symbol. However, as symbols bind groups, they also tend to create an us-versus-them phenomenon (Wagoner 2022:4). Similarly, myths and rituals can also have an ingroup, outgroup, and us-versus-them effect. In stringent conditions where groups find themselves persecuted, they may use symbols as a survival strategy (Suprianto et al. 2022:294). An example of this would be early Christians' use of the fish sign to discern who their fellow believers were (Suprianto et al. 2022:294, 297). Ingroup members have a greater chance of understanding the meaning behind a symbol than outgroup members (Horbiński & Zagata 2021:281). To make significant social impressions on people, it may be necessary to teach people to analyse symbols rather than just identifying them (Hegy 2023:3). From this, symbols are thereby not only taken for granted knowledge but something to be genuinely understood. By using symbols together with digital media, one might create creative teaching environments. Symbols are often used within digital media without full context or explanations.

7.2.3 Working definitions:

The researcher designed the two definitions with the current study in mind. First, the definition of myth is as follows:

Myth is a construct simulated through human narratives that are deeply tied to identity, meaning-making, ethics, and an understanding of the world. These narratives may intersect with holy narratives (written or oral). Therefore, it intersects with religion, ritual, and symbols. It may also intersect with culture and nationalist narratives. Myth is,

however, not limited to these phenomena. Myths can intersect with the physical, spiritual and digital realms. Myths are narratives with their own status of truth; they are neither seen as entirely historical writings nor considered fiction. Myths should not be seen as falsehoods and should be respected for their own narrative status. Myths intersect strongly with belief, especially for the community ascribed to them. Myths may intersect with identity and us-versus-them phenomena. They significantly impact people's affective realism and human thoughts and behaviour.

The following definition is ascribed to symbol:

Symbols are constructs that are simulated through an object or gesture that has more meaning than is apparent to an outside observer. Symbols intersect with religion, culture, nationalism, ritual, myth, and geography. However, symbols are not limited to these phenomena. Symbols are dependent on context and revealed reality. Symbols may unite or divide people, creating a potential us-versus-them phenomenon. People's affective realism predicts the meaning of symbols. However, the knowledge of certain symbols also affects one's affective realism.

These broad definitions aided the researcher in finding narratives that simulated the constructs.

7.2.4 Examples from digital narratives

Simulations of symbols and myths can be found in electronic books (E-books and audiobooks). *The Chronicles Of Narnia* (2013) by Lewis is a good example of a narrative with much religious symbolism and myth rather than being overtly religious; an especially striking symbol in this book is Aslan, as a Jesus-like figure (Kozlovic 2023:11-12). Kahn (2020) wrote an article for The Washington Post on popular novels written by Muslims. The article named several popular books and stated that Islamic, Middle Eastern, and Arabic mythologies are popular in the novels (Kahn 2020). Many of the novels have prominent Islamic female protagonists (Kahn 2020). Among other publications, Kahn (2020) named *Cairo* (comic book) (2007) by Wilson, *Alif The Unseen* (novel) (2012) by Wilson, *An Ember In The Ashes* (Novel) (2015) by Tahir, and *The Daevabad Trilogy* (novels) (2017-2020) by Chakraborty as examples. Filmography often utilises symbols and myths within their narratives. Crosthwait (2020:179) noted the utopian afterlife concepts, myths, and symbols found in the animated film *Coco* (2017) by Unkrich, based on "Mexican culture". There are also utopian afterlife narratives, with a myriad of myths and symbols found in the series *The Good Place* (2016-2020) by Schur (Crosthwait 2020:179, 180).

Biblical apocalypticism narratives, their myths and symbols are often utilised in films with the theme of the end of days (Ostwalt 2013:40). Examples of such films include but are not limited to *Left Behind* (2014) by Armstrong and *The Road* (2009) by Hillcoat (Ostwalt 2013:40). The use of the burka in the animated series *Burka Avenger* (2013-2016) by Haroon can be seen as the use of religious clothing (possible symbol) in filmography. *The Thin Jew Line* (2011) by Stewart on the Daily Show can act as a stand-up comedy example of using the Jewish Eruv symbol. The documentary *Avatara* (2020) by Harel is an example of a documentary that showcases "Hindu Himalaya" ritual, myth, symbol and spirituality (Moran 2021:1-19). *Taste The Nation With Padma Lakshmi* (2020-2023) by Roma and Smith is a light-hearted documentary focusing on food from different cultures in the USA. The narrative is not overtly focused on religion, yet many lived religious experiences and symbols are featured.

Video games utilise the concept and simulation of myth and symbol. The game *AR The Gods Of Olympus* (2022) by Ventoulis was made and used to educate school children on Greek mythology and symbols (Ventoulis & Xinogalos 2023:2, 9). The game *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow* (2010) by Alvarez contains Christian symbols (Wibawa et al. 2019:3). The video game *Pharaoh* (1999) by Parker and Sheppard features ancient Egyptian mythology and symbols. The games *Elden Ring* (2022) by Kojima, *Hades* (2020) by Kasavin, *World Of Warcraft* (2004) by Kern and Metzen, *Age Of Mythology* (2002) by Goodman and *God Of War* (2005-2022) by Jaffe all contain religious mythology and symbolism (de Wildt 2023:13, 20, 82). Ford (2022:301-303) used examples of video games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) by Howard, multiple forms of *Assassin's Creed* (2007-2020) by Ubisoft, and *Ghost Of Tsushima* (2020) by Fox and Connell that feature mythology. Another example is *Diggy's Adventure* (2015-2024) by Pixel Federation, which features many ancient mythologies and symbols. Horbiński and Zagata (2021:270) used *Valheim* (2021) by Jarlestam as an example of a game set in Norse mythology.

This paragraph gives examples of virtual reality videos that are available on YouTube. These videos include symbols from different religions, such as holy places, rituals, and mythologies. In a study conducted by Johnson (2018), the following examples were used: *Al Aqsa, 360° Tour Of Jerusalem's Holiest Mosque* (2017) by Al Jazeera English, *20161106 Allsaints Antiochian Orthodox Church, Bloomington, In Great Procession* (2016) by MrOldtimer48, *CN 360° Erlang Temple Pingyao China* (2016) by Pandorama360, *Holi Festival Of Colors 360 Degree Video* (2016) by The Good Line, *Sanctuary, Hinduism, Hindu Temple* (2017) by 360 Asia, *Meditate With A Buddhist Monk, Hanoi, Vietnam 360 VR Video*, *Discovery TRVLR*

(2017) by Discovery, *Bevis Marks Synagogue: Exploring Religion In London* (2016) by OpenLearn from The Open University and *Malaysia Hungry Ghost Festival* (2017) by AP-VR360. These videos can be used with virtual reality technology. However, they can be viewed without it, considering the digital divide. These are the videos that Johnson (2018) compiled; however, many more can be found on YouTube.

Music often uses metaphorical concepts and is prone to use symbolism and mythology. Norse mythology and symbolism can be noted in the music of Miracle of Sound (2023) and Peyton Parrish (2023). Christian mythology and symbolism are also found in Katy Perry's music, although she is a secular artist, such as the song *Rise* (Perry 2016). Many bands are overtly religious and utilise Christian symbolism and mythology in their music; one example is *Voice of truth* (2003) by Casting Crowns. However, different forms of religious music from a variety of traditions should be considered as needed for curriculums. All these artists are available on YouTube and streaming services like Apple Music. Internet narratives often utilise symbolism and mythology. This can be seen in social media simulations. Khan and Aytes (2021:21) stated that:

[...] emojis consist of tiny, pictographic and iconic symbols employed in text fields within electronic communications.

Emojis are often used within social media. Emojis reflect many concepts within society, including but not limited to religion (Khan & Aytes 2021:20). Examples of religious-connected emojis include but are not limited to a woman wearing a hijab, Kabaa (often symbolically connected with Islam), Crucifixes (Christian Symbols), and the "wheel of dharma" (Buddhist and Hindu symbol) (Khan & Aytes 2021:20). Many YouTube videos discuss religious symbolism; there are examples of YouTube videos that discuss multiple symbols quickly and simplistically. Some examples include *10 Common Religious Symbols And Their Meanings* (2022) by FTD Facts and *10 Most Common Catholic Symbols And Their Meanings | Common Christian Symbols* (2022) by Keep Your Faith. Other examples that give a more in-depth description of religious symbols and their meaning include *What Is Dharmachakra (The Symbol Of Buddhism)?* (2022) by Bodhisattva and *Star And Crescent: Symbol Of Islam? | Dr. Safiyyah Ally* (2020) by Let the Quran Speak. Furthermore, using # (insert specific religion) # (insert religious symbol) (for example, #Christianity #Cross or #Judaism #StarofDavid) on social media sites (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter) leads to posts with these hashtags and symbols. The Symbols are, however, not always used with religious intent.

Myths and symbols can also be found on websites. "The pluralism project", hosted by Harvard University (2023a), is a website where information can be found on religions. This includes basic religious information like symbols, myths and rituals (Harvard University 2023a). The Cultural Atlas has a page on religion; although it is much more limited in its diversity than the page hosted by Harvard, it is also a source of general understanding of religious myths, rituals and symbols (Cultural Atlas 2023). Another website that explains different religions' beliefs, practices, symbols, and mythology is Learn Religions (2023). These pages are less narrative-based and more information-based. This does not mean that they are entirely devoid of narrative. They can still be engaging in education settings. News articles on religious symbols and mythology are also encountered. Gambrell (2023) reported on a multi-religious site in the United Arab Emirates where the three Abrahamic religions have their places of worship in one complex. These places of worship are part of and usually encompass many religious symbols.

The Quran is the Islamic holy book and is treated as sacred by Muslims, with strict rules of conduct (Huda 2018). The BBC News has reported on the recent burning of a Quran in Sweden that sparked outrage abroad (Armstrong 2023). The Quran falls under holy texts rather than symbols; however, as it has such an essential function in the Islamic religion, the burning of the Quran is a symbolically violent act. The #Burning #Quran brings up posts about the issue on social media apps such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok. Associated Press Daily Sabah (2022) reported on the complex historical entanglements of the swastika in both the context of the holocaust and the religious meaning that it has for "Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism". Martyn-Hemphill and Libell (2018) wrote an article for The New York Times wherein Viking symbols are used commercially by Pagan groups and by "neo-Nazi factions". However, the uses have little to do with one another, creating problems for people who do not wish to use it as a sign of intolerance (Martyn-Hemphill & Libell 2018).

7.2.5 Narrative evaluation example

Religion education often works with both modern and ancient religions (Beyers 2017b:189). The following narrative focuses more on ancient religious mythology. It should be noted that the thesis does not reduce myth and symbol only to ancient narratives or, as stated by Lisiecki (2022:54), "dead myths", nor does the thesis state that the myths and symbols may not have a modern understanding. However, the narrative focuses on ancient Greek religion and does not comment on modern Hellenism. The narrative analysed here is titled *Percy Jackson And The Olympians* (2023-2024), a filmographic series by Riordan and Steinberg. The series is based on books (available in ebook and audiobook format) titled *Percy Jackson & The Olympians*:

The Lightning Thief (2005) by Riordan. This same narrative was also made into a film produced by Columbus (2010). This is a popular narrative (as evidenced by the many renditions) that can cultivate curiosity about religious phenomena (myth and symbol) found in narratives. The focus is on a small part of the narrative to make it more manageable for a compact analysis. However, there is much mythology in symbolism in the narrative, and this analysis should not limit the usefulness of the larger narrative.

This segment focuses on Season 1, Episode 2, timestamp 34:00-36:15 on Disney+ (Riordan & Steinberg 2023-2024); the clip was chosen as it is available on YouTube¹² (longbtms 2023), making it accessible in religious education settings. The narrative forms part of digital entertainment, specifically filmography and is fictional and passive. The original author, Rick Riordan, is an American (religion unspecified) author of fiction novels with a degree in history and English (Riordan 2024). The main character is Percy Jackson (protagonist), a young modern boy who discovers he is a demigod (Riordan & Steinberg 2023-2024). The character is completely synthetic (not based on reality or myth but is an entirely fictional character); his mother is human, and his father is a Greek God (Riordan & Steinberg 2023-2024). The narrative clarified that he is not the demigod Perseus but was named after him, as evidenced in the first episode (Riordan & Steinberg 2023-2024). This information should be made clear to the students as it will assist in analysing the narrative. The plot of the narrative under investigation for the thesis showcases where the character discovers that Poseidon is his father; this is showcased when he is "claimed" with the symbol of a trident that appears overhead and with the background discourse that declares this fact (Riordan & Steinberg 2023-2024).

The narrative intersects with some of the concepts mentioned in the definitions of myth and symbol. First, the narrative is based on ancient Greek mythology. The narrative intersects with identity, as Percy's claim led to a better understanding of his identity. The symbol is connected to a fictional mythology of how demigods are claimed by their parents. However, the mythology of demigods and Greek gods should not be construed as fiction but as historical mythology. The claim was made through a symbol. The symbol is visible (physical world) in nature while having a deeper (spiritual world) meaning while being depicted in digital narrative form (digital world). The claim confirmed his demigod status while perpetuating an us-versus-them phenomenon between demigods and monsters, as seen in the series (Riordan & Steinberg 2023-2024). The claim affected the affective realism of how the character is viewed, as his

¹² For easy access to the narrative, please follow the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOHh06c2hyE->

identity is tied to his father from then on. The affective realism of the characters in the narrative predicts the meaning of the trident symbol as they are insiders who understand the mythology connected to the narrative. If the symbol was unclear to the audience, it was explained by the background narrator. The symbol further intersects with geography, appearing only after he enters the water.

The narrative can be useful to educate children and adults. A religious studies class focusing on ancient Greek mythology can find this narrative helpful, especially for a short assignment (the digital divide should be considered). If possible, the episode can be viewed in class (available through Disney+), and the clip can be given to students through proper channels through the URL for an assignment. If it is impossible to watch the episode in class because of time constraints or the digital divide, a small synopsis may be given to create some context for the students. An assignment should ideally give the link to the YouTube video and some background information on the narrative and the author. The following questions can assist students with the analysis of the narrative. What is the prominent symbol used in the narrative, and what is its significance (both in the narrative and Greek mythology)? Who is the Greek God Poseidon? What is his relation to other Gods in Greek mythology? What is a demigod? What does the reaction of the other characters say about insider-outsider relationships regarding symbols? What is the interaction between the physical, spiritual and digital worlds regarding the narrative? Why did the symbol appear only after he entered the water? Much more can be done to analyse this and other scenes from the narrative; however, it is outside the scope of the thesis. This concludes the subsection on Myth and Symbol.

7.3 Spirituality

Spirituality as a construct intersects with but is not limited to religion. Spirituality is often found within digital narratives (Waaïjman 2002:1). These simulations have the potential to aid interactive educational moments. Learning to see and evaluate narratives that simulate spirituality can lead to lifelong learning. Care should be taken not to limit spirituality only to digital phenomena. Religious education often includes conversations on the differences between faith, spirituality and religion. This section gives a (i) *Discussion and semantics*, (ii) *Working definition*, (iii) *Examples from digital narratives* and (iv) *Narrative evaluation example* on spirituality.

7.3.1 Discussion and semantics

The words spiritual and spirituality are derived from the Latin word *spiritualitas*; therefore, as a term, it is western (Sheldrake 2013:16). Spirituality is not limited to western thought, but the construct is found worldwide. Initially, the term referred to someone with the spirit of god (within a Christian view) (Sheldrake 2013:16); the term is not limited to this origin today. In its many forms, spirituality within the world has long superseded the word, similarly to religion (Magid 2021c:123). Spirituality includes humans as not being only flesh and blood but having a spirit or soul and the care and development of this part of a person (Ammerman 2013:27, 28). Spirituality is connected to the metaphysical (Ammerman 2013:271). The experience of spirituality refers to "lived spirituality", although it is also the object of research and the subject of study, which is often interdisciplinary (Waaijman 2002:2-5). Ryan (2016:13) defined spirituality as "The quest for meaning in life". The search for meaning is often associated with spirituality (Sheldrake 2013:18); however, one may find meaning without associating it with spirituality. Waaijman (2002:4) gave the following general definition of spirituality:

(a) Spirituality is conceived as a polar structure: the relation of the human person (inner dimension, spirit, spiritual core, deepest centre) to a transcendent dimension (ultimate reality, ultimate goal). (b) this relation is not a static structure but a dynamic process (discovery, development, journey, spiritual ascent). (c) This spiritual process is fostered by specific means (prayer, spiritual direction, maps and methods).

In a way, this statement is close to many definitions of religion but explains what finding meaning through spirituality entails. The question then stands if there is a difference between religion and spirituality. Magid (2021b:10) stated:

Religion distinguishes itself from "spirituality" in that, while the latter is often singular, and quietist, the former often contains social formations meant to solidify collectivity (i.e., ritual) and to construct a hierarchical message of preference (i.e., election) and soteriological vision of the future (i.e., redemption).

Magid's statement shows that spirituality comes down to personal faith, whereas religion deals with the collective faith of communities. Spirituality is often seen as less authoritative and more individualised (Lewis 2021c:92; Banton 2011:1248); in contrast, religion is seen as institutionalised and rule-based (Lewis 2021c:92). Religion and spirituality can overlap; however, spirituality is not dependent upon religion (Ryan 2016:13). Similarly, faith can also be seen as a personal understanding or experience (Beyers 2016:3). Religion can act as a system for constructs like faith or spirituality to thrive in (Beyers 2016:3) while not being limited to religion (Ryan 2016:13). Spirituality and religion are often firmly rooted constructs (Lewis 2021c:93), this is important to remember, as students of any age can find constructs outside their simulation complex. Religion and spirituality are not entities but are rather constructs

attributed by people for self and others as part of identification (Lewis 2021c:93; von Stuckrad 2021b:112). Spirituality can also act as a social phenomenon (Sheldrake 2013:18); this is encountered in traditional religious communities or communities that identify as spiritual rather than religious.

Many people have turned away from the construct of religion and prefer to identify as spiritual (Grimes 2014:196; Sheldrake 2013:17, 18; Waaijman 2002:1). Sheldrake (2013:19) stated that organised religion is not always individualised enough or sufficient for everyone's spiritual needs. Magid (2021c:124) stated that spirituality is created from religion, but it negatively comments on religion. Secularism and spiritualism, although two different constructs have a common critique of religion (Magid 2021c:125). Therefore, people look for ways to live out their spirituality outside of traditional religious structures (Sheldrake 2013:19). Ammerman (2013:258, 276) stated that spirituality does not always need to oppose religion but exists within and outside of religion. Spirituality can be individual, but even then, it can focus on some form of connectedness between people, nature or transcendent beings (Ammerman 2013:266, 268). Ryan (2016:13) stated that:

Religion does organise, direct and shape Spirituality, it gives it a context within which to express it, to celebrate it and explore it further.

The intersection between religion and spirituality is made clear through this statement, although it should not be limited to this intersection. Hogan (2014:xiii) made the following statement:

One can come to know of spirituality in any number of different ways. The psychology of spirituality is a veritable ocean of human activity.

Hogan's statement on spirituality emphasises the diversity in the phenomenon. Just as one should be cautious when defining religion, the same can be said for words like spirituality (von Stuckrad 2021b:115). For instance, not making the mistake of putting a westernised or stagnant view on all spiritualities as context will play a significant role in the simulation of concepts (von Stuckrad 2021b:115; Hogan 2014:xiii, xvii). The different contexts of spirituality can form part of discourses between religions to create better understanding and more tolerant societies (Waaijman 2002:1). Hogan (2014:3) stated that "ideals, values and beliefs" are a part of spirituality, while not limiting it to these constructs. Belief, faith and spirituality are tied to one's identity (Hogan 2014:11). Spirituality is closely connected to what can be considered sacred and ethical (Sheldrake 2013:17, 18; Ammerman 2013:272). The intersection of identity and ethics showcases the connection between spirituality and affective realism.

7.3.2 Working definition

The researcher designed the definition of spirituality with the current study in mind:

Spirituality is a construct that describes the various simulations of the non-tangible part of humanity, e.g., the spirit or soul of a person. Spirituality involves the care and development of the non-tangible part of humanity. However, this care can be simulated in the physical world. Spirituality can intersect with religion and culture but is not limited to it. Spirituality can act as a criticism toward organised religion, although this is not always its function. Spirituality intersects with but is not limited to identity, either of an individual or group. Spirituality intersects with connectedness; even in the case of individual spirituality, however, it is not limited to it. The connectedness can be toward oneself (mind-body connection), other people, nature, the universe, or transcendent beings. Spirituality forms part of the meaning-making and ethics-building of a person or group. However, ethics, meaning, and spirituality are not mutually exclusive. Spirituality can be simulated in the physical-, spiritual- and digital worlds. Spirituality or lack thereof will affect one's affective realism.

This broad definition aided the researcher in finding narratives that simulate the construct.

7.3.3 Examples from digital narratives

The construct and simulations of spirituality are found in books and electronic mediums. Examples of eBooks that are not fiction, written by religious leaders with an acute focus on spiritual growth include *Mere Christianity* (2009) by Lewis, *The Book Of Jewish Values: A Day-By-Day Guide To Ethical Living* (2000) by Telushkin, and *Beyond Religion: Ethics For A Whole World* (2011) by the Dalai Lama. These books may simulate real-world beliefs to illustrate theories. May et al. (2022:468–487) examined the intersection between scientists and how religion may have affected their lives through their biographies, stating that these concepts could be introduced into children's education. They reference, among other biographies, *Sally Ride: Life On A Mission* (2014) by Macy and *Super Women: Six Scientists Who Changed The World* (2017) by Lawlor (May et al. 2022:574-576). Filmography can contain constructs and simulations of spirituality. The films *Life Of Pi* (2012) by Lee and *Eat Pray Love* (2010) by Murphy depict the simulation of a spiritual journey. Aaltonen (2015:1) showcased how he, in his two documentary films "Kusum (2000) and Leap (2012)", showcased spiritual experiences. His article addressed how one captures spirituality on film as it is not always a concept of sight or audible sound, and filmography is intrinsically audio-visually inclined (Aaltonen 2015:1-6).

Films can be experienced spiritually; however, the perception of whether a film is experienced as spiritual may differ between groups and individuals (Magalhães 2021:1-22). Magalhães's (2021:1-22) study showcased how Seventh-day Adventists experience spirituality in film. The overtly religious films like *The Ten Commandments: The Movie* (2016) by Avancini were seen as invoking a less spiritual response than a film that had religious themes but were not meant as religious films like *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016) by Gibson (Magalhães 2021:16, 14). Magalhães (2021:14, 16) ascribed this finding to higher identification levels and cultivation theory. However, this may also demonstrate the "show don't tell" theory as set out by Gottschall (2021:62). Islamic reality shows in Malaysia are an alternative to westernised television within the region (Shariffadee & Manaf 2018:356, 359). The programs are used to gain knowledge of Islam (Shariffadee & Manaf 2018:359, 361, 362, 365) and can therefore be part of spirituality. *Imam Muda* (2010) by Astro Oasis is an example of a reality show that showcased knowledge of Islam (Shariffadee & Manaf 2018:361; Wasli 2020:218-220). However, like all reality shows, there is a synthetic component that is not purely mimetic; this is not always considered and may give a skewed reality of Islam (Shariffadee & Manaf 2018:361).

Virtual reality and video games also showcase concepts and simulations of spirituality. Virtual reality meditation apps are a part of spiritual experiences that may be facilitated through the medium. Examples of such applications are *Solar Meditation VR* (2020) by Tiesto Capital and *Exhale XP, VR Wellness* (2016-2021) by Artist Life Vision VR LLC. However, it should not be seen as only limited to the examples. These virtual reality meditation experiences can also be found on YouTube, for example, *Virtual Nature 360° - 5.7K Nature Meditation For Oculus Quest* (2017) by ECOVR. As named under the ritual section, applications such as *Buddhify: Meditation & Mindfulness App* (2018) by Whistle Studios LLC and *Second Life* (2023) by Linden Research, Inc. (Grieve & Veidlinger 2021:40-43) are narrative applications that are used by some Buddhist communities to have spiritual experiences.

Spirituality is also intertwined with music. Endong (2016:133-144) emphasised the responsibility of gospel writers (specifically Christian artists) to live spiritually and warned against content creators who only create content for money. This was written with the Nigerian Christian gospel context in mind (Endong 2016:128). Endong (2016:128) cited artists like "Sammie Okposo and Lanre Teriba [...] Gloria Doyle and Tope Alabi [...] Keefee and Doyle" as some controversial gospel artists in the Nigerian context. "Tope Alabi" was also mentioned by Ayorinde and Ajose (2022:2) as a controversial gospel singer. They further emphasise that the content creator can be as much a spiritual symbol as the music itself (Ayorinde & Ajose

2022:8). Endong (2016:129-130) further urged the evaluation of narratives and artists rather than taking the narrative at face value. However, particular emphasis is put on how content receivers have marked control over their understanding of narratives and their experience of the spiritual (Ayorinde & Ajose 2022:11).

Inglis (2023:1, 2) stated that the songs "Ave generosa (1996)" and "The Song of Margery Kempe (2008)" showcased both spirituality and religious symbolism. Furthermore, spirituality can be transmitted through music regardless of whether it has a vocal or only instrumental quality (Inglis 2023:1). Heavy metal is very dependent on context, as there are Islamic bands that utilise this type of music (James & Walsh 2019:4). Examples of Islamic heavy metal bands include "Purgatory" "Tengkorak" and "Kodusa" (James & Walsh 2019:8). The music is however not accepted by all as appropriate. In a study by Hays and Minichiello (2005:83, 95), music was shown to have a spiritual effect; in this study, it was mitigated toward older people. Examples of musicians mentioned in the article include Bach, Borodin and Wagner (Hays & Minichiello 2005:89, 92). In this study, music was equated with prayer, interaction with the transcendent, care for the human soul and meditation (Hays & Minichiello 2005:92, 93). Music and the content consumer did not have to be intrinsically religious to be perceived as spiritual (Hays & Minichiello 2005:95).

Internet narratives also contain constructs and simulations of spirituality. Jonveaux (2021:61-71) stated that not only should the use of internet narratives for religious life be investigated, but the fasting of internet narratives as a ritual is also essential. This is often seen during the Christian celebration of Lent, the Islamic celebration of Ramadan and the Jewish celebration of the Shabbat (Jonveaux 2021:61-71; Lieber 2021:80-82). Fasting internet narratives is said to have a deepening spiritual effect (Jonveaux 2021:61-71). Spirituality as a construct and simulation can be encountered in social media narratives. Religious people sometimes utilise social media as a space to live out their religious convictions. Religious leaders have also utilised it for preaching (Hegy 2023:10). Social media is used to advertise religious communities and events (Hegy 2023:10). It can, therefore, be seen as an expression of spirituality. Baig et al.'s (2023:179-193) study focused on university students in Pakistan and whether they learned from Islamic teachings via social media. Most students followed Islamic preachers on social media and felt that it impacted their lives (Baig et al. 2023:190). The study expressed that both good and misinformation exist on social media platforms (Baig et al.

2023:179-193). Social media may be changing how and where spirituality takes place. Syahputra and Hafiar (2019:60) made the following statement:

New media as a discursive space enables anyone to express their spirituality and religious activities via social media.

With this in mind, the private and public domains (see Chapter Eight) begin to blur as personal accounts on social media are used to live out spirituality in what can be considered public spaces (Syahputra & Hafiar 2019:60). It is easier than ever before for spiritual leaders to get in touch with a broad audience (Syahputra & Hafiar 2019:64). Syahputra and Hafiar (2019:64) stated that there are misleading spiritual leaders online, convicted of crimes like murder and rape, yet they still have followers, they include "Gatot Brajamusti" and "Dimas Kanjeng" as examples. Commentaries on #Spirituality can be found on social media sites like Twitter, Tik Tok, and Facebook. This can be combined with other hashtags like #insert specific religion #meditation #prayer, and #conection, as the context dictates. Spirituality in the form of activism may also be seen in social media, websites and news. This can, for example, be seen by female Muslim advocates in Pakistan who advocate for women's rights and promote education for women (Junik-Łuniewska 2016:296). Junik Łuniewska (2016:296-297) used "Tabassum Adnan" and "Malala Yousufzai" as some of the many women's rights advocates who use social media to further their cause. Hashtags are often utilised in social movements such as "#girlwithabook" and "#TheLast" to generate awareness and funding (Junik Łuniewska 2016:297).

Videos are often uploaded on YouTube, such as the speech that Malala gave at the UN to advocate for women's rights to education (United Nations 2013). Yousafzai is a women's rights activist in Islam, and her passion lies specifically with women's education, some of her speeches and initiatives can be found on websites and social media through hashtags, websites, and speeches at the UN (United Nations 2013; Junik Łuniewska 2016; Rubens 2012; Yousafzai 2023). Websites like The World Plus and Malala.org are used for awareness and funding activist causes (World Plus 2023; Junik Łuniewska 2016:296; Yousafzai 2023). News systems can also act as a place for activists fighting for human rights, education and religious rights to have a voice. This can be seen, for example, in the BBC news publication *Malala's Diary*

(2012) by Rubens. Furthermore, other spiritual concepts can be found on websites. Abdelfattah (2021:1) made the following statement:

One of the most popular cultures in Islam is the genre of "hymns" or "invocations" (pl. ibtihalat, sing. ibtihal), which has recently been amplified on social media platforms. The ibtihalat are Arabic short poems performed by a sheikh known as the "supplicator" (mubtahil).

Abdelfattah (2021:1) used "ibtihal like that of Sheikh Sayyid al-Naqshabandi's "My Lord"" as an example. This music is associated with times of holiness and festiveness, such as Ramadan (Abdelfattah 2021:3). This type of music can be perceived as part of a spiritual experience on the part of content receivers (Abdelfattah 2021:6). An example of this music is available via the website *Sayed Al-Naqshabandi: Egypt's Voice Of Grace* (2023) by Rafik. Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center (1993-2023) is a website that provides information on Jewish beliefs and customs and spiritual support for Jewish people. Lieber (2021:81) mentioned an app and website, *Thrive Global* (2023), by Huffington. The website tries to combat burnout, using articles by "leaders from a variety of religious and cultural perspective[s]" (Lieber 2021:81). The website promotes multi-religious and multi-cultural views on the problem of burnout.

One also finds news articles that are focused on spirituality. In a news article published by The Times of Israel, Tarnopolsky (2022) reported on a Bat Mitzvah held by "the Western Wall in Jerusalem". Here, a "women of the Wall activist group" joined in protest to help the ritual occur (Tarnopolsky 2022). The group actively live out their spirituality by reading the Torah in public at the wall where they are not allowed to do so (Tarnopolsky 2022). Mdaka (2023) wrote an article on News 24 about how Spotify, a music and podcast app, has increased the number of Muslim users with the celebration of Ramadan, as it can "foster a sense of mindfulness and spiritual focus". Banks (2018) wrote an article for The Washington Post on millennial African American spirituality. This article referred to spirituality within organised religions and spirituality as an opposing force to religion (Banks 2018). Stein (2021) wrote an article for The New York Times on how many women seek spirituality online, terming American preachers on Instagram as "Instavangelists". The article highlights both the positive and negative aspects of seeking spirituality online. Schiffman (2022) wrote for The Washington Post on mental health and the benefits of spirituality in its religious and non-religious forms.

7.3.4 Narrative evaluation example

This section contains a compact analysis of a narrative that contains spirituality. This analysis may be expanded to fit the necessary context (e.g. sociocultural or religious). The narrative is titled *Pause For Thought: Ramadan Is Hard - But It's Also Beautiful* (2022) by Sarah Joseph¹³. This is an internet narrative, classified as part of a website for this thesis. The website forms part of the BBC Radio 2 station; the website has a Pause For Thought¹⁴ segment, where different religious opinions are given as part of reflections (BBC: Radio 2 2023). Many of these narratives can make interesting segments for classes and should not be limited to the example used in this thesis. The narratives in these segments are non-fiction and part of lived religion. The personal nature of these narratives needs to be considered if educators want to work with them in religious education. This compact narrative is just over 3 minutes, making it ideal to use inside and outside class. The narrative is passive and does not demand much physically from the listener unless they reflect on the narrative after listening.

The main character is also the author of the narrative. Her name is Sarah Joseph. Joseph is a British, practising Muslim person (she converted after growing up in a catholic household) and a public figure ("writer and broadcaster") who specialises in matters of Islamic faith, lifestyle and spirituality (Emel 2024; WISE 2024). She founded the Emel magazine, catering to Muslims while encouraging interreligious dialogue (WISE 2024). She is considered an influential voice and has received recognition from the British crown for her contribution to interfaith tolerance and dialogue (WISE 2024). She has multiple degrees, including a Bachelor's in religion studies, and actively works against Islamophobia with the British government (Emel 2024; WISE 2024). Depending on context, some students may know of her as an influential figure. However, basic biographical information may be helpful in contextualising the character for students. If students have prior knowledge of her, this may influence the level of transportation, para-social interaction and reception of the narrative.

The narrative's plot was her personal experience of Ramadan (Joseph 2022). She spoke about fasting during Ramadan and how the discomfort of fasting is often juxtaposed with the joy and celebration that occur (Joseph 2022). She replayed her personal experience and struggles with fasting, adding a significant concept of humanisation to the character (Joseph 2022). She expressed that while fasting is a space of discomfort for her, it leads to immense spiritual growth (Joseph 2022). She mentioned self-reflection, self-discipline, the bettering of self,

¹³ For easy access to the narrative, please follow the link: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0bzmwyy>

¹⁴ For easy access to the overall webpage, please follow the link: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p015nm0y>

emotional control, and interpersonal relationships (both with her community and with God) as part of the spiritual experiences found during this month (Joseph 2022). She stated that fasting is a physical sign of the spiritual experience (Joseph 2022). She emphasised that during Ramadan, growth takes place, which is part of "the goals of the human spirit" (Joseph 2022).

She does not use the word spirituality (she does use the word spirit), but it is clear that many aspects of spirituality are found in this segment. The narrative intersects with quite a few concepts mentioned in the definition. There is a spiritual and physical aspect to her experience, showcasing various simulations of the non-tangible (spiritual world) part of humanity and how fasting (physical world) forms part of the month. By sharing her experience online, the ritual becomes part of the digital world. The narrative intersects with religion, specifically with Islam. The spiritual experience of Ramadan intersects with both connectedness to her community and the transcendent and creating a concept of identity. The narrative intersects with ethics (bettering self, self-discipline, control) and meaning-making (spiritual goal as meaning to existence). It should be noted that this narrative does not simulate spirituality as a negative commentary on religion but as part of religion. This narrative is appropriate for adults and younger groups in education settings. The narrative can be used in classes or pre- and post-class activities. This narrative will be useful in religious education settings where Islam is the subject, such as Islamic studies or a religion course where Islam is part of the curriculum.

It should be noted to the class that lived religion is memetic as it is what a person experiences. However, students should not interpret the narrative as thematic; for example, they should not assume that all Muslims will feel the same about Ramadan as Joseph does. By making this assumption, the ritual stagnates in students' minds and becomes synthetic. Another experience of Ramadan is not less authentic or less meaningful than the one described by Joseph, nor should such an experience diminish Joseph's experience. An idea for education settings can be to ask students to compare Joseph's experience to the definition of spirituality (Class discussion) and, alternatively, discuss some of the intersections in depth (post-class reflection). This clip can be given to students as part of pre-class reading, as this can cause humanisation through para-social interaction with the protagonist characters' lived religious experience before traditional fact-based learning. This can be followed by a class with fact-based learning focusing on Islam and explaining Ramadan and its role. Students can be asked questions about what they heard and if they have questions about the phenomena. Students can also be asked to reflect on how the narrative impacted their view of the phenomena; all these suggestions can

help encourage conscious retrospective reflection. More can be done to analyse this narrative; however, this is beyond the scope of the thesis. This concludes the subsection on spirituality.

7.4 Chapter themes

- Digital narrative as a creative source (SQ5; RG5; PC6)

The three subsections, (i) *Ritual*, (ii) *Myth and Symbol* and (iii) *Spirituality*, all have small catalogues of narrative with the relevant phenomena present. In each section, there was a compact analysis of a narrative. The compact catalogue and analysis showcase that religious phenomena occur in narratives and can be used within religious education. The analysis of the three narratives focused more on the educational purpose of the narratives and, therefore, stood as compact demonstrations.

- Critical thinking abilities and digital narratives (SQ6, RG3, PC5)

Critical thinking can be achieved by informing students of religious phenomena in narratives. By creating this awareness, curiosity and para-social interactions can be encouraged for lifelong learning. By encouraging students to think about the narratives, their creators, and their relationship to the phenomena showcased, educators can encourage students to question the information found in narratives.

- Tolerance and the responsible use of digital narratives (SQ7, RG6, PC4)

Better tolerance and humanisation may be achieved by showcasing lived religious narratives to students, as seen under the Narrative evaluation example under the headings *Ritual* and *Spirituality*. This can be achieved through para-social interaction with favourable characters, fictional and non-fictional. These narratives can involve lived religious experiences but do not have to. Furthermore, better tolerance can be achieved by encouraging students to be curious about phenomena found in narratives. Thereby, students can learn about concepts (physical and spiritual) found in the world, creating lifelong learning opportunities, as seen under *Myth and symbol*.

- Post-secularism and digital narrative (SQ8)

Telling students that the narrative is memetic is essential when working with lived religion narratives. However, as a lived experience, it should not become thematic, where all experiences must reflect the character's experience. Nor should another experience declare the current narrative void, as a significantly individualised understanding of religious experiences within a post-secular society exists. It becomes synthetic if one narrative dictates the experience

of all people regarding a religious phenomenon. This balance needs to be considered when working with narratives.

- Interpretation of narratives (SQ4)

The Chapter showcased some of the factors mentioned throughout the thesis in analysing three compact narratives. The Chapter also added a small catalogue with some religious phenomena found in narratives. These are very compact examples, and they should be expanded on contextually. Educators contribute to lifelong learning experiences through curiosity and para-social interactions by analysing, cataloguing and using narratives in educational settings.

- Well-informed or ill-informed digital narratives (PC2)

Many of the narratives named in this Chapter either have positive or neutral depictions of the religious phenomena, e.g. ritual, myth, symbol, and spirituality. The researcher did not elaborate on the accuracy of the narratives; the catalogues showcase that narratives have religious phenomena. However, some narratives had negative depictions. This included but was not limited to the baptism depiction in *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) by Levine. The news articles regarding symbols often showcase simulated intolerant concepts. The Scholar Endong (2016) showcased the exploitation of spiritual music. This thereby showcases the need for evaluation of narratives and their creators. Negative aspects were also noted under spirituality and social media narratives. Three narratives were analysed in more detail in this Chapter. The first narrative was an internet social media narrative by Bialik (2018) that explained her lived religious experience of her son's Bar Mitzvah. This narrative is inherently positive and accurate. The narrative should have a positive, pro-social, humanising effect on the narrative receiver. The narrative encourages knowledge of Judaism and can act as a counter-narrative for some stereotypical views. However, the narrative should not stagnate the ritual or make the ritual thematic in students' minds, as individual experiences may differ. This is, therefore, a narrative that can be utilised to cultivate better tolerance in multi-cultural societies.

The second narrative was a segment of a fictional, filmographic narrative by Riordan and Steinberg (2023-2024) titled *Percy Jackson And The Olympians* (series). This narrative is fictional but contains blatant mythology and symbolism. The narrative does contain fictional mythology of how Greek demigods are claimed by their parents; this should be noted to the class (as the synthetic element). Furthermore, the narrative is fiction, and the main characters, for example, are new fictionalised characters set apart from ancient Greek mythology. However, the narrative does contain concepts that can lead to learning about ancient Greek

mythology. Educators can encourage students to research the phenomena and information found in narratives to become lifelong learners by giving students narratives like this one as an assignment. The last narrative analysed in the Chapter is Joseph's (2022) lived religious experience of Ramadan. The narrative is memetic as it is a lived religious experience, but it should not be seen as thematic as experiences differ. Joseph (2022) emphasised that the recounting was her personal experience, discouraging thematic concepts. This humanising narrative can cause greater tolerance in multi-religious societies through para-social interaction.

- Catalogues (PC12)

This Chapter added a small catalogue of digital narratives. The narratives given were both in entertainment and internet narrative forms that showcase the concepts of Ritual, Symbol, Myth and Spirituality.

- Providing new definitions to add to the ongoing conversation of scholarly definitions (PC13).

This Chapter contributed definitions for (i) ritual, (ii) myth, (iii) symbol, and (iv) spirituality. As seen in the definition of religion in Chapter One, these concepts intersect with religion. These definitions, therefore, enhance the definition of religion. These definitions assisted the researcher in finding relevant phenomena connected to religion within digital narratives. The subsections on examples from digital narratives showcased that the constructs discussed in the Chapter are simulated within multiple digital narrative forms. Continued future exploration is necessary for researchers to understand narratives and their use within education settings. This concludes the Chapter on *Terms relevant to religious education*. The following Chapter explores *Digital narratives and religious (in)tolerance*.

Chapter Eight: Digital narratives and religious (in)tolerance

This Chapter brings together all the work in the previous Chapters and their implications. In this Chapter, the terms (i) *Secularism and nationalism*, (ii) *Fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism*, and (iii) *Islamophobia, Antisemitism and minority-majority relationships* are discussed. The terms in this Chapter interact with (in)tolerance in a complex manner. This complex system influences this Chapter's structure. Each term has a (i.i; ii.i; iii.i) *Discussion and semantics* and (i.ii; ii.ii; iii.ii) *Working definition* section. A section on (iv) *Examples of digital narratives* is found after the explanation of all the terms. Because of the complex interactions between terms, it is not always possible to situate a narrative under one construct. The potential phenomena that can be encountered in the narratives will be named. Although this Chapter focuses on the potential us-versus-them phenomena, some examples may not be discriminatory and may even serve as counter-narratives. One of the reasons why examples are given in one subsection is that extremist content exists on a myriad of platforms. Even though it is written extensively in scholarly work, actual examples are tough to come by, and there are some reasons for this. First, one does not want to encourage these narratives by giving them more light, potentially spreading them and creating more significant harm. Secondly, when one encounters these narratives, one must report them so that they can be removed (especially on social media platforms).

While the responsibility of educating students on these narratives remains, one must be cautious about not causing harm when working with extremist narratives. Therefore, educators are responsible for not indoctrinating students or traumatising them altogether. The age group and potential vulnerability of specific contexts must be considered when working on these narratives in class settings. The thesis is, however, not a curriculum for a specific context. The narratives in this section will not be analysed for accuracy or shown where they can work in religion education as it will be very contextually bound. The function of the subsection is to show that these narratives exist and contain these phenomena, acting as a catalogue. They are in the digital world and can potentially affect students when encountered. The phenomena are not limited to the examples given in this Chapter; educators should be on the lookout for potential narratives they may encounter. Lastly, under the heading (v) *Narrative evaluation example*, two narratives of similar overarching contexts are evaluated as an example. The Chapter concludes with the (vi) *Chapter themes* that contextualise the work to the overall themes of the study.

8.1 Secularism and nationalism

The word secular is convoluted and can have many different interpretations. One finds terms like secularisation, secularism, secularity, secular age, and post-secular age. These terms influence law-making, religion, religious education, or lack thereof, religious tolerance, public opinion and digital narratives. It is, therefore, essential to understand what these terms mean. Nationalism is also discussed here, as it is sometimes influenced by religion and impacts how secular and non-secular societies function, thereby influencing tolerance and religious education. Nationalism is often found in digital narratives. This section contains a *Discussion and semantics* and *Working definition* for both terms.

8.1.1 Discussion and semantics on secularism

A distinction must be made between the pre-secular age, the secular age, the post-secular age, secularism, and secularisation. The pre-secular age refers to the time before the secular age, where religiosity was seen as part of a non-optional understanding of being human (Beyers 2014:3). In the pre-secular time, the word secular was already used. Beyers (2014:3) stated:

The concept 'secular' thus came to refer to time and place, to the temporal and existential limitations of human existence. Only later did secular come to denote a qualitative differentiation. Opposed to the secular world stands the sacred. This differentiation is also addressed by the separation of transcendence and immanence.

The secular age promised or predicted the destruction or extinction of religion (Phan & Tan 2013:231; Beyers 2016:1). Taylor (2007:773) stated:

All these together—science, mechanism, the instrumental stance—contribute to disenchantment. The mechanization of the Weltbild is a high-level cousin of Entzauberung in the sense in which I've been using the term here: the decline and withering of beliefs and practices that call on spirits and moral forces.

The hope was that science and reason would outweigh concepts such as emotion and religion (Barrett 2018:164). Science tried to alter how humans view their construction or existence from religious and spiritual beings to genetic beings who can reason (Barrett 2018:164), and religious narratives became irrational in the face of rationalism and secularism (McGrath 2019:17). Religion in the public realm had become a scapegoat for violence while secularisation was seen as an answer to control this violent potential (Moyaert 2019:217). Therefore, religion could be approved in a private realm but not a public one (Moyaert 2019:217, 218; Beyers 2021:45-55). The secularisation theory was so strong that very little attention was given by policymakers to interreligious education (Moyaert 2018:4). The reasoning behind this was that if something is going to disappear, it is not worth learning from (Moyaert 2018:4).

Another thing to consider is the post-secular age, where it became clear that the secularisation premonition of the destruction of religion was left unrealised (Beyers 2014:7). W.C. Smith (1991:loc124) already pointed out in 1991 that secularisation did not happen as foretold. Lofton (2021a:38) stated that religion would not expire or be extinguished, nor can it be reasoned away. Prostack (2021:197) asked if the remnants of religion rather than the "church" are still embedded within state entities. Religion and spirituality still form part of society and shape it, no matter how neutral the claim is or how people try to banish it (Phan & Tan 2013:231; Hogan 2014:5). This brings up the question of "secular religion" or "implicit religion", implying a form of spirituality or meaning-making in the mundane that is not religiously connected (Bailey 2002:iii-iv). Studying the secular in the same manner as if it were religious, for instance, for the value that it adds to human life, is part of implicit religion (Bailey 2002:8). Stewart (2022:2) made the following statement on implicit religion:

This can perhaps be best expressed as understanding that what people stand for, combined with who they are, leads to action for what they want beyond themselves.

This statement by Stewart can be used as a functional definition of implicit religion. Secularity and religion intertwine to become a reality, and neither one can exist alone or need to be dominated by the other (Bailey 2002:7-8). Bailey (2002:9) suggested that religion and secularism are not the same thing, yet they are two different parts of a spectrum of the same phenomena. Implicit religion is useful to religion education settings (Stewart 2022:2), as one cannot fully explore religion without the secular. The construct of implicit religion may help students understand complex simulations that might neither be entirely secular nor religious. Implicit religion may be an excellent way to study "popular culture" or digital narratives (Stewart 2022:2; Aicinena 2017:57). Popular culture intersects with digital narratives; however, the two terms are not mutually exclusive. An example may be that sports may be seen as popular culture, yet it is not always a part of digital narrative, although they may intersect (Stewart 2022:2). When fractions of religion arise in digital media, it may be illustrated religiously, or it may also be detached from religion. In this way, the phenomena might have originated in religion but are practised in a secular manner while still attaching a non-religious meaning to the concept.

One of the essential constructs to understand is that atheism and secularism are not always mutually exclusive, especially in a post-secular age (Arthur 2013:62). However, some definitions still include anti-religion and atheistic constructs within their views of secularism

(Arthur 2013:64). Secularism has been described as a "liquid" that can take on different shapes (Tokrri et al. 2022:98). Bailey (2002:6) stated that:

If 'secularisation' describes the process of becoming secular, and 'secularity' describes the quality of being secular, then 'secularism' describes either the philosophy or the practice of secularity.

This is something to consider as the different words have different meanings. Paas (2011:7-9) gave five definitions of secularism. The first definition he titled "Differentiation" this is the separation between governance and religion (Paas 2011:7). The second definition he titled "Rationalization" this involves religion becoming one of many knowledge bases alongside rationalised concepts like science (Paas 2011:7). Religion becomes one of many ideologies and may be simulated in a more rationalised form (Paas 2011:7). The third definition he titled "Privatization", where religion is seen as private rather than public, indicating a loss of control from religious institutions toward their members (Paas 2011:8). The fourth definition he titled "Pluralisation", where religious identity is no longer an assumed one, but rather multiple options (including no religion) may arise in one society (Paas 2011:8). Finally, he titled the fifth concept as "Individual loss of faith" where the complete abandonment of religion takes place by individuals.

These five concepts, as given by Paas (2011:7-9), can be used to showcase different simulations of secularism. These concepts may be seen to overlap in societies. It would explain why, as with religion, there exists no universal definition for secularism (Arthur 2013:63; Beyers 2014:6). These five concepts, however, can be used to classify definitions and can be useful in religious education settings. Some examples will be given; however, the use of these definitions as classifications can not be fully explored here as it is beyond the scope of this thesis. The definition of "Differentiation" (Paas 2011:7) can be seen in many scholarly works. For example, secularism is described as the separation of religion and government (Prostak 2021:196; Indiparambil 2018:435; Beyers 2021:45-55; Beyers 2016:1). Furthermore, secularism usually involves the neutrality or equal respect of government toward religion (Moyaert 2018:6; Indiparambil 2018:435). It can also be seen as the separation between the material world and the spiritual one (van Gennep 1960:1). However, one must not mistake secularism for democracy as the two are distinct constructs that are not mutually exclusive (Martin 2014:12).

Secular can refer to that which the state rules, the physical and the state institutional systems (Arthur 2013:62). Therefore, religion does not necessarily have a say in matters like law, governance, and education it previously enjoyed (Beyers 2014:4, 10). Religion becomes

another subsystem with less or no say over other systems (Beyers 2014:4). This train of thought may be more reminiscent of the "Rationalization" concept as given by Paas (2011:7). The laws of specific countries will grant insight into a contextually bound understanding of secularism. There is usually a divide between the public and personal realms within a secular state. Fridlund (2013:224) made the following statement:

In this contribution, I consider 'the public sphere' to be a sphere of common interest, and in which there is some kind of debate or exchange going on with regard to some kind of decisions; that entails use of arguments. This could be called a 'political sphere'. Important to notice though is that it is not limited to political institutions.

How exactly public and private or personal is defined will differ from context to context (Fridlund 2013:224). One can see that the "Privatization" concept by Paas (2011:8) played a role in the previous quote. In some contexts, religion is considered personal and strictly removed from the public realm (Fridlund 2013:224). In other countries, religion is considered inseparable from the public domain (Fridlund 2013:224). Martin (2007:140) stated that secularism is not a clear-cut line between political and religious realms, instead, it is a transition between the two. Transition theories may explain why context makes such a big difference in secular societies regarding how much religion is removed from the public realm. Postmodern societies struggle to co-exist peacefully in now irreversibly multi-religious countries (Pratt 2013:244). Today, most countries are multi-religious, meaning that more than one religion exists in the same context and that religious diversity is also present within single traditions (Pratt 2013:245). Secularism as a political concept is often the answer to this struggle, although it is only one of the first steps to peaceful co-existence and is not the only answer to the problem. Paas's (2011:8) "Pluralisation" theory is present in these thought patterns.

Henking (2021c:6) stated that the concept of secularism is a twin or mirror image of religion. Taves (2021:15) and Bailey (2002:5) stated that secularism is the opposite of religion. Lewis (2021a:9) asked, "What makes an action religious rather than secular?". This question, as posed by Lewis, is fundamental, especially if taking Henking's and Taves' statements into account. Is secular similar to religion, yet different, as stated by Henking, or is it, as Taves stated, the opposite? If it is similar, what makes it secular rather than religious? Is it still done out of outright fundamental convictions that differ from other world views? Karim and Terebessy

(2003:11-12) stated that secularism could be equally oppressive, non-neutral, and fanatic as some religions can be. Politics and laws bind secularism.

Moyaert (2011:93) stated:

The reason for this is that the law itself is not symbolically neutral. First of all, the law came into being in a particular historical and cultural society, with a certain ideology, from which values, norms, and social goods grew. The law is not value-neutral but is ideologically embedded. It is always an embodiment of values. The law is a reflection of the society's identity. Next, the law always stands in need of interpretation, certainly in view of legislative conflicts. When various laws conflict and a decision has to be made as to which legislative principle should prevail, ideology certainly plays a part in this process.

True neutrality and objectivity are impossible to obtain (Cox 2010:52; Ryan 2016:30; Beyers 2017b:194), although one can strive toward this ideal. To obtain some form of neutrality, one must understand one's affective realism and that it is not entirely escapable (Barrett 2018:284). Understanding that one is not neutral can create better neutrality. One must ask if secularism distinguishes between the profane and the sacred. What constitutes profane and sacred? For Eliade (1959:10), one of the explanations for the sacred is its ability to stand as an opposing force to the profane. The sacred is something that makes itself known and is not inherently evident without this revelation (Eliade 1959:11). The sacred is not natural and is hidden from the profane world until it is revealed (Eliade 1959:11). However, the sacred may be manifested through natural objects (Eliade 1959:12). Eliade (1959:14) stated that:

[...] sacred and profane are two modes of being in the world, two existential stations assumed by man in the course of his history.

Here again, the opposing forces of sacred and profane can be seen in Eliade's work. Durkheim (2016:40) stated that "...anything can be sacred". He stated that sacred constructs are kept from the profane or mundane (Durkheim 2016:44). Durkheim does not consider the modern context when discussing profane and sacred constructs. Sacred and mundane are constructs that will differ for each religion and individual. The separation can leave religion more distinct from the mundane part of society (Martin 2007:143). Within the question of what makes something religious and secular, one usually gets additional political classification problems. Henking (2021a:71) stated that in addition to the secular and religious debate, one usually comes across: "social formations such as violence, gender, race, sensitive individualism, and colonialism". Nationalism and culture should be added to the list given by Henking. As such, a *Discussion and semantics* now follow on nationalism.

8.1.2 Discussion and semantics on nationalism

Nationalism is a term of identification for some opposing religions; for others, it might be a part of this identity (von Stuckrad 2021b:114). Nationalism is a construct that often has ties to language, culture and sometimes ethnicity (Nussbaum 2012:15, 17, 94; Davis 2022:53). These national identifiers may complement each other or contrast each other, in a sense debating if, for example, religion has more sway in national identity than language (Davis 2022:57). Nationalism is a narrative that constitutes history, mythology, and current belonging (Nussbaum 2012:96; Davis 2022:53). Levinger and Lytle (2001:178) stated that nationalist narratives work on the following basis:

- 1. The glorious past. The original nation once existed as a pure, unified and harmonious community.*
- 2. The degraded present. The shattering of this corporate unity through some agency or traumatic series of events undermined the integrity of the national community. A key dimension of this rhetoric is the identification of the sources of the nation's decay.*
- 3. The utopian future. Through collective action, the nation will reverse the conditions that have caused its present degradation and recover its original harmonious essence.*

Past and present are used to mobilise the nation toward an idealist future through specific actions and virtues rooted in historical identity (Levinger & Lytle 2001:179). Considering these three stages of nationalist narratives, it is almost impossible not to recall Trump's slogan, "let's make America great again" (Steinhorn 2022). A slogan that supports a specific ideological nationalistic view (from the 1950s) while deeply suppressing specific people (non-caucasian, female, non-Christian and the LGBTQ+ communities) (Steinhorn 2022). Liberation narratives often use this in another way, depicting the oppressive past, present problems, and progress already made toward the utopian future (Levinger & Lytle 2001:179). All politics, regardless of whether they are nationalistic, include forms of narrative (Kuhlmann & Blum 2021:2; Homolar 2022:334). Nationalist narratives are designed to be emotive, especially regarding fear of the current situation and hope for the future, making their appeal stronger (Levinger & Lytle 2001:181, 182; Homolar 2022:332). Religion can be used within the national ideological narrative as a tool to manipulate (Beyers 2017b:207). Strong us-versus-them phenomena may occur when working with religion and nationalist ideologies where *they* threaten *our* religious way of life (Beyers 2017b:208; Beyers 2017c:6).

Many political nationalist agendas utilise us-versus-them narratives, and religion is not always the dominant theme (Homolar 2022:325). These narratives are usually centred around threats, possible bad outcomes, suspense-building, time constraints, meaning-making and highly emotive themes (Homolar 2022:325-331). Political leaders control narratives through

nationalist ideologies and simplifying complex concepts (Homolar 2022:328, 331). Nationalist ideological narratives are deeply rooted in political agenda (Davis 2022:66). These political agendas can, over time, even lead to a "social amnesia", where certain events are taken out of the national identity, distorting historical events over generations (Davis 2022:53, 57). The use of historical narratives can have a significant impact on national identity (Davis 2022:58). Nationalism is often majority-based, leading to the exclusion of minorities (Nussbaum 2012:96). Moyaert (2011:94) stated that how a society views itself can affect how it treats people that are not part of the dominant ideology. Nationalism and national identity are not constructs that can be ignored, as these narratives influence the lives of everyday people.

Nationalism is not inherently wrong, and it can have inclusive values (Nussbaum 2012:96). The value of national identity, when healthy, takes all its people into account and not just the majority (Bouma 2013:56). In an ever-changing society with multiple cultures, religions and languages, the national identity must inevitably also change (Bouma 2013:56). National identities should therefore ensure that all members are valued, without fear of threat for living in a way that they identify (Moyaert 2011:89). For secular laws to succeed in treating people in an equal manner, national identity needs to shift to a more inclusive understanding (Moyaert 2011:89). Within nationalism, certain ideologies are found. Moyaert (2011:96) gave the following statement on ideologies:

Ideology functions as a pre-given symbolic realm, permeating all discourse, claiming a certain naturalness. It exerts a power over how people within a society think, what they accept as reasonable, what they consider important, valuable and worthy of pursuit.

If viewed this way, ideologies can be seen as a form of communal affective realism. Unhealthy nationalism is seen as nationalism that only considers the majority of the people or those in control of a set country. When this happens, one has an unhealthy communal affective realism. As was seen earlier in this section, law and secularism are not unbiased (Moyaert 2011:93). Nationalist ideologies can significantly influence how governments function and how tolerance and freedom of religion behave. Beyers (2017a) stated:

Pluralism recognises the validity and equality of all religions: No religion can be considered inferior to the other, all religions must be viewed as having knowledge of that which is considered transcendental, and every religion presents a valid mode of existence. No longer can one religion deny or exclude the position and status of the other.

The statement by Beyers can be adapted to a broader view to include all constructs that intersect with nationalism, for example, culture, ethnicity and sexuality. In the wake of pluralistic societies, the plurality can feel like a threat or challenge (Levinger & Lytle 2001:181).

Nationalism is often challenged when society becomes more pluralistic (Moyaert 2011:97). Unfortunately, the result of such a challenge is fundamentalistic ideals that arise (Moyaert 2011:97). These fundamentalist ideals are built with the hope of preserving the previously mentioned ideologies (Moyaert 2011:97; Levinger & Lytle 2001:181). The simulation of preservation is triggered by distress and the surrounding loss of purity of unique attributes or values within the ideologies (Levinger & Lytle 2001:181,183). A fundamentalist reaction makes the hope for inclusive national identity even more unattainable. In most countries, pluralism is there to stay, but societal ideologies do not reflect the pluralism encountered (Moyaert 2011:87).

More inclusive roads may be taken within nationalistic identities. This can be achieved by asking how all groups can prosper rather than being concerned only with the maintenance of one (Castiglioni & Bennett 2018:235). Therefore, building toward new inclusive societies where minority groups are neither a threat nor at the bottom; instead, a tapestry of understanding starts to emerge (Castiglioni & Bennett 2018:235). This is not universalism or a system without conflict. Instead, it is a system that seeks to resolve conflict in a way that is respectful to all concerned (Castiglioni & Bennett 2018:235). Castiglioni and Bennett (2018:236) stated that one of the solutions to this problem is:

In the case of communicative intersectional space, each participant's attempt to coordinate meaning and action across a cultural boundary takes into account the other participant's differing perspective—a relationship is formed that becomes part of the worldview of each participant.

Therefore, the dominant culture of a country should also adapt to its new inhabitants (Castiglioni & Bennett 2018:237). Furthermore, counter-utopian narratives may be an effective way to counter national ideologies (Moyaert 2011:99). Moyaert (2011:103) stated that:

[...] counter-narratives are aimed not at restoring the past but at projecting a possible future from which present injustices can be criticized.

Therefore, an inclusive national identity will showcase everyone as functioning members of one society (Moyaert 2011:100,101). Narratives are crucial instruments that must change as a national identity evolves for better-functioning multi-cultural societies (Davis 2022:66; Levinger & Lytle 2001:184). Masquelier (2022:3) made similar remarks:

Utopia has a major role to play in indicating that things could be otherwise and, consequently, acts as a disruptive force in everyday life, alerting us to the possibility for change.

Utopian narratives must be rooted in intergroup discourse and have a flexible nature of change (Masquelier 2022:3, 4, 13). Healthy, inclusive utopian narratives are in line with the current

study. However, this does not mean that narrative is an instant solution to all of society's problems. Instead, narratives are tools that can potentially help transform societies over time. Beyers (2021:45) stated that transformative thinking includes:

[...] indicating how changing contexts demand adjustments. The past is not altogether bad. But, in order to address the challenges posed by a globalised environment, societies need to adjust to the needs in a new context. Transformation is thus to move over from brokenness to wholeness.

Counter-utopian narratives need not ignore past or present problems. However, for a pluralistic society to truly move forward, a narrative must be created where everyone can move forward. Multi-cultural and multi-religious societies must learn to co-exist, with each group existing in their own right while being respected (Beyers 2017c:6).

8.1.3 Working definitions

The researcher designed the definitions with the current study in mind. Here follows the definition of the secular age¹⁵:

The secular age is a construct simulated through the prediction of eradicating certain irrational constructs. The view of irrational constructs intersected with religion, narrative, emotion, and any other construct seen as irrational by humanity in favour of intersections with constructs such as logic, reason, science and rationalism. The secular age had a marked effect on many people's affective realism.

Here follows the definition of the post-secular age:

Post-secularism is a construct that is simulated by falsifying the secular age theory. Post-secular refers to the current period where it is evident that intersections such as religion, spirituality, emotion, and other supposed irrational constructs did not disappear from society. However, it is seen that religion and its place in society have changed. For example, religion is often more privatised and individualised. Therefore, in post-secular societies, one also sees an effect on people's affective realism.

Here follows the definition of secularism:

Secularism is a construct in which a government simulates (in different degrees) its domain apart from religion. Secularism intersects with politics and laws, but the terms are not mutually exclusive. Secularism is often said to simulate neutrality from the government. This is often strived towards, and a perfect secular system would be neutral,

¹⁵ Compare *A Secular Age* (2007) by Charles Taylor.

but true neutrality is unattainable. The concept of implicit religion is often found within secularism. The word secular refers to an ideology or way of doing or understanding the world. Secularisation, on the other hand, is a social process of change. Secularism often intersects with digital and non-digital narratives. One of the intersections that impact non-neutral secularism is nationalism. In turn, how a government simulates secularism will impact the affective realism of a country. The simulation of secularism impacts the definition of (in)tolerance and freedom of religion. Secularism may be a tool that can guide pluralistic societies. However, one must not assume it is the only way, neutral or perfect. The citizens of secular societies' affective realism will be affected by what is seen as appropriate constructs for the private-public, sacred-profane, and appropriate behaviour of religions and government. The same can be said for non-secular societies, as one's simulations and constructions will affect one's affective realism.

Here follows the definition of nationalism:

Nationalism is a construct that is simulated by identifying a specific group or, indeed, a nation. Nationalism intersects with politics, culture, religion, language, sexuality and ethnicity but is not limited to these constructs. Nationalist ideologies are bound through narratives (digital and non-digital) that involve time-based constructs. Nationalism is not limited to secularism or democracy but can be found in any nation. Nationalism can foster a feeling of belonging, creating a communal affective realism. This communal affective realism can include all people found in the national simulation. It can, however, exclude and marginalise those who do not comply with national ideologies. Nationalism has strong intersections with the dualistic (in)tolerance phenomenon. Renewed simulations of national narratives are crucial in building functional multi-religious societies. Individuals will, therefore, vary on how much they feel connected to national ideologies. Nationalist narratives can build toward healthy or unhealthy communal affective realism.

This concludes the subsection of secularism and nationalism.

8.2 Fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism

Fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism are complicated constructs concerning religion, tolerance and education. Solving the problem of these terms within education is beyond the scope of this thesis. As Schmid (2021c:31) stated, there are no quick fixes to extremism and terrorism, and it is an ongoing, long-term process. The complete elimination of extremism and terrorism is improbable (Schmid 2021c:31). However, showcasing some critical views on the

topic is necessary, as this thesis works with the subject. Even if the problem cannot be entirely eradicated, it is an ongoing responsibility to continue working on new ways to build functioning multi-religious societies. Fundamentalism and extremism must be discussed in this Chapter because extremist and fundamentalistic groups also utilise digital narratives for their gain. The terms also intersect with religion and tolerance. This subsection has a *Discussion and semantics* and *Working definitions* for the terms. The terms are interconnected; therefore, only one subsection on *discussion and semantics* is found here.

8.2.1 Discussion and semantics

Some people within groups feel that theirs is the only valid interpretation of reality, ideology or religion (Smith 1991:loc 159; Schmid 2021c:14; Beyers 2014:11). Similarly, some believe that studying multiple religions distorts their own beliefs (Smith 1991:loc 159). Fundamentalism as a term is a western Christian construct (Pratt 2013:243). Historically, it was a term used to describe the views of "ultra-conservative" Christians, who published booklets on "the fundamentals of Christianity" (Pratt 2013:243; Krüger et al. 2009:296). Fundamentalism, in modern terms, refers to people who believe in a fundamental, all-consuming truth (Carr 2013:12). This use of the term started as criticism from Christian Protestant North Americans toward extremist Islamic groups (Krüger et al. 2009:296). Fundamentalism is not unique to one religion but can be found within most religions or worldviews (Pratt 2013:241). The groups linked to fundamentalism usually then become, for example, "Islamic fundamentalists" or "Christian fundamentalists", although the phenomena are not limited to these two groups (Krüger et al. 2009:296-197). Fundamentalism is a negative exclusivist view that negates pluralism in a multi-religious society (Pratt 2013:244).

Fundamentalism can also refer to yearning for a time when the worldview of communities was very homogeneous (Beyers 2014:11). This serves as a reminder of the nationalist ideological narratives discussed in the previous subsection (Levinger & Lytle 2001:179). Fundamentalists feel everyone must believe in their truth (Carr 2013:12). However, using the term in different contexts has problems, as can also be seen with terms such as religion and tolerance (Pratt 2013:243). The initial construct either changes or is forced upon other constructs that do not necessarily comply (Pratt 2013:243). Cheetham et al. (2013:2) made the following statement:

[...] a withdrawal into an increasingly closed-off religious identity, often equated with fundamentalism and exclusivism, which at best politely tolerates, in practice simply ignores, and at worst actively abhors the religious other.

From this statement, it is clear that fundamentalism and exclusivism are, at best, practising Forst's (2013:27-28) permission conception of tolerance (see Chapter Two); otherwise, taking a negative, intolerant, hateful, and fearful view of the other. Furthermore, one must consider that fundamentalism is not limited to religion (Arthur 2013:67; Krüger et al. 2009:296). Simulations outside of religion, such as culture, secularism or nationalism, are not immune to concepts of fundamentalism. The term is often misused to state that someone is close-minded about a specific problem rather than a whole worldview or religious construct (Pratt 2013:243). The concept of essentialism is closely related to fundamentalism in the belief that something has an essence or ultimate truth (Barrett 2018:157). Exclusivism is another term connected to fundamentalism, but the two terms are not always simulated similarly (Pratt 2013:241). Pratt (2013:241) stated that exclusivism is more closely linked to extremism and religious violence (Pratt 2013:241). This will all depend on the definitions given to each term, as different scholars may have different relational structures toward each term.

It should be noted that although religious fundamentalism and exclusivism can lead to violence, this is not always the case (Pratt 2013:250). For instance, people who only engage in interreligious conversation to convert the other are considered exclusivist; they do not meet on a neutral and equal footing (Pratt 2013:246). Pratt (2013:246) called them open exclusivists, as they demand superiority from their religion toward the other (Pratt 2013:246). This is a risk in studies focusing on theological views of religions that have been observed in the past (Beyers 2017b:191). However, this is not always the case; theologians can neutrally meet with people of other religions. Pratt (2013:247) also referred to closed exclusivists who do not entertain interaction with others. Lastly, Pratt (2013:247) referred to rejectionists who will go as far as to abolish the other. Similarly, not all fundamentalists are the same, ranging from indifferent to violent (Pratt 2013:259). Therefore, it may be said that extremists hold fundamentalist views, but not all fundamentalists are extremists.

The same can be said for the term radicals. The abolishment of slavery and making sure everyone can vote are only some of the concepts that seem radical and are normal today (Samuel 2021:174; Schmid 2021c:26). Radical does not mean violent; however, people who commit violence can be seen as radicals (Samuel 2021:174; Schmid 2021c:16). Radicalism is seen as going against the accepted norm (Samuel 2021:174). Radicalism and extremism are not always synonymous in all circumstances (Samuel 2021:174; Schmid 2021c:16). This will depend on the definitions assigned to the words. There is no consensus on how extremism should be defined as different types exist, and it is not limited only to religious extremism

(Schmid 2021c:24). Schmid (2021c:24-25) gave the following definition that was aimed more at religious extremism:

The pursuit, usually by a fanatical sect or cult, but occasionally also by a political 'party of God', a terrorist organization, or an official 'religious establishment' of a program of societal renewal which usually involves some form of social cleansing. The use of violence is justified by reference to a divine authority, an absolute truth, or a literal interpretation of texts deemed sacred. Specific groups of people such as non-believers, pagans, apostates or heretics are identified as enemies [...]

As given by Schmid, this definition is a good and accurate description of religious extremism. Knowing what extremism is can aid in countering extremism and promoting healthy constructs (Schmid 2021c:25). In human nature and one's survival mechanism, opposing views are met with less favour than views that match (Barrett 2018:285). People can have more than one construct and alter their view of reality (Barrett 2018:284). The affective realism mechanism creates the simulation of concrete truths (Barrett 2018:286). The best way to combat affective realism is to train the mind to be more inquisitive and not just take everything at face value (Barrett 2018:286). Gottschall (2021:177) similarly stated that the best way to fight against fundamentalism is to have doubts and not necessarily take everything at face value. Pratt (2013:246) stated that having a foundation and knowledge of one's identity is healthy and necessary. It is similar to Barrett's (2018:290) statement that a balance is needed for healthy, affective realism and scepticism. Being too stuck in one's constructs leads to an affective realism that predicts everyone else is wrong. However, if one is only sceptical of everything, then no constructs can arise, and essential human functions cannot be carried out.

Pratt (2013:243) stated that it is best to have a foundation to clarify one's identity before engaging in interreligious dialogue. However, this identity should not be so extreme that it excludes any other opinion to the point of fundamentalism and even extremism (Pratt 2013:248). Therefore, Pratt (2013:248) referred to two concepts: the first is where one is exclusive in knowing one's religious identity, and the second is exclusivism, where one excludes any other opinion of having value. People are sometimes wrongly labelled as fundamentalists to indicate radicalism, inspiring fear and panic within other communities (Pratt 2013:243). This has been seen in western constructs where fundamentalism is used to inspire panic that Christianity or the western way of life is threatened by the other (who is then labelled as the fundamentalist) (Pratt 2013:244). Fundamentalism creates problems with concepts such as non-confessional religious education and interreligious conversation (Pratt 2013:241). Fundamentalists either actively create conflict or completely retract themselves from any interreligious situation that works toward peace-building (Pratt 2013:241).

Terrorism is going to be used synonymously with violent religious extremism in the current study. Zeiger and Gyte (2021:359-360) made the following statement on terrorist groups:

Terrorist organizations are dynamic systems that adapt and evolve over time. Traditionally, terrorist organizations were thought to have a centralized, hierarchical structure in which the leaders at the top controlled the operations of the entire organization. These traditional structures would often have a well-defined chain of command and control, with great specialization of functions for individuals and branches.

This statement gives one a good idea of how terrorist groups work in terms of structure and organisation. Violent religious extremists are not necessarily bound by groups but can be individuals (Zeiger & Gyte 2021:364; Schmid 2021c:17). Most definitions of terrorism are either too narrow or too broad, it is a complicated construct to pin down (Schmid 2021c:50). There is currently no universally accepted definition of terrorism (Schmid 2021c:17). The problem is that law and international resistance to terrorism become complicated when there is no consensus on what the word means (Schmid 2021c:17). Terrorism is not always linked to religion but can stem from many different ideological constructs, such as race, politics and nationalism (Schmid 2021c:17). However, the focus of this thesis is religious; therefore, it will focus on religious terrorism when referring to the construct. One must consider that humans are intersectional, and many factors can contribute to violent ideologies. When discussing religious terrorism, one must also consider that it is not unique or bound to one religion. Political violence is often seen as synonymous with terrorism; however, it is not always mutually exclusive (Schmid 2021c:17).

McCauley (2021:140) distinguished between violent extremism aimed at influencing a government and violent extremism performed by the government, the first being terrorism and the second as politicide. Politicide and terrorism have much in common, even if they fall into different categories (McCauley 2021:140). Both politicide and terrorism are fuelled by us-versus-them narratives where *their* ways are seen as a threat to life as understood by the *us* (McCauley 2021:142-143). Many threats can be included in the us-versus-them narratives, including but not limited to economics, status, security and ethics (McCauley 2021:142-143). More than one reason is usually present as one part of the narrative fuels the next (McCauley 2021:143). Parker (2021:1059) made the following statement on the power of terrorists:

Left to their own devices, terrorists will rarely possess sufficient force to successfully attain their political goals. The genius of generations of terrorist planners has been to explicitly seek to turn the state's strength to their advantage, provoking government after government to overreact to the threat they pose by introducing draconian security measures, curtailing civil liberties, and infringing established human rights protections.

This statement of Parker is significant as it reminds one that violent extremist groups are not as powerful as some of their deeds may want the public to believe. He also reminds governments not to overreact and act against their democratic regulations (Parker 2021:1059). One of the things needed for violent extremist groups to thrive is communication (Schmid 2021b:565). Violent extremist groups are reported in the news when attacks occur, giving them a megaphone publication coined "propaganda by deed" and "pseudo-events" (Schmid 2021b:565, 566). Usually, these are violent acts, and the victims of these acts are not the actual target, instead, the media and the coverage of such an event are the desire behind the attack (Schmid 2021b:566, 567). This dramatically impacts terrified viewers, manipulatable governments, recruitment opportunities and sway (Schmid 2021b:566-567). The option of one religion in society today is unlikely as communities become more diverse (Cheetham et al. 2013:2). Being open-minded, respectful, and tolerant while understanding grievances from different perspectives is essential to de-escalating conflicts and building healthy societies (McCauley 2021:145; Castiglioni & Bennett 2018:239; Cheetham et al. 2013:2).

8.2.2 Working definitions

The researcher designed these definitions with the current study in mind. Here follows the definition of fundamentalism:

Fundamentalism, essentialism, and exclusivism are interchangeable constructs. Fundamentalism is a construct that simulates a fundamental truth, essence or exclusive conviction toward reality. Fundamentalism is situated as a non-negotiable affective realism. These terms may intersect with anger or avoidance of constructs outside the personal or group simulation. Discrimination may be encountered at this point, but not complete violent extremism. Fundamentalism may intersect with religion, culture, ethnicity, nationalism, and politics but is not limited to these constructs. Fundamentalistic views can be found within digital media but are not limited to this construct. Fundamentalism is not limited to one group of people but can and does occur in any group. Individuals may also simulate fundamentalism. Fundamentalistic views often simulate superiority toward others and are not interested in peace-building and religious education; it involves active avoidance and inferior notions of all others. Therefore, fundamentalism may lead to different intolerance levels and even dehumanising notions. Fundamentalistic views, or lack thereof, strongly affect people's affective realism.

Here follows the definition of terrorism for the use of this thesis:

Terrorism and violent extremism are seen as interchangeable constructs. Terrorism is the simulation of violence by individuals or communities based on their fundamentalistic affective realism to spread panic and fear. Thereby, extremists influence the group that is acted against and potentially their government. Terrorism intersects but is not limited to identity formation concepts such as religion, culture or nationalism. Violence is enacted against people who fall outside their fundamentalistic affective realism. This causes an us-versus-them phenomenon. This is usually based on fear of the other as a threat to the simulation of one's constructs. Violent extremism can be simulated out of any community and is not limited to any specific group. Terrorism is not limited to groups but can also be simulated by individuals. Terrorism is often depicted in digital narratives, amplifying its effects on the community. Terrorism intersects with fundamentalism, intolerance, violence and the dehumanisation of others. Terrorism can have a significant effect on people's affective realism. This influence extends to those who subscribe to the group or those targeted by the terrorists.

This concludes the subsection on *Fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism*.

8.3 Islamophobia, Antisemitism, and minority-majority relationships

Islamophobia and Antisemitism are discriminatory constructs found in the world and digital narratives. These concepts simulate fundamentalistic and sometimes extremist ideas. These two concepts are only two simulations of many religious intolerances. This does not make other intolerances less critical; they are beyond the thesis's scope. Minority-majority relationships often play a role in Islamophobia and Antisemitism, but this is not the only factor. This section contains the *Discussion and semantics* and *Working definition* of the terms.

8.3.1 Discussion and semantics of Islamophobia

Islamophobia can be described as the fear of Muslims or Islam, especially regarding terrorism (Ghani & Awang 2017:76). Islamophobia should be seen as the simulation of this fear in hate crimes, verbal or physical, against Muslim people and the Islamic community (Allen 2021:108,110). Denial of Islamophobia or downplaying thereof is often found in politics and media (Allen 2021:108, 109, 115). This socio-political threat impacts many Muslim groups in multi-religious societies (Allen 2021:109, 118). Unfortunately, many attacks on Muslims are not always reported to authorities and are often not reported in the news (Allen 2021:112, 123), making it easy to downplay or dismiss the phenomena. The intersection between race and

religion has been considered when constructing definitions of Islamophobia but is very reductionistic (Allen 2021:117). It is harshly criticised, as Islamophobia is not just a form of racism but a measure of discrimination that should be acknowledged in its own right if it is to be stopped (Allen 2021:117), creating a need for greater intersectional sensitivity to understand the problem. The fear of Islam increased after 11 September 2001 (9/11), and this incident is frequently named as the cause to this day (Ghani & Awang 2017:76; Allen 2021:120).

The 9/11 event is often named in scholarly articles when Islam and terrorism are the topics (Schmid 2021c:14). The media widely publicised the 9/11 events, which was the actual target (Schmid 2021b:568, 569). Through this, terrorists not only hijacked the media system to spread fear, but they also transformed the culturally perceived image of Islam into the stereotype of terrorism. Islamophobia was not absent before the 9/11 incident, but it was set ablaze by the incident (May & Smilde 2016:875). In western societies, Muslims, especially women, stand out because of their clothing, making them easy targets for Islamophobia (Allen 2021:121). Although this is less prevalent in men, it can occur if they wear traditional Islamic clothing (Allen 2021:121, 122). This visibility factor makes them question whether they should change how they dress for fear of their safety (Allen 2021:121, 122). Islamophobia has been exasperated through digital narratives (see *Examples from digital narratives*) (Ghani & Awang 2017:76; Tolera 2017:60); this includes digital entertainment and internet narratives (Ahmad et al. 2021:65). Narratives often depict and instil fear of all Muslims as terrorists or as a religion built on extremism (Ghani & Awang 2017:76).

These narratives have far-reaching implications and do not necessarily only impact their country of origin. For instance, anti-terror propaganda from the USA has affected many other countries, as narratives have a global impact in a digital age (Tolera 2017:60). Religious extremism that leads to violence is often alienated as not part of true religion (Pratt 2013:250). This is understandable if the narrative is forced that all people of a particular religion are violent. Freedom of association is a right in many countries; therefore, one also has a right not to associate with certain behaviours or groups. Pratt (2013:242) stated that religion escapes the blame by claiming other socio-political problems as the cause of violence. Contrary to this, religion has been made a scapegoat for furthering political violence (Moyaert 2018:12). The balance between all parts of human life is essential and must be considered when examining complex phenomena such as violence (Moyaert 2018:12). Religious extremism as a term evolved in the place of terrorism with the idea in mind to move away from the narrative that all Muslims are terrorists (Schmid 2021c:23). Rather, terrorists are religious extremists and

should be viewed as different from the religious adherents that do not believe in the extremist's views and actions (Schmid 2021c:23).

Religious extremism, violence, and terrorism can appear in any religion and are not mutually exclusive to only one religion (van der Walt 2016:2; Phan & Tan 2013:220). Religious extremism and fundamentalism are often linked to Islam as part of Islamophobia (Pratt 2013:242). Not all Muslims are fundamentalists, and extremists and many other religions have fundamentalistic and extremist adherents (Pratt 2013:242, 243; Ghani & Awang 2017:76). Affirming that one religion is fundamentalistic or extremist in nature when all who practice it are not is a fundamentalistic and extremist construct. These fundamentalist prejudices create problems when educating and building tolerant, peaceful, multi-religious communities. In the previous section on *Fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism*, the overreactions of governments to terror attacks were pointed out (Parker 2021:1059).

How a government responds to terror attacks can and will affect the tolerance and polarization of their own country (Parker 2021:1060,1065). If a government were to react by targeting ethnic or religious groups through dehumanisation, abuse of power, undermining human rights, and other concepts that construct their constitution, it would only make the state look like a hypocrite (Parker 2021:1060, 1056, 1068, 1073, 1074, 1075). The overreaction from governments makes them the antagonists the terrorists claim they are increasing probable recruits (Parker 2021:1061, 1064, 1067, 1072, 1074, 1083). Not all people who undergo these suppressions will turn to terrorism (Parker 2021:1078). Parker (2021:1079, 1080, 1085) warned that a reaction is necessary from governments; however, it should be appropriate to the threat and not undermine their law and international human rights.

8.3.2 Discussion and semantics on Antisemitism

Antisemitism, in the classical sense, is seen as the simulation of discrimination against and fear of Jewish people, often leading to hate crimes (Tarant 2020:128; Yuval-Davis 2020:175; Krantz 2018:112, 138). The terms anti-Jewish and Judeophobia are also often used with this phenomenon (Yablokov 2019:291; Krantz 2018:109). The media and many political officials do not always use the word Antisemitism in connection with these hate crimes (Krantz 2018:115). Jewish people who adhere to specific dress codes, such as men wearing traditional headdresses or *yarmulkes*, may be more vulnerable to violence (Krantz 2018:137) as their dress marks them as different. The phenomenon of clothing was also discussed under Islamophobia. However, as the phenomenon changes, the terms new-Antisemitism and anti-Zionism come

into view (Yuval-Davis 2020:175; Krantz 2018:111, 128). This indicates the fear or hatred of the Israeli Jewish state and all Jewish people because of how the state is perceived (Yuval-Davis 2020:175; Krantz 2018:111, 119, 138). However, the thesis focused on a broad sense of Antisemitism that does not focus on anti-Zionism but does not exclude it. Antisemitism is a complex phenomenon with many intersections (Tarant 2020:128).

The prosecution of Jewish people throughout history has been fuelled by narrative (Gottschall 2021:15-16), often bound in conspiracy theories (Tarant 2020:111). For example, the Jewish genocide by the Nazis was driven by hatred and fear, with a narrative spread on their economic empowerment (McCauley 2021:143). Many conspiracy theories involving Antisemitism revolve around a secret Jewish plot to control and manipulate the world or a country (Tarant 2020:143; Yablokov 2019:293,294; Kogan 2017:384,385). Kogan (2017:384) stated:

two varieties of antisemitism, each with different origins: (a) xenophobic antisemitism, which derives from a social reality in which there is contact or rivalry with Jews, and in which prejudice is related to social experience. (b) chimerical antisemitism, which arose in the twelfth century after the introduction of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, and centered around such false accusations as Jewish desecration of the Host, ritual murder of Christian children, poisoning of wells, and so on. It is based on fantasies and the projection of inner conflicts, thus providing explanations for personal or national disasters

This showcases that Antisemitic scapegoating has been around for longer than the existence of the digital world. In modern times, internet narratives help to facilitate the spread of these narratives (Tarant 2020:123-124). Antisemitic narratives are often verbal; however, they can be depictions as well ("visual artwork, cartoons, images, memes, and animated GIFs") (Tarant 2020:123-124); this is not unique to Judaism, but offensive depictions occur toward many religions. Political leaders have also been known to spread antireligious sentiments such as Antisemitism (Yablokov 2019:293). This usually creates an us-versus-them phenomenon, blaming others for the political problems in the country (Yablokov 2019:293). This correlates with Levinger and Lytle's (2001:178) three-step nationalist narratives (discussed earlier). Unfortunately, Antisemitism is not always fully understood, as Jewish people are sometimes targeted by Islamophobic people, as the groups are ignorantly seen as interchangeable (Yuval-Davis 2020:175). These incidents are one of many key indicators of a lack of religious literacy. New-Antisemitism is often fuelled by some "Islamic, Christian and secular" viewpoints (Krantz 2018:111). There have been Antisemitic actions taken by radical Muslim people in the past (Cohen 2022:1; Jikeli 2018:297). An example of this is attacks that have taken place in France toward Jewish people committed by radical Muslim people (Jikeli 2018:297). However,

not all Muslims harbour Antisemitic views, and not all Antisemitic viewpoints originate in the Islamic religion (Cohen 2022:1, 13; Jikeli 2018:299, 313). Multiple factors may influence Islamic Antisemitic views. Cohen (2022:3) listed the following factors that influence Antisemitic views among Muslims in western societies:

These include integration into western societies, perceptions of discrimination against Muslims, economic distress, education, age, and religiosity.

The power and wealth of Jewish people are also echoed by Jikeli (2018:310) as reasons for Islamic Antisemitism. As with most societal concepts, many intersections may influence the view of the other. The "Palestinian-Israeli conflict" has also been shown to play a role in violence abroad, feeding more into a new Antisemitism construct (Jikeli 2018:303). Antisemitism has been reduced to xenophobia by scholars like Kogan (2017:378). With xenophobia, however, Kogan (2017:370) referred more to a general us-versus-them phenomenon than understanding the term as the fear of immigrants (Paalo et al. 2022:9). One of the intersections of discrimination within the globalised society today does include immigration patterns and fear of the other. However, it is impossible to limit a phenomenon as complex as Antisemitism to only xenophobia.

8.3.3 Discussion and semantics surrounding minority-majority relationships

Frequently, minority and majority religions play a role in discrimination constructs such as Islamophobia and Antisemitism. Any religion can be a majority or minority, as limited to contexts and is not limited to Islamophobia and Antisemitism. Islamophobia and Antisemitism should not be reduced only to minority discrimination, as the phenomena have complex intersections. The terms majority and minority are often used within conversations of political power and tolerance (Phan & Tan 2013:219). Phan and Tan (2013:219) stated that these terms could have a negative connotation because of the political power struggle for recognition associated with the term's majority and minority. This negative connotation should be taken into consideration; however, power struggles and majority biases exist in many countries worldwide. Phan and Tan (2013:219) stated that "historically excluded groups" may be used if one fears the terms minority and majority may offend. Although this researcher considers this, majority and minority have been seen as academically acceptable and normative and are used within the thesis. Kogan (2017:388) made the following statement:

Liberal thought and international human rights laws recognize the rights of minority groups to maintain their cultural identity, but assume that majorities have neither a need for similar rights nor a moral ground for defending them [...] Disregarding the interests of the majority is not only morally wrong, but also politically unwise, as it may enhance majority nationalism in the future.

This statement by Kogan can be extended not only to culture but also to religion. The balance between majority and minority groups is complex, as everyone's rights must be respected (Kogan 2017:388). However, one must consider that minority religions are not on equal footing with majority religions. This unequal footing is probably why more attention is given to the rights of minorities. May and Smilde (2016:874) made the following statement:

Religious minorities face a number of challenges ranging from deliberate discrimination to inadequate worship space and accommodations [...]

This can include government and societal discrimination (May & Smilde 2016:875, 878). Discrimination can impact both the physical and mental health of minorities (May & Smilde 2016:877). Narratives are one of the driving forces for discrimination patterns in society. Examples of non-Muslim and non-Jewish narratives are numerous; examples can include anti-Mormon propaganda (see *Examples from digital narratives*) (Weisenfeld 2019:23-29). It is equally possible to break down biases and positively alter the construction of the human mind through narrative (Barrett 2018:294). Narratives are not meant here as a quick fix but rather one of many steps to change human biases toward healthy constructs in the future. However, counter-narratives do not always have enough power in popular culture or political traction to promote enough change successfully (Yuval-Davis 2020:176). This is particularly complex if the general population believes the conspiracy theories that circulate (Yablokov 2019:294, 307), affecting their collective affective realism. More care must be given to the responsibility of leaders and popular culture to promote healthy constructs and healthy multi-religious societies. Education settings should also enable individuals to evaluate narratives to help maintain healthy affective realism.

8.3.4 Working definitions

The researcher designed the definitions with the current study in mind. The definition of Islamophobia is as follows:

Islamophobia is a construct simulated through intolerance, fear, hatred, mistrust and violence against Muslim people and the Islamic community. This fear intersects strongly with the misconception and thematic view of Islam as a fundamentalistic and terroristic religion. Islamophobia intersects strongly with narratives, especially conspiracy theories and misinformation. Islamophobia can have multiple intersections, as religion is a complex phenomenon. Islamophobia is, at the very least, fundamentalistic and can lead to violent extremism. Islamophobia will affect the affective realism of the person who harbours Islamophobic ideologies and the community that suffers under these views.

The definition of Antisemitism is as follows:

Antisemitism is a construct that is simulated through intolerance, fear, hatred, mistrust and violence against Jewish people and the Jewish community. Antisemitism intersects strongly with conspiracy narratives about Jewish people, creating thematic views, especially on how they secretly control nations or the world. Antisemitism can have multiple intersections as Judaism is a complex phenomenon. People who hold Antisemitic ideologies are, at the very least, fundamentalistic and can lead to violent extremism. Antisemitism affects the affective realism of those with Antisemitic sentiments and those who suffer under these views.

The definition of minority and majority religious dynamics are as follows:

Minority and majority religious dynamics are constructs simulated through power dynamics in communities. The phenomenon is simulated in countries with smaller amounts of some religions and a large group of one religion. Minority and majority religious dynamics are becoming more complex as they intersect strongly with expanded migratory patterns. However, not all minority groups can be seen as migrants. Minority and majority religious dynamics influence tolerance, religious freedom, discrimination and both groups' safety and well-being. It can, therefore, also have a significant impact on religious education. Minority and majority religious dynamics intersect with national identity and its simulation. Minority and Majority religious dynamics affect the affective realism of all the people in a country, even if the simulation is not experienced in the same way by everyone.

This concludes the subsection on *Islamophobia, Antisemitism and minority-majority relationships*. These are only some discriminatory phenomena, and many more should be considered in future research.

8.4 Examples of digital narratives

This subsection includes a myriad of narratives that include the constructs discussed in this Chapter. These narratives include discriminatory (us-versus-them) phenomena that can lead to intolerance. Furthermore, it includes narratives that are not necessarily discriminatory of their own accord, but they do showcase the phenomena in question and can potentially influence constructs. Lastly, counter-narratives are also found in this subsection, which can help create better tolerant societies. The narratives given here are only a tiny sample of the myriad narratives found in the digital realm. Naming all the possible narratives is beyond the scope of

the study. Educators are urged to look for narratives that work in their context and curricula. Furthermore, these examples are not analysed in detail or showcased for their worth in religious education as the thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context. Lastly, narratives should not become stagnant; the rate at which new narratives are created is staggering, giving educators new resources for creative teaching opportunities.

Many different forms of books may be found on the phenomena discussed in the Chapter. There are non-fictional books that encourage secularisation and act as a negative commentary on religion (Bosman 2019:2). Bosman (2019:2) included the following examples *The God Delusion* (2011) by Dawkins, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007) by Hitchens, *The End Of Faith: Religion, Terror, And The Future Of Reason* (2004) by Harris and *God: The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (2008) by Stenger and Hitchens. These books showcase secularisation ideologies and can act as a simulator to depict the phenomenon. The titles do not indicate tolerance or neutrality from the stance but should be seen as secularisation ideologies with strong fundamentalistic undertones. These are non-fictional narratives, where the character (author) gives the audience the plot (their simulation and affective understanding of the world) through a book form. Not all books on secularisation will be fundamentalistic.

Charles (2021) wrote an article for The Washington Post on how 9/11 impacted many fictional works, mainly novels. The article mentioned the following novels, among others, that are influenced by the 9/11 events: *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) by Foer, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) by Hamid, and *My Year Of Rest And Relaxation* (2018) by Moshfegh (Charles 2021). Republishing the 9/11 events in fiction may not be Islamophobic, depending on how it is portrayed. However, the potential of such narratives to fuel negative biases is there and should be considered. For example, *Once In A Promised Land* (2007) by Halaby is a novel featuring American nationalism, especially as an us-versus-them phenomenon against Islam (Žindžiuvienė 2021:198-227). However, the novel showcases the impact of the ideology and negativity on the minority group (Žindžiuvienė 2021:198-227). This can be used positively to showcase the problem of seeing all Muslims as terrorists (synthetic thematic view), thereby acting as a counter-narrative. Peak (2019) gave the following statement on the Novel *Trilby* (1992) by Du Maurier:

In short, the novel both champions and condemns sexual and gender transgressions in ways that are directly related to the novel's anti-Semitism.

The novel thereby showcases Antisemitism, fear of moral contagion and intolerance on various levels. Another example is *My Daughter's Keeper: A WW2 Historical Novel Based On A True Story Of A Jewish Holocaust Survivor* historical novel, by Geffen (2021). The book is fiction; however, it does have a foot in reality, as it is based on a true story. However, these works are considered fiction and not memoirs or documentaries, and one would need to take the memetic and synthetic into account. In this book, one will encounter Antisemitism and Nazi nationalist ideologies while not condoning these simulations. Antisemitism can also be seen in *The Merchant Of Venice* (1600) by Shakespeare¹⁶ (Hammerman 2018:41; Beyers 2018:2). It is available as an ebook and audiobook but is a much older classical source. Therefore, the responsibility of the content receiver is much greater than that of the content creator in that instance. The content creator did not create the content for the current era and cannot bear the responsibility for its impact today. Therefore, content consumers should consider this when reflecting critically on such work. Hung (2020:25) pointed out that the novel "Wolf Totem" (2008) by Rong, showcases nationalist ideologies. However, the novel was written as a commentary to change the Chinese nationalist ideology (Hung 2020:25). The phenomena discussed in the Chapter are also found within different filmography forms. Homolar (2022:325) used an example of us-versus-them narratives in nationalist security narratives in the following manner:

In the narrated contest between good and evil, the antagonist, be it Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein or Osama Bin Laden, stands eye to eye with the protagonist and is evil by choice – the same as fictional villains ranging from Sherlock Holmes's Professor Moriarty to Batman's Joker, Harry Potter's Lord Voldemort and the Avengers' evil demigod Thanos.

This showcases how fiction and non-fiction narratives influence one another with stark, us-versus-them and protagonist-antagonist themes. The series *Homeland* (2011-2020) by Gansa et al. contains nationalist, terrorist and Islamophobic constructs (Bezrucka 2020:157-158). Ashraf (2020:196, 214, 215) used *Iraq In Fragments* (2006) by Longley and *My Country, My Country* (2006) by Poitras as examples of documentaries that portray peace journalism. The films portray multiple nationalist ideologies, from extremists in the country to people suffering

¹⁶ There is an ongoing debate on whether William Shakespeare can be judged by modern values regarding the Antisemitism in this play. For example, this can be seen in Jha's article (2017:431-436). This is not a debate that will be solved within the current study. Understanding a text as a product of its time is important. However, one should reflect on its impact on modern consumers. Taking both into account leads to a responsible answer for modern consumers. As stated in Chapter Five, older texts have been made available digitally, and the content creators may be removed from modern society for many years. With this in mind, the writer can only be judged based on his or her era. However, the narrative and its ongoing influence must be evaluated critically, as it can still affect consumers who view it today.

under Islamophobic ideologies that were created because of the extremists and the ideologies given by the USA occupying the country (Ashraf 2020:215). Peace journalism may be used as a counter-narrative to showcase multiple views of complex situations. The *Burka Avenger* (2013-2016) cartoon, written by Haroon in a Pakistan context, showcases female Muslim empowerment and identity (Pirzada 2017:93). The animation seeks to portray a positive role model and representation of Muslim girls and advocate for education (Pirzada 2017:89; Junik-Łuniewska 2016:298). This is a counter-narrative to Islamophobia, terrorism, and anti-feminist sentiments (Pirzada 2017:93, 99, 101).

Little Mosque On The Prairie (2007-2012) by Darling and Donnell was used to measure the increase of positive views toward Muslim people after exposure to the series, and it was successful (Murrar & Brauer 2017:1-25). The series has much interaction between Christian and Muslim protagonists and how they function together in a town in Canada (Murrar & Brauer 2017:6). The series can act as a simulator to demonstrate different forms of tolerance and minority-majority power relations. Furthermore, it can act as a counter-narrative to the Islamophobic narratives found within films. Many fictional movies and series have the theme of terror attacks. There are numerous examples of how Muslims are portrayed as antagonistic terrorists in digital narratives. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to name them all. However, some examples are showcased here. Movies with Islamic terrorist plotlines include *Eye In The Sky* (2015) by Hood and *Infidel* (2020) by Nowrasteh. Chaudhary et al. (2021:144, 146, 147, 148) used the following three films as an example of narratives that support Islamophobic intent by using stereotypical brutal and terroristic depictions: *American Sniper* (2014) by Eastwood, *The Hurt Locker* (2008) by Bigelow and *The Dictator* (2012) by Charles.

Many "pseudo-documentaries" are created to encourage Islamophobia (Stein & Salime 2015:379). Stein and Salime (2015:384) used the following three films as examples of Islamophobic pseudo-documentaries: *Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against The West* (2005) by Kopping, *The Third Jihad: Radical Islam's Vision For America* (2008) by Kopping and Werth, and *Iranium* (2011) by Traiman. The narratives evoke a fear of Islam abroad and a paranoid fear of Islam in the country of origin, creating a strong us-versus-them phenomenon (Stein & Salime 2015:385, 391). Oftentimes, "footage is edited to draw parallels between the Holocaust and Islamic terror" (Stein & Salime 2015:385). This representation of the Holocaust is seen as an abuse and distortion of the historical phenomena (Manca et al. 2022:26, 15). It can, therefore, not just be seen as Islamophobic but also Antisemitic. Usually, fear-mongering films and documentaries showcase a threat to concepts of society that are held dear, like

religion or political values like democracy (Stein & Salime 2015:386). Stein and Salime (2015:386) drew a connection between documentaries made about the LGBTQ+ communities in previous years and the current Islamophobic content. The films on the LGBTQ+ communities are homophobic rather than Islamophobic, but showcase the same us-versus-them and threat to society showcased in the Islamophobic content.

One of the most concerning problems with intolerant pseudo-documentaries is that they often have political support (Stein & Salime 2015:391). The legitimisation of false information by political leaders lends credibility to misinformation. As stated in previous Chapters, public figures have a greater responsibility not to support and condone misinformation. Weinstein (2019) wrote a book titled, *Antisemitism In Film Comedy In Nazi Germany*. This book shows that narrative and filmography were indirectly used as part of Nazi German propaganda in sighting Antisemitism (Ashkenazi 2021:340). Hammerman (2018:xxi) agreed that there was Nazi-era propaganda in cinemas. This would include films like *The Eternal Jew* (1940) by Hippler and *Jud Süß* (1940) by Harlan (Hammerman 2018:xxiv; Abrams 2015:542). These films tried to showcase otherness, deceitfulness and trickery by the Jewish antagonists (Hammerman 2018:xxiv; Abrams 2015:542). Hammerman's (2018) book, *Silver Screens, Hasidic Jews: The Story Of An Image*, also explores Antisemitism in narratives, especially film. Hammerman (2018:39) explored films such as *The Mad Adventures Of Rabbi Jacob* (1973) by Oury and *Little Jerusalem* (2005) by Albou. These films do not necessarily utilise Antisemitism in the same way. The books by Hammerman and Weinstein are advised for more on this phenomenon.

Abrams (2019:234-247) noted the English nationalist connotation toward cricket and the "mimicry" and "assimilation" needed by outsiders in England in the film *Wondrous Oblivion* (2003) by Morrison. The article focused on the main Jewish character, and Antisemitism is also noted within the film (Abrams 2019:234). The *Marjorie Morningstar* (1958) film, also available in audiobook as it was a novel first, is said to be responsible for the stereotypical caricature of the overbearing Jewish mother that was imitated multiple times within filmography (Abrams 2015:548). Creating and perpetuating stereotypical caricature roles for minority groups damages societies by influencing people's affective realism (Abrams 2015:555). It becomes very damaging if the audiences and content creators perpetuate a character thematically; the synthetic and memetic concepts must be noted to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and caricatures. Content creators can avoid this by showcasing many characters with various intersections. Islamophobia and Antisemitism were only used as examples of

minority-majority power relationships in narratives. However, this dynamic can be seen beyond Judaism and Islam. Weisenfeld (2019:23-29), for example, pointed out that film had a marked influence on anti-Mormon propaganda, using *A Mormon Maid* (1917) by Leonard and *A Victim Of The Mormons* (1911) by Blom as examples of early films with this theme.

The drive of majority nationalism can fuel narratives with discrimination themes (Weisenfeld 2019:29). Weisenfeld (2019:42) points out how ethnicity features as a similar phenomenon and uses the film *The Birth Of A Nation* (1915) by Griffith as an example of white supremacism and the showcasing of African Americans as a threat to society. This, of course, will be racism rather than religious discrimination. These are older films but have fuelled biases for a long time. Furthermore, in today's society, there are still narratives that perpetuate stereotypes and harmful content. Rectification and awareness of this phenomenon are essential. Animations are not devoid of human bias as with any other narrative. Walt Disney has, for example, been blamed in the past for biased depictions of indigenous people to suit their western audience (Fonneland 2020:2). Fonneland (2020:2) used *Pocahontas* (1995) by Gabriel and Goldberg, *Brother Bear* (2003) by Blaise and Walker, and *Moana* (2016) by Musker and Clements as examples. These films are not on the same level as, for instance, the documentaries mentioned previously. Instead, they do feature protagonist characters of indigenous people. The depictions are, however, not always accurate. This being said, Walt Disney has started to correct these biases by working with the indigenous people they are depicting, as was evident in the making of *Frozen II* (2019) by Buch and Lee (Fonneland 2020:9-11).

This brings up a significant point: For narratives to be created responsibly, it could be beneficial to work with the different communities depicted in them. Religion and cultural studies specialists can also be a part of the conversation and help facilitate good depictions and conversations between narrative creators and the people depicted in the narratives. This is not to say that creating a narrative that will offend no one is possible. The diversity within communities can make "true" depictions immensely complex. However, it can aid in creating less stereotypical and biased depictions of the people represented in narrative content. This will make it easier for narrative receivers to have a more accurate picture of the people depicted in the narratives; thereby, their affective realism may be impacted less negatively.

Istad et al. (2022:529) explored how reality television programming in South Korea showcases foreigners. The South Korean government implemented regulations on fair depictions of foreigners and encouraged broadcasters to use a broad multi-cultural cast to encourage a more tolerant society (Istad et al. 2022:530, 535, 536). However, foreigners are not equally

represented and are often stereotyped, presented as others, and demeaned if they act outside of what would be seen as traditionally acceptable in South Korean culture (Istad et al. 2022:531-542). They also point out that production and editing greatly influence how the content is viewed by the content receivers (Istad et al. 2022:531-541). The shows used for the study were "Daehanoegugin (MBC), Iutjip Chalseu (KBS), and Chinhan yeneung (MBN)" (Istad et al. 2022:534). The article was not particularly focused on religion but on multi-culturalism in general. The concepts they bring up should be transferable, as they work with minority-majority relationships and nationalistic ideologies. Furthermore, this article showcases that good policies are not always enough if they are not used in practice.

Dikes (2019:94) reviewed many documentaries that aired 40 years after the "mass murder-suicides at Jonestown that ended Peoples Temple". These films showcase the extremism found within the situation. Dikes (2019:102) used *Jonestown: The Life And Death Of Peoples Temple* (2006) by Nelson as one of many examples. However, many biased, misinformed and sensationalistic documentary narratives also exist, which should be evaluated critically (Dikes 2019:94-104). This again points to the memetic and synthetic concepts often found in work portrayed as fact-based. The documentaries showcase the extremist group and their ideologies. There are also video games that showcase the phenomena found in this Chapter. Bosman (2019:2) made the following statement on secularist religious criticism in games:

religion as (1) fraud, aimed to manipulate the uneducated masses (for example The Rise of the Tomb Raider); as (2) blind obedience towards an invisible but ultimately non-existing deity/ies (for example The Binding of Isaac); as (3) violence against those who do not share the same set of religious rules (for example Far Cry 5); as (4) madness, a deranged alternative for logical reasoning (for example Nier: Automata); and as (5) suppression in the hands of the powerful elite to dominate and subdue the masses into submission and obedience (for example Dishonored and Dishonored 2).

The game series *Civilization* (1991-2016) by Meier has strong nationalistic concepts embedded in the games (Martín et al. 2020:160). Western enlightenment theories of progress, nationalist ideologies and evaluation theories of religion can be found within the game (Vrtacic 2014:91, 92, 93, 95). An example of an Islamophobic game is *Muslim Massacre* (2008); the game's sole purpose is the persecution of Islamic characters (Wibawa et al. 2019:6). Furthermore, the game *Quest For Saddam* (2003) by Petrilla Entertainment is another example of a game with Islamophobic intent. These games have strong Islamophobic and nationalistic narratives. Where one narrative arises, one often finds the opposing force. Video games are one of many platforms on which Islamic terrorist groups have focused their ideals (Zeiger & Gyte 2021:361; Todorovic & Trifunovic 2021:597). Isis has created a video game titled "Salil al-Sawarem (The

Clashing of Swords)" (Zeiger & Gyte 2021:361; Al-Rawi 2016:1). The game was described in the following way by Zeiger and Gyte (2021:361, 362):

a "first-person shooter" game that was modelled on the popular Grand Theft Auto franchise, and aimed to gain publicity for – and draw attention to – ISIS.

This is not the only game that has been manipulated in this way; Al-Rawi (2016:2), for example, stated that:

In 2006, Al-Qaeda group made changes to the first-person shooter (FPS) game Quest for Saddam (2003) and introduced another game called Quest for Bush.

Changing existing narratives to fit the view of another ideology is not as complex as one might think (Al-Rawi 2016:1). The game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) by Nelson features the Ku Klux Klan. The game neither promotes the group nor is it an integral part of the storyline, but it does feature the extremist group. The *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) game features an antagonistic cult that the protagonist (player) is set against in the storyline.

The phenomena described in the Chapter are also found within music. *Imagine* (1971) by Lennon is an example of music with a distinct simulation of secularisation (Bosman 2019:2). However, it negatively comments on religion and nationalism, advocating for humanisation and peace. It, however, does not value diversity or tolerance and wishes for a fundamentalistic homogeneous society. *One Of Us* (1995) by Osborne is a less clear-cut song. On the one hand, it can easily be seen as a secularisation idea of the divine disappearing into society. As it is written with Christianity in mind, mentioning Jesus and the saints, it could be interpreted from a point of view that imagines Jesus as living in modern times. Religious myths and beliefs are also found in secular music (music that was not meant to be religious). This can be seen in music such as *Baptised* (2013) by Daughtry, which relates to Christian baptism, and *Samsara* (2015) by Tungevaag and Raaban, which relates to reincarnation in Hinduism. Three main questions arise with secular music and its use of religious phenomena. The first question is whether this is part of implicit religion. The second is how people of the set religion interpret the music as religious people may, for example, interpret the music as religious or as offensive. The third question is whether people outside the set religion interpret the religious phenomena in music or whether it becomes a secular phenomenon to them. Curiosity about religious phenomena within digital narratives can encourage lifelong learning.

Secular music can be viewed spiritually if narrative consumers find this affinity with the music (Lauzon 2020:35), showcasing that the narrative creator's and receiver's intent are not always mutually exclusive. In an article by Lauzon (2020:35), the song *À La Claire Fontaine* (1604)

is an example of a secular song with significant spiritual meaning for a Roman Catholic woman. This song, like many pre-digital narratives, is available online (Fascinating Nana - Νάνα Μούσχουρη 2020). Classical narratives become a part of digital narratives, while the original content creator cannot bear responsibility for their narrative and its impact. This creates a greater responsibility for the people who recreate the music and those who receive it. This song does not necessarily prompt the us-versus-them phenomenon. Instead, its secularity is the reason for the placement in this section. Thompson (2014:206) made the following statement on music and nationalism:

Nationalism in music has most often been associated with the orchestral works of nineteenth-century composers, such as Antonin Dvorak and Bedrich Smetana, and, to a lesser extent, with ideological writings of such figures as Johann Gottfried von Herder and Richard Wagner. Much of the critical literature in the latter nineteenth century focused on Russian music, acknowledging the influence of Glinka on the younger generation of composers.

Yang (2021:1) made the following statement:

The early concerts of the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra (SMO), I suggest, were an assertion of settler sovereignty in a treaty port such as Shanghai. Therefore, Chinese musicians performing western music – propagated through the establishment of the National Conservatory of Music by Chinese elites in Shanghai's French Settlement in 1927 – was the embodiment of three contradictory ideals: colonialism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism.

This statement shows the overarching effect that cultural narratives such as music can have when spread to other communities (even in a pre-digital era). Understanding the effect of narratives when spread outside their context is essential, as digital narratives easily spread beyond their original context. Nationalist ideologies are noted in more modern music used at "political rallies" and "popular music" (Thompson 2014:209). Some of the South African struggle songs that originated in apartheid are often used at EFF rallies, and hate speech has been claimed on some of the music (Robertson 2011). Thereby, it brings up questions about the contextual suitability of specific narratives. In a study by Mwangi (2004:5), Hip Hop music showcased nationalistic and mainly male-centric ideals within East African countries. Artists that were given as examples are "Soggy Doggy and Mr Nice", "Nonini", "E-sir", and "Juma Nature" (Mwangi 2004:11-15). On the other hand, female musicians comment on this male-centric nationalist ideology through their music, and this can be seen in the music of "Wahu Kagwe" and "Jaysday" (Mwangi 2004:9-10, 18). Todorovic and Trifunovic (2021:597, 605) stated that extremist groups have also utilised music to further their cause. Music is one of the mediums used on social media to either indoctrinate or intimidate mass amounts of users (Todorovic & Trifunovic 2021:605).

Many of the phenomena discussed in the Chapter can be found on social media. Klomp and Veldsman (2017:15) investigated "The Passion" ritual found in the Netherlands. Although overtly Christian (the ritual focuses on the "suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ"), it draws many people who do not necessarily attend out of a Christian motivation (Klomp & Veldsman 2017:15-16). This brings up the idea of implicit religion in a secular landscape. The ritual involves a procession after a cross and music from secular artists (Klomp & Veldsman 2017:15-16). One can form part of the ritual in many ways, including physically or digitally through hashtags on Twitter and viewing the life procession from a website (Klomp & Veldsman 2017:18, 19).

In Latvian and Lithuanian, traditional folk music referred to as "dainas and dainos" has been revived and encourages the revival of a pre-Christian, modern pagan religious belief system (Strmiska 2005:1). These regions have been oppressed by other countries, including by "German, Polish and Russian" countries, with this came the oppression of their folk traditions and beliefs (Strmiska 2005:1). Music linked to these traditions include the band and its albums (Strmiska 2005:3): "Kulgrinda released a CD called Ugnies Apeigos (Rite of Fire) [...] 2003 by Perkūno Giesmės (Hymns to Perkunas the Thunder God)". The emergence of this folk music strengthens the independent national unity (Strmiska 2005:3). A ritual chant can be seen by this musical group on YouTube, *KŪLGRINDA - Chants To Lithuanian Gods* (2018) by Trinkūnienė. Music is also associated with spirituality, myths, and rituals (Strmiska 2005:4, 5, 7). Music has played a large part in nationalism in these regions; therefore, it has been placed under this subsection.

In Japan, secular and religious music artists have used Buddhist sutras (chants) (Reehl 2021:1-18). The Heart Sutra is used within the Japanese Buddhist tradition for meditation, wisdom, and ceremonies (especially for burial) and can be just vocal or accompanied by instruments (Reehl 2021:2). Reaction to the new popular music variations is varied, as some feel it a relatable expression of their spirituality, while others feel it is detached from the original religious value (Reehl 2021:1-4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13). On YouTube, many different variations occur, ranging from religious to secular; there are also videos available explaining some parts of the Sutra (Japanese Zen Music - Kanho Yakushiji 2020; Zen Meditation & Chanting 2021; Uchitani 2023; Neretti 2011). The use of the Sutra in popular music raises the question of potential secularisation and implicit religion within society.

Bozdağ (2020:712) analysed how nationalist ideologies were evident in tweets in 2016 surrounding Syrian refugees in the Turkish context. The concept of strong nationalism, us-

versus-them and othering of Syrians were noted in the tweets (Bozdağ 2020:712, 721, 722). These opinions stood in strong contrast to those of the government and news agencies (Bozdağ 2020:713-715). The problem, however, is that social media impacts people's opinions and shows a "bottom-up discourse" about different concepts (Bozdağ 2020:713, 725). The contrast between social media and government statements can showcase that the national ideology of governments does not always overlap with that of all its people. This is while accounting for the fact that fake accounts and bots may play a role in distributing such content. Furthermore, social media may influence people's affective realism and propagate scapegoating. The study by Celuch et al. (2022:1) explored online hate speech and its connection with more extensive world views in the context of six western countries. They found that the phenomena of online hate speech had a connection with "pro-violence and pro-social inequalities beliefs" (Celuch et al. 2022:10). Thereby, it is necessary to understand that concepts of strong nationalistic or extremist hate speech on social media platforms are not neutral but is tied to greater affective realism and has real-world consequences.

Social media plays a profound role in nationalist ideologies and in spreading political agendas (Adriani 2019:12). Many social media platforms are used across the globe to distribute such content. This includes Twitter in the USA, Tik Tok in India, YouTube in the United Kingdom (UK) (Adriani 2019:12-13) and Twitter in Norway (Enjolras 2014:1). It should be noted that these are just some of the prominent mediums used the content can appear on any social media sites available to the region in question. Furthermore, strong us-versus-them concepts are often encountered within these nationalistic narratives (Adriani 2019:16). Examples of politicians using social media include but are not limited to "Donald Trump", "Nerendra Modi", "Paul Joseph Watson and Carl Benjamin" (Adriani 2019:12-13).

Zainudin et al. (2021:15) conducted a study focusing on the Malaysian context of the concept of Islamophobia on social media platforms, including "Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube". In their study, they found that one of the most prominent constructs of Islamophobia on these platforms was the mockery or insult of Islamic beliefs (Zainudin et al. 2021:24). This usually included insults against the prophet Muhammad and the mocking of halal prohibitions (Zainudin et al. 2021:18, 24). Humour is often used to belittle and discriminate against others in different contexts (Missier 2021:35). Evolvi (2018:1, 2) investigated the presence of Islamophobic Tweets during Brexit. The Islamophobic tweets were fuelled with nationalistic

ideologies to advocate for the Brexit decisions (Evolvi 2018:4, 5). Evolvi (2018:4) stated that in that timeframe, the:

British politician and Leave supporter Nigel Farage unveiled a poster that shows a queue of migrants, mostly men and brown-skinned

This continued the propagation of Islamophobia and nationalist ideologies from a political leader. Many of the Islamophobic listings were aimed at Muslims in general rather than targeting one person (Evolvi 2018:6). Thereby creating a thematic narrative that biases and dehumanises a group as a whole. Furthermore, Evolvi (2018:4) stated that misinformation also spread during this time, as evidenced from:

For example, they often praise politicians such as Donald Trump as allegedly being able to stop a "Muslim invasion," and blame other political actors for being part of a global "pro-Muslim conspiracy"; unverified accounts send a high number of tweets containing incorrect information; and many tweets embed fake news that comes from non-legitimate sources and has probably been created for Islamophobic purposes [...]

However, at this time, Muslim women also started a campaign on Twitter using "#MuslimWomenDay" with the hope of humanisation within society (Evolvi 2018:12). This hashtag and the narratives that work alongside it are part of counter-narratives. A more recent example of Islamophobia and anti-western sentiments can be seen in the riots in France on social media platforms, especially on Twitter. This occurred in June-July of 2023 after a police officer shot a teenage boy named "Nahel Merzouk" as reported by The New York Times (Gross et al. 2023). Strong us-versus-them sentiments are seen from both sides, such as the #FranceHasFallen and #FranceOnFire hashtags trend on social media. The Washington Post reports that President "Emmanuel Macron" places blame on "social media and video games for stirring passions" (Noack et al. 2023). Freear and Glazzard (2021:18) encouraged the concept of "conflict-sensitive journalism". In the situation with the riots in France, the BBC published a news article titled *France Riots: For The Politicians We Are Nothing* (Hill 2023). The article by Hill is an excellent example of an article giving a voice to marginalised people within a conflict situation, showcasing peace journalism. This leads to questions of whether narrative is being scapegoated as youth turn to violence when their "immediate environment cannot satisfy the basic human needs" (Schmid 2021c:29). This is not to say that narrative does not play a role, but rather that the phenomena should be viewed holistically.

The spread of misinformation and conspiracies surrounding the holocaust is Antisemitic and is termed "Holocaust distortions" (Manca et al. 2022:15). This type of Antisemitism is more challenging to identify than outright hate speech directed at Jewish people; however, it is prevalent in social media (Manca et al. 2022:19). Counter-narratives are becoming more critical

when dealing with such propaganda, misinformation and conspiracy theories. The "#ProtectTheFacts" (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance 2020) and "Toolkit Against Holocaust distortion" (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance 2021) are used as an example of websites that are very valuable counter-narrative tools (Manca et al. 2022:20, 37). Manca et al. (2022:20) used the following example of counter-narratives:

In January 2021, Facebook had already reached an agreement with UNESCO and the World Jewish Congress to redirect users searching for terms related to the Holocaust or Holocaust denial to the website AboutHolocaust.Org (www.aboutholocaust.org).

Museums are urged to create social media content that will work well as counter-narratives (Manca et al. 2022:36). They are also urged to work with influencers so that they may have a more significant impact (Manca et al. 2022:41). The TikTok page of Ebert and Forman (2023) is also used as an example of social media content that features the Holocaust survivor Lily Elbert thereby acting as a counter-narrative for misinformation (Manca et al. 2022:46). For more information on the topic the report by Manca et al. (2022) is highly advised. Many holocaust distortion narratives can be encountered on social media platforms using hashtags like #holocaust #fake and similar hashtags. This can be found on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Antisemitism has been noted on Kanye West's (a famous rapper's) Twitter page (Yoon 2022). West's account was recently removed after he posted a "swastika inside the Star of David" (Yoon 2022). Antisemitism is also present in online forms; these platforms include "4chan or Reddit" (Bossetta 2022:15). Online forms are generally more anonymous than mainstream social media, and forms usually have less moderation on their content (Bossetta 2022:15). Memes are often used for discrimination purposes like Antisemitism, its humour and simplicity can create a quick and robust impact (Bossetta 2022:17-18).

Other examples of extremism on social media include digital recruitment, as this is the easiest way of reaching many people (Zeiger & Gyte 2021:358). This is evident from videos where people, especially young children, declare themselves as part of known terrorist groups and express willingness to commit violence (Samuel 2021:170). These pledges and recruitments can be seen as part of rituals performed via social media. Counter-narratives and precautions regarding terrorism and extremism are just as important as understanding that extremist narratives are a reality. McDowell-Smith et al. (2017:52) investigated how counter-narratives can help fight against extremist groups such as ISIS that spread their propaganda via social media. Defectors have proved helpful in the fight against extremist groups' narratives (McDowell-Smith et al. 2017:58-71). McDowell-Smith et al. (2017:61) used the following YouTube video as an example *The Glorious Cubs Of The Caliphate* (2016) by ICSVE. In this

case, the line between counter-narratives and Islamophobia is very thin. The video does not seem to have had an Islamophobic effect on the participants (university students asked to watch the video) (McDowell-Smith et al. 2017:68). It is, however, essential to take the possibility of Islamophobia into account when producing counter-narratives against Islamic extremism.

In a report by Freear and Glazzard (2021:1-30), the importance of helping marginalised communities in Kenya that might be in greater danger of extremist recruitment express their voice helped to empower and create resilience against extremist groups. Freear and Glazzard (2021:17) made the following statement:

Most activities, however, were designed to develop skills in communicating and participating in media activities, which included working with professional, independent media organisations for some mentees. Recognising that self-expression can create pathways to explore purpose, belonging and personal values, the component sought to build the mentees' capacity in purpose-driven storytelling, intended to create 'opportunities for participants to connect emotionally with themes in their lives, and to each other, in order to create stories that represent their experiences'.

This led to greater inter-community building and gave participants purpose and confidence (Freear & Glazzard 2021:21). The social media campaign #BringBackOurGirls was prompted after "April 2014, 276 girls were abducted from Chibok Secondary School in Borno State, also in northeast Nigeria" by Boko Haram (Verjee & Kwaja 2021). This indicates the backlash on social media forms against extremist groups. More on the campaign can be found by utilising the hashtag on social media platforms. Websites also contain the phenomena named in the Chapter. The interactive documentary featured as a website, *Hidden Like Anne Frank* (2010) by Prins et al., showcases where Jewish children hid during World War II (Forceville 2017:222). This interactive documentary can showcase the reality of Antisemitism within the time period and can increase tolerance and empathy (Forceville 2017:222). The documentary was adapted from a book and can also be seen as a biography (Prins & Steenhuis 2014). The website acts as a counter-narrative for holocaust distortion.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2024) pointed out that the book *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1919), is an Antisemitic conspiracy theory. This book has dramatically impacted conspiratorial narratives since its release, transcending its original time, space and medium (The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2024). The basis of the narrative is that there is or was a Jewish council that seeks to control the world through "politics, the economy, financial markets, media, education, and other parts of society in order to benefit Jews" (The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2024). Traces of the text can still be found on different internet mediums, such as social media (The United States Holocaust

Memorial Museum 2024). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2024) is a counter-narrative against this narrative. The video *Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories: Past, Present and Future?* Evens (2023) showcased conspiracy theories that encourage Antisemitic thinking and act as a counter-narrative. The narrative discusses conspiracies from the Middle Ages to the current Israel-Hamas war (Evens 2023).

The Islamic conspiracy theories that circulated in Europe were exacerbated after many countries took in Muslim Refugees (Slivková 2022:430). Many of these conspiracy theories evolve around an Islamic plot to replace indigenous European people, heritage, religion and politics with Muslims (Slivková 2022:430). These conspiracy theories often depict all Muslims as terrorists who form part of this plot that wants to rape their way through Europe (Slivková 2022:430, 431). The narratives seek to use fear to mobilise people toward first hatred of the other and secondly toward specific political choices (e.g. Brexit) (Slivková 2022:430, 431). In a YouTube video, Keith Ellison¹⁷ (Core Library 2024) explained how conspiracy theories that encourage Islamophobia form part of some political stances in the USA. The narrative can act as a counter-narrative against such conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories utilised against groups are often (not always) intertwined with political propaganda. These narratives often thematise all people of a specific group into a negated narrative, causing strong us-versus-them concepts. Islamophobia and Antisemitic conspiracy theories should not be seen as purely Western; instead, these phenomena can arise in any context.

Not all internet narratives are harmful, and some even encourage social cohesion. A call to prayer can be found both in Islam and Hinduism in Indonesia (Hynson 2021:1). Along with these two traditions, Roman Catholic churches ring bells and have prayers in Latin (Hynson 2021:7). These prayers and calls to prayer are all unique to the specific religious groups. It can be heard over loudspeakers and is broadcasted digitally through "TV and radio stations, and even on cell phone apps" (Hynson 2021:7). The Hindu call to prayer is relatively new and only started to become popular in 2001 (Hynson 2021:5). However, this new tradition, along with electronic broadcasting has led to a spike in children wanting to learn the *gender wayang* music that accompanies the call to prayer (Hynson 2021:5). These different religious calls and broadcastings form part of a nationalistic identity of "unity in diversity" in Indonesia (Hynson 2021:1-12). An example of all three religious calls can be found on the Folklife website (Hynson 2020). These religious calls will intrinsically also fall under ritual and spirituality.

¹⁷ An American politician

However, it can showcase a form of inclusive nationalistic identity and was, therefore, placed here.

The National Secular Society (2017) has a website where they "challenge religious privilege" in the UK. On this site, the association calls for government change toward a more significant secular nationalist ideology (National Secular Society 2017); showcasing nationalism and secularisation. The website E-international Relations (2023) has different articles on political matters. For example, an article by Mostofa (2023) negatively commented on secularism as a religion, one of many different views found on the site. However, they have articles and books with many views for students to access for free (E-international relations 2023)¹⁸. Many of the concepts in this Chapter are simulated in news articles. The National Post reports, "Unhinged teacher tells Muslim to support Pride or 'you can't be Canadian'" (Mohamed 2023). This article raises questions about nationalistic ideologies and the unbiasedness of secular views. Kelly (2018) reported on fasces symbols uncovered in Italy when the former embassy was renovated in the Washington Post. The symbols connect to Mussolini's fascism, who tried to use it as a nationalist ideological symbol connected to the ancient Romans (used as a narrative for the ideal past) (Kelly 2018). This report points toward a strong intersection with historical nationalistic ideologies, symbols and narratives.

The Dutch News (2023) reported banning religious symbols for the police force while in uniform. This falls under religious symbols; however, it is also a strict secularist concept. Similarly, a debate has been sparked in France over whether Muslim girls should be allowed to wear abayas (not seen by all as a religious symbol) as religious symbols are banned (Marashli 2023; Nijenhuis 2023). This again points to a strict secularist concept that tries to force any religious concept out of the public sphere. Coletta (2021) reported in the Washington Post that banning religious symbols for government workers in Quebec will have a marked effect on people who wear "Muslim hijabs and Sikh turbans". All these different examples fall under symbols, but because of the intensity of nationalist and secularist ideologies, they fit better under this subsection. Horowitz (2021) reported that Pope Francis condemned the nationalistic use of the Christian symbol of the cross. This was after Pope Francis visited Hungary, where "Prime Minister Viktor Orban" used the cross in nationalist ideological politics (Horowitz 2021).

¹⁸ For easy access to the website, please follow the link: <https://www.e-ir.info/about/>

Tully (2022) reported on an anti-Muslim symbol (bulldozer) being used in a public parade in New Jersey. The symbol is considered offensive because of the use of bulldozers in India to persecute Muslims (Tully 2022). Adams (2022) wrote an article for The Tennessean describing the rise and strengthening of Christian Nationalism among American politicians. Missier (2021) looked at fundamentalism and media, both news-based and social media. One of the examples used was the French newspapers "Le Monde and Le Figaro", which generally depicts Islam negatively (Missier 2021:23-33). This has been shown as seen earlier as well, to exacerbate Islamic extremism, as the West plays into the villain image that extremists make them out to be (Missier 2021:33). Missier (2021) stated:

For example the campaigners used the highly publicized event in 2016 which shows the humiliation of the Muslim women wearing burkinis who were media forced to undress by French police. This caused outrage on social resulting in #WTFFrance the hashtag # and was globally rewarded and supported with comments, retweets and likes.

One still finds various reactions to the burkini swimwear in the news; for example, Muslim women are banned from wearing burkinis (Aydogan & Sevenican 2022) or compensated for swimwear discrimination after lawsuits (MercoPress 2023). The blatant disregard for someone's sense of safety and modesty is at least fundamentalist, if not extremist. Politzer and Alcaraz (2023:352) investigated the concept of Islamophobia in the news, especially in times surrounding terrorist attacks committed by people who identify as Muslim. They specifically focused on the mass shooting in Paris on 2015 the 7th of January (Politzer & Alcaraz 2023:352). They specifically investigated "The New York Times and the Wall Street Journal" articles. Their research found that 28% of the news articles had Islamophobic traits within this time, with an increase after the event (Politzer & Alcaraz 2023:359, 364). The examples that follow are given by Politzer and Alcaraz (2023:361):

How to Answer the Paris Terror Attack: The West must stand up for freedom—and acknowledge the link between Islamists' political ideology and their religious beliefs. (Example 1: The Wall Street Journal, 07/01/2015).

Islam to Blame for the Shooting at Charlie Hebdo in Paris? (Example 2: The Wall Street Journal, 07/01/2015).

What If Modern Islam Isn't Being Hijacked by Radicals? From the very beginning, there has been little tolerance in Islam for its sibling faiths of Christianity and Judaism. (Example 3: The Wall Street Journal, 03/11/2014).

Islam and the West at War (Example 4: The New York Times, 16/02/2015).

The links to the four examples are in the bibliography (Kristof 2015; Ali 2015; Wall Street Journal 2014; Cohen 2015). Schreuer (2019) wrote an article for the New York Times on banning the ritual slaughter of animals in Europe, creating problems for both the Islamic and Jewish communities. The article stated that the ban is disguised under animal rights while

discrimination occurs toward minority groups (Schreuer 2019). This concludes the subsection on *Examples from digital narratives*. The following subsection showcases two narrative evaluation examples in a more critical light.

8.5 Narrative evaluation examples

This section focuses on an ongoing event with an overwhelming amount of narratives. The focus of this section is on pseudo-events that were provoked by the Israel-Hamas war. This includes an increase in Islamophobia and Antisemitic occurrences in countries other than the war. This focus should not be seen as indifference toward the suffering experienced by humans within the warzone. Like most wars, this one is complex, and there is a very complex entangled history before this latest escalation (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica 2024). The focus of this section is on religious education in countries other than that of the war. This section and its narratives will work best in a tertiary education setting. In Chapter One of the thesis, there was a quotation by Plate (2021a:209) that stated:

Most obviously for early twenty-first-century life, the mass media embodies us through the internet, social media, television, video games, and news outlets, as well as linking us with war [...]

Through digital narratives like news, humanity experiences some form of simulation with a war that is contextually (especially physically) removed from them. In a tertiary education setting, there is a chance that some of the students have heard of the conflict, and others may actively be following the narrative online (this will be very contextually bound to each student). Students are linked to this dangerous us-versus-them phenomenon (definition in Chapter Four) through internet narratives. If students follow the narrative in the news, it would be good to encourage students to see different views on the subject matter, as different journalists and news agencies may report in vastly different manners. Through news apps, search engines and social media, news about the war, with live updates, can be found. This can be found, for example, by using search terms that include but are not limited to "Israel-Hamas war", "Gaza", and "Palestine". Following news agencies on social media platforms may present such news-related narratives spontaneously. Furthermore, narratives and opinions run rapidly on social media under hashtags that include but are not limited to #Israel, #Hamas, #Gaza, #Palistine, #Israel-HamasWar, #IsraelUnderAttack, #FreeGazaFromHamaz, #IsraelApartheid, #GazaTerrorism, #IsraelTerrorism, #GazaStarving. However, as this section focuses on Antisemitism and Islamophobia prompted because of the war, but outside the warzone, these narratives will not be evaluated in detail.

There is a very strong connection between the war and religious affiliations: Israel is represented by a specific form of Orthodox Judaism, and Hamas is represented by a group of Muslims associated with terrorism and the Jihad (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica 2024; Friedman 2023). Here, it is necessary to be cautious not to make the war narratives thematic. Israel does not represent all Jewish people, and Hamas does not represent all Muslims; educators should state this fact in the class. This religious association and the digital simulations that students can potentially experience make this a critical topic to address in religious education settings. As seen under the subsection *Discussion and semantics on Islamophobia* earlier in this Chapter, religion has a complex place within society and conflicts like war, where scapegoating often takes place (Pratt 2013:242; Moyaert 2018:12). All human intersections need to be considered when evaluating concepts such as violence and war (Moyaert 2018:12). The focus of the thesis is on religion. However, this should not reduce the understanding of the complicated socio-political context of the war to only a religious phenomenon.

The narratives discussed in this section will be ideal for use in class as part of para-social interaction and for creating an understanding of phenomena. If utilised, educators will have to give some basic neutral facts on the war, as not all students will be well informed on the subject. For example, educators can provide a map of the geographical locations of the phenomena, which may be necessary; The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica (2024)¹⁹ have an example that may work well. Modern conflict in the area can be traced back to 1948 (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica 2024), as this latest conflict is a large escalation of a problem with an extended historical background. The current declaration of war was declared on 8 October 2023 after Hamas had started a large-scale assault on Israel on 7 October 2023, which saw lives lost and hostages taken (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica 2024; Dumas 2023; Mercer 2023; Edrich 2024; Kelter 2023). This led to the Israel siege of the Gaza Strip to secure both Hamas and the hostages, with lives lost and widespread displacement of Gaza civilians through the process (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica 2024; Dumas 2023; Edrich 2024; Kelter 2023). These are very basic facts; if educators seek to work with this subject matter, it would be beneficial to know more about it. Furthermore, one does not know how much students know about the subject and if they have a strong opinion. As this section focuses on pseudo-events

¹⁹ For easy access to the map please follow the link <https://www.britannica.com/event/Israel-Hamas-War-of-2023>

abroad, students should be directed toward these events rather than letting the conversation get sidetracked by the war.

The focus will now turn toward the pseudo-events. Islamophobia and Antisemitism have risen around the world since the start of the War (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica 2024; Dumas 2023). The rise in Antisemitism and Islamophobia has been reported in the news in South Africa, Australia, European countries, the US, China, and the UK (Klawansky 2023; Makhoali 2023; Dumas 2023; Mercer 2023; Benakis 2023; Bukhari 2023; Porter 2023; Ramírez 2024; Jung 2023; Svrluga & DouglasGabriel 2024; Smilgius 2023; Ainslie 2023; Wang 2023; Kelter 2023; Edrich 2024; Gibbons 2024). However, these are just examples; these discriminatory patterns are not limited to these contexts but act as examples of the rise of Antisemitism and Islamophobia from the start of the war. These Antisemitic and Islamophobic behaviours include anything from vandalism, hate speech, online hate (social media), dehumanisation, death threats, violence and the threat thereof (toward people, holy places, schools, homes, and businesses), boycotting of businesses and even murder (Klawansky 2023; Dumas 2023; Benakis 2023; Bukhari 2023; Jung 2023; Ainslie 2023; Wang 2023; Mercer 2023; Smilgius 2023; Kelter 2023; Fabricius 2023; Muzicant 2023). If educators want to work with these pseudo-events, students must be given these and similar facts.

These incidents showcase minority groups in countries persecuted for the war abroad (Dumas 2023; Jung 2023; Klawansky 2023; Mercer 2023; Edrich 2024); this brings up minority-majority power relations. The increase in hate crimes showcases a thematic response toward all Muslim and Jewish people as representatives of different sides of the war. However, it should be stated that this is not the response by all. The us-versus-them phenomenon (in this case, war) inherently creates a gravitational pull for people to pick a side. It is difficult for entities, especially states, to stay neutral (Ainslie 2023). As alignments make themselves clear, the simulations become even more complex as countries not at the centre of the conflict use misinformation against others (Wang 2023). For example, propaganda has been noted in China against the US-Israel alliance (Wang 2023). Jung (2023) stated:

Misinformation has also run rampant on social media and in news stories, creating confusion and further stoking the flames of hate [...]

News is not the only narrative simulation of the war; social media has started to play an active role in conflict situations (Liaropoulos 2023:198, 199). Liaropoulos (2023:201) stated that:

There is no doubt that social media is revolutionizing the way societies interact with war. Social media brought a paradigm shift in terms of time, target audiences, and strategic utility.

Social media has become a political tool to spread information, misinformation, and propaganda to further ideologies and political causes during wartime (Liaropoulos 2023:198). It would be necessary for educators to state to the class that the modern influence of social media and news is immense. As seen in Chapter Four, internet narratives can potentially create a storm of information that overwhelms content consumers (Bazelon 2020:2). War is an overwhelming negative phenomenon, and using narratives showcasing phenomena that are in their nature negative and violent can impact one's emotional state. This is not to discourage people from following these internet narratives. Instead, when this subject is addressed in education settings, educators should encourage students to evaluate their emotional responses to these narratives. Furthermore, when following these narratives, taking a step back and contextualising oneself to the socio-political context outside the war narrative is essential. Political leaders have condemned the rise of Islamophobia and Antisemitism and stated the importance of freedom of religion within the constitutional rights and nationalist identities of their countries. These condemnations have included some of the following countries but are not limited to them: the USA, South Africa, Australia, and European countries (with additional measures) (Samuels 2023; Fabricius 2023; EJC 2023; O'Carroll 2023)

This is a start and an essential concept for political leaders to address. A storm of current information and misinformation is found on internet platforms; both can lead to an intense emotive response. Furthermore, seeing all Muslims and Jewish people as thematically linked to the war is a synthetic view. Regardless of their view on the war, they are outside of the conflict; they are human and have a right to human dignity, and students should be reminded of their contextual responsibility toward building a tolerant society. However, if people have a thematic view of Jewish and Muslim people because of the war narrative, a reminder of the norms and laws of the country may not be enough. Note that this is not to say that such an address should not happen, but that this may not be enough to counter the problem. The other problem is the emotional engagement that is found within narratives. Chapter Four stated that altering people's views from a narrative with "bland fact" is unlikely to help (Gottschall 2021:95).

One of the tools available to educators is counter-narratives. Emotional counter-narratives have the potential to have a positive influence on content consumers through para-social interaction (Zeiger & Gyte 2021:375; Gottschall 2012:loc 884; Murrar & Brauer 2017:4). The hope would be to increase humanisation, build students tolerance skills while gaining social and intersectional awareness. Narratives are not a "quick fix"; as stated in Chapter Five, they act as

one of many tools educators can utilise within education settings (Gottesman 2017:13, 14). It is not always easy to find the correct counter-narrative, as there is a large amount of information to work through on social media platforms. A narrative from the local context should be used if possible, but this is not always available. Using narratives from abroad will also work as it helps with students' global citizenship awareness.

This paragraph contains the restrictions used for choosing two narratives that may work in education settings. The narrative needed to focus on the lived experience of a person who experienced Islamophobia or Antisemitism. Thereby, non-fiction was sought out. The narratives needed to be dated after the start of the war. The narrative should include information on how the war impacted personal experiences outside the war zone. Preferably, the narrative should not be overtly political to ensure that people view the characters as non-thematic to the war narrative. It should be noted that people do not have the right to discriminate against others based on their political allegiances. However, the war narrative is being used in a thematic way to show Judaism versus Islam in an us-versus-them phenomenon. The narratives should help to de-escalate this problem. The main characters should be relatable or create potential humanisation through para-social interaction.

Two narratives that fit the criteria were chosen. The first narrative showcased a lived experience of Islamophobia; it is an internet narrative, specifically a social media narrative (non-fiction). The narrative is titled *Muslim School In London Facing Islamophobic Threats Amidst Gaza Conflict*²⁰ (2023) by TRT World. The content creator TRT World (2015) creates meaningful conversations about relevant social phenomena in society while showcasing humanising narratives, often with lived experiences. The narrative is under three minutes, making it ideal for an educational setting, both in and outside class. How and where this is used may be contextually bound to the digital divide and available time. The narratives are passive and portable through YouTube for educators to use in class or send to students through appropriate channels.

The narrative takes place in the UK in a private Islamic school that received a bomb threat (plot) (TRT World 2023). In the UK, the following personal identifications were found in the 2021 census: Muslims (6.5%), non-religious (37.2%), and Christian (46.2%) (Office for National Statistics 2022). Therefore, Muslims are a minority within this country, with non-religious and Christian people in the majority. Providing this statistic to students may assist

²⁰ For easy access to the narrative, please follow the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6cJILDcytk>

them in understanding minority-majority relationships in terms of religion. Care must be taken not to thematise the UK as the only place where Islamophobia takes place or to paint all people in the UK as being Islamophobic, as this would be a synthetic view; the narrative, however, should not create this pitfall. Furthermore, showcasing the phenomena as used earlier in many countries (news articles) can also assist in countering this potential problem. If educators fear this potential pitfall, it should be addressed outright by stating to the class that Islamophobia exists outside this context and that not all people found in the context are Islamophobic.

The prominent people (characters, protagonists) showcased are two Muslim women; one is the head teacher at the school named Meherun Hamid, and the other is the mother of one of the children named Shanaz Syeda (TRT World 2023). This showcases Muslim women as mothers and teachers, showing people who want to live their lives and want the best for the children under their care, causing potential humanisation through para-social interaction (TRT World 2023). It should be noted that the researcher does not reduce the humanisation of women to the roles filled in the narrative. They both wear a traditional Islamic head scarf, which may increase humanisation toward women who choose to wear Hijabs. In the narrative, the women spoke separately about their experiences (discourse) (TRT World 2023). The two women used emotive language, for example, feeling terrified and scared; this may be beneficial to the humanisation effect of the narrative (TRT World 2023).

Shanaz emphasised how their faith and beliefs helped them in this period (TRT World 2023). One of the terms that may be unfamiliar to non-Islamic students is the *qadr* of *Allah*; Shanaz used this in retelling her experience (TRT World 2023). Bagasra et al. (2022) stated that *qadr* is "the belief that Allah has willed for something to happen". Another term that is briefly shown on the screen is *shahadah* (TRT World 2023), which is the "profession of faith" and part of the "five pillars of Islam" (The MET, n.d.). Students can be asked what the terms mean if used in an assignment, encouraging curiosity about unfamiliar phenomena found in narratives. If used in class, students can be asked to look up the words (if they are unknown to the students) through search engines, or educators can explain the terms. If students know what the terms mean, they can share the meaning with the rest of the class, also creating an interactive moment.

Throughout the narrative, sections of the letter (the threat) were showcased, showing the perpetrator's dehumanising and intolerant thought patterns (TRT World 2023). Meherun (the teacher) emphasised their contact with the police concerning this incident (TRT World 2023). Meherun and Shanaz also emphasised that they have received support from the community (TRT World 2023). Meherun further emphasised that Islamophobic events are increasing and

have a direct relation to the war (TRT World 2023). Shanaz expressed astonishment that this event occurred in the UK (TRT World 2023). This can potentially point to the idea that the UK nationalistic identity does not condone such actions or an overall understanding of safety within the country. This also points to the exacerbation of Islamophobia because of the war.

The narrative correlates with the definition given of Islamophobia as it showcases hatred and violent intent against Muslim people. The narrative showcases the thematic interpretation of Muslim people regarding the war narrative. The affective realism of the perpetrator is showcased through the letters; this is a violent extremist. The narrative also shows how the community's affective realism was affected by the Islamophobic event. If used in class, focus groups can discuss the narratives and what students heard and saw. The intersections with the definitions may be used to formulate questions. For instance, students can be asked what they think the person who sent the letter believes about Islam or what impact they believe such a letter had on the community receiving the threat. Students can be asked what they notice about the characters and how they add to the narrative. Students can be asked what part of the discourse was particularly striking. Students can be asked to reflect on what emotions the narrative provoked and how it influenced their view of the phenomena. Students can be asked what impact the age group of the students (7 years and younger (TRT World 2023)) in the video had on their understanding of Islamophobia. The different groups can then report back. Similar reflections may be useful in assignments.

The second narrative showcased the lived experience of an Antisemitic event. This is an internet narrative, specifically a social media narrative (non-fiction). The narrative is titled *Israel-Hamas War: Student Shares Harrowing Experience Of Anti-Semitism In Pennsylvania University*²¹ (2023) by The Economic Times. The Economic Times (2015) is a newspaper hosted in India that is available in English. It should be stated that the narrative is set in a USA context (The Economic Times 2023). The narrative is just over five and a half minutes, making it ideal for educational settings. The narrative can be used inside or outside class as context, time, and the digital divide dictates. The narrative is passive and available on YouTube, making it possible for multiple forms of use (inside and outside of class).

The narrative takes place in the USA. The statistics of the 2020 Census indicate the following religious affiliations: Christian (70%), unaffiliated (23%) and Jewish (1%) (PRRI 2021). The Jewish community is a minority group within this context, showcasing minority-majority

²¹ For easy access to the narrative, please follow the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvV89KWwujU>

power relations. As with the previous narrative, the same precautions must be taken to ensure that the students understand that Antisemitism is not a purely USA phenomenon, nor should everyone in the USA be viewed as Antisemitic. The main person in the narrative (character, protagonist) is a Jewish undergraduate student named Eyal Yakoby (The Economic Times 2023). The fact that the target audience (the people in the class watching the narrative) are undergraduate students and that Eyal is an undergraduate student may increase identification. Greater identification can lead to better para-social interaction and increased humanisation and tolerance, as mentioned in Chapter Four (Sestir & Green 2010:275; van Laer et al. 2013:802; Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. 2014:565-566; Murrar & Brauer 2017:4). Although Eyal is wearing jewellery around his neck the quality of the video makes it unidentifiable as a religious item, the quality of the video also makes it impossible to see if he is wearing a *kippah* or *yarmulke*.

In the narrative, Eyal spoke (discourse) about the Antisemitic incidents on his university campus (The Economic Times 2023). Eyal started with a very strong statement that indicated the dehumanisation and violence voiced by his peers and educators (The Economic Times 2023). He indicated how these antisemitic incidents had affected his experience as an undergraduate student (The Economic Times 2023). He expressed the crimes perpetrated by faculty and students, e.g. calling for mass murder, vandalising property, lighting smoke bombs, bomb threats, harassment, marking property with swastikas, online hate, mocking of Jewish hostages held by Hamas, mocking slurs related to gas chambers and pigs, and spreading of Hamas propaganda (The Economic Times 2023).

The emphasis and core of the narrative was to expose the silence and lack of action of the University's president on the antisemitic acts (The Economic Times 2023). He emphasised that the University discouraged students from wearing religious symbols after the Antisemitism started as a solution to the problem (The Economic Times 2023). Religious clothing often marks people as different in societies where they are minorities and has been shown to affect Islamophobia and Antisemitism. The impact of religious clothing can be a point of interest for students to reflect and debate on. He uses emotive language, describing the events as horrifying and chilling and describing the perpetrators' actions as hateful, intimidating, and hostile (The Economic Times 2023). He described the Jewish students' emotional states as overly cautious, uncertain, unsafe and fearing for their lives (The Economic Times 2023). This emotive language may help increase humanisation.

Eyal emphasised the correlation between the war and the increase in antisemitic attacks (The Economic Times 2023). He stated his nationality as an American (USA) (The Economic Times 2023), making him part of the American Nationalistic narrative. This statement can help with the non-thematic concept that needs to be achieved through the counter-narratives. As stated before, this does not give grounds for discrimination based on political alliances or nationality, which should also be stated to students. There is a large thematic simulation of connecting Jewish and Muslim people to the conflict, and these narratives can aid in de-escalating this synthetic understanding.

This narrative correlates with the definition given for Antisemitism, as Eyal shared the lived experiences of hatred and violence against Jewish people. The perpetrators are violent extremists. Through their acts, they show their affective realism. Furthermore, the affective realism of the Jewish community who experience these hate crimes is also affected. If used in class, focus groups can be utilised, or this may be given as an assignment. Students can be asked to reflect on how the narrative makes them feel about the phenomenon. Students can be asked to state what they heard and saw. Students can reflect on how the character presents himself and how that presents the phenomenon. The perpetrators were students and faculty; students can be asked if the fact that it was not just students but faculty also affects the narrative and their understanding of the phenomenon. Students can be asked how they think these crimes affected the students and their academic experience.

Another option is to showcase narratives where Jewish and Muslim people come together in this challenging time to counter the concept that these two groups must be enemies. By showcasing tolerance between the groups, educators can inspire students to act in a tolerant and humanising way in the future. An example of such a narrative will not be examined here in detail. However, here are two examples of such narratives: *Reading Of The Joint Multi-Faith Commitment To Counter Anti-Muslim And Anti-Jewish Hate In The U.S.* (2023)²² by Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign; *Jews And Muslims Coexist At Kosher, Halal Bakery In Westhampton Beach* (2023)²³ by Newsday.

The following paragraph addresses both narratives that were discussed in detail. The goal of these narratives in an educational setting would be to increase humanisation and empathy toward the affected groups. Educators should note that the goal is not to inspire pity or to see these groups as weak. Both narratives, although addressing emotions such as fear, showcase

²² For easy access to the narrative, please follow the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHKMS9lmcHU>

²³ For easy access to the narrative, please follow the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GKRACqOIAM>

strong characters that should inspire empathy rather than pity. The narratives can help refocus students who feel overwhelmed by the narratives they receive. Furthermore, it can counter dangerous propaganda that seeks to dehumanise the affected groups and make students aware of the narratives that surround them. The narratives will not necessarily make violent extremists desist but can aid general students in understanding the discriminatory factors that are happening in the world, thereby countering propaganda from the violent extremists. Educators should take care to moderate conversations in class, in terms of keeping on track with the topic, not letting any one person dominate a conversation and being sensitive to strong emotive responses that students may have.

By making students aware of these narratives and their civic responsibility toward building tolerant societies, they may act in a way that is more aware of the situation. This does not mean that students have to hold large assemblies to counter these factors; although peaceful assemblies are not discouraged, such actions can get out of hand from their original purpose if emotions are running high. Instead, students should be aware of such situations and act with kindness and support (not pity) toward affected groups when they have contact with them. Furthermore, educators can inspire students to act responsibly with digital narratives by encouraging them not to send along propaganda and narratives that inspire hatred or fear toward others.

Encouraging students to do something productive to help the situation abroad may also give them a healthy outlet for the emotions provoked by the situation and the narratives. In Chapter Six, it was mentioned that giving people a practical outlet can alleviate some of the negative emotive responses to crises (Merizalde et al. 2021:967, 971). Educators can encourage students to give to non-profit organisations if they want to aid those suffering. Students can contribute money themselves, encourage others to donate or create fundraisers. An example of non-profit organisations that impact the warzone can be found on the CNN (n.d.)²⁴ news webpage; these will not be the only non-profits but act as examples. However, geographical location and currency may impact how one can contribute financially. In global events such as war, with the overwhelming amount of narratives that arise, it can be complex for students to know how and if they can act to support people affected by the phenomenon. By redirecting energies toward purposes that may have a genuine impact on people suffering because of the war, students can have a positive outlet in the confusion that can impact the lives of many.

²⁴ For easy access to the website, please follow the link: <https://www.pledge.to/help-humanitarian-efforts-in-israel-and-gaza>

It should be noted that the current situation is not unique, and this should also be pointed out to students. The hope would be to encourage young adults to act with social and intersectional awareness. When large global phenomena occur, there is often a backlash toward groups associated with the phenomena. Examples of such phenomena include discrimination and hate crimes against Russians who have lived abroad since the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war and toward Ukrainian refugees (Teslova 2023; Cossé & Funke 2022; Gosling 2023). Another example includes the discrimination against Asians because of the thematic understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic in regard to China (Human Rights Watch 2020; Tang & Sanders 2023). Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not new and will probably continue as world events manifest. By making students aware that the case at hand is not isolated but a pattern they can observe in future phenomena, greater social and intersectional awareness can manifest throughout students' lifetimes. Furthermore, these pseudo-events may be less powerful if more people have better social and intersectional awareness. With this in mind, better-functioning multi-religious societies may arise.

8.6 Chapter themes

- Factors to consider (SQ1; RG8; PC11)

One of the factors to consider is that religion is not the only construct simulated through digital narratives. Constructs such as secularism and nationalism are often portrayed in narratives of different mediums. The simulation of these concepts can equally influence content consumers. The different simulations that may influence people are not limited to these examples but can extend to any simulation found in humanity. Constructs that influence identities, including but not limited to religion, nationalism, secularism, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, politics, and history, can influence content consumers when simulated in narratives. Concepts like identification theory (discussed in Chapter Four) explain why a narrative may be more influential toward specific people, e.g. a person who identifies strongly with a group will be influenced by narratives that simulate the group. These identity formation simulations found in humanity can form part of fundamentalistic ideals. Narratives that portray these simulations in a fundamentalistic manner may encourage these fundamentalistic patterns. Similarly, narratives with a more inclusive understanding of human identity simulations can encourage more tolerant points of view.

- Digital narrative as a creative source (SQ5; RG5; PC6)

This Chapter included a small catalogue of narratives under the heading *Examples from digital narratives*, showcasing different religious, tolerant, and intolerant phenomena. By showcasing the phenomena, it becomes clear that narratives can be a source of creative teaching in religious education settings. Under the heading *Narrative evaluation example*, related examples of two narratives were analysed to showcase the pseudo-events of the Israel-Hamas war. This evaluation stands as an example of how narratives can be used within religious education. However, narrative in religion education should not be limited to the examples given, as narrative is a creative source that can be used in multiple ways. The narratives showcased how counter-narratives may be used within education settings. The counter-narratives contrast discriminatory patterns found as pseudo-events to a larger world event. The hope would be to enhance humanisation, tolerance and empathy toward the affected groups. Furthermore, these narratives may make students more aware of such pseudo-events in the future, contributing to their social and intersectional awareness.

- How religious studies and media studies can benefit each other (RG4, PC7, PC8, PC9)

Digital narratives are in the homes of many today (considering the digital divide). Not all narratives promote tolerant societies, as prominent us-versus-them and scapegoating occur in narratives. This is often used with misinformation, propaganda and emotive manipulations. Religion is one of many identity-related factors often used in such narratives. This puts religion education in an ideal position to help educate people on the responsible use and understanding of narratives. If educators in religion take on the task, it can benefit digital narrative users in evaluating and understanding narratives better. Furthermore, by promoting humanising counter-narratives, students can learn to utilise this resource throughout their lives. Narratives aid religion education, as they are a creative source for para-social interaction and can act as a learning simulator for students. Ideally, students can become lifelong learners through curiosity about the responsible use of information found in narratives.

- The responsible and ethical use of narratives (SQ2, RG2)

By making students more aware of the different types of narratives: neutral, tolerant, intolerant, and counter-narratives, they may learn to navigate these digital narratives in the future. The knowledge that not all digital narratives are created with good intent, even when constructed by societal leaders, can increase critical thinking in the future. Teaching students to examine their emotional responses to narratives will aid in ethical considerations of narratives. When concepts like fear, anger, and strong us-versus-them sentiments arise, it is beneficial to take a

step back and investigate the narrative from another perspective. This does not invalidate human emotion; sometimes, fear, anger and even us-versus-them sentiments are appropriate. However, the knowledge that people use these emotions to further their ideologies is essential, as this may lead to less manipulatable audiences. This does not mean emotions will not arise; the content consumer can ask if specific emotions are appropriate for the situation. Further questions of how to productively help a situation, like contributing to charities directly related to the situation, may also help.

When students are aware of how discriminatory ideologies are used within narratives, they may view the phenomenon without getting swept up in the reaction that the content consumer tries to prompt. An example is the outline given by Levinger and Lytle (2001) on nationalist ideological narratives. If students know about these narratives and their basic outline, they may view the phenomenon and ask questions. Some questions can include but are not limited to whether it is an inclusive and responsible narrative for the context of the entire nation or whether it leans only toward one group. If it discriminates toward specific groups, the content consumer must ask if they know anything about these groups and their sociopolitical stance within the set society. If they do not, it will be beneficial to research the group in question. If students learn to see concepts like scapegoating that are often utilised toward minority groups by political leaders, then they may be less prone to fall prey to such narratives. Lastly, if students are aware of counter-narratives, they may be more prone to utilise them in the future.

- Critical thinking abilities and digital narratives (SQ6, RG3, PC5)

Group identities often contain ideologies that act as an affective realism shared by the community. These ideologies can be bound to different simulations of human identity. When this happens, a specific understanding of how concepts should be simulated exists. It should be stated that a very individualistic concept of human identity has started to emerge in the post-secular era; this should be taken into account, although group identities have not and will not dissipate completely. If this affective realism is fundamentalistic, no other simulation of concepts is seen as having value or merit. Educators can use digital narratives as simulators to aid critical thinking by showcasing different viewpoints. This may broaden students' viewpoint toward a pluralistic understanding, where although they have an exclusive understanding of the world, it does not exclude others from having a meaningful simulation that differs from their viewpoint. Critical thinking is needed to understand a pluralistic view of society. Narratives can be used to mobilise toward a healthy communal affective realism. One that does not see the difference as a threat to the communal concepts, simulations, affective realism, and intersectional understanding of the world.

- Tolerance and the responsible use of digital narratives (SQ7, RG6, PC4)

Tolerance may be increased by creating and promoting narratives with a pluralistic understanding of humanity. For example, when working with nationalist ideologies, narratives that promote an inclusive understanding of inhabitants will be beneficial to promote better tolerant societies. Furthermore, if working with more narrow narratives that are fundamentalistic, it will be beneficial to showcase any memetic, synthetic and thematic concepts that may arise. Students may experience a suspension of disbelief by using narratives in education that may aid learning. Educators can encourage curiosity and humanisation by using narratives that showcase different viewpoints. Curiosity about narrative phenomena can encourage students to be curious about phenomena outside the narrative world. This may counter fundamentalism through patterns that may form as part of one's affective realism. This curiosity can encourage students to expand their affective realism (predictions based on constructs and simulations) to include that others may have meaningful experiences that are equally worthy. Other constructs, simulations, affective realism and intersections are not considered a threat to one's own.

- Post-secularism and digital narrative (SQ8)

In the secular age, "irrational" concepts such as religion, emotion, and narrative were not valued or considered less worthy of academic pursuit. Today, in a post-secular and digital age, it is more important than ever to study these phenomena, as these three elements (religion, emotion and narrative) combine to influence human constructs, simulations, affective realism and intersectional understanding of the world. Thereby, narratives influence human understanding and actions (the degree of this influence will be contextually bound to individuals). It is irresponsible in a post-secular view to ignore concepts previously seen as irrational. In the secular age, religion was often scapegoated for negative simulations like violence. In a post-secular age, narratives are often similarly scapegoated for such simulations. These factors must be acknowledged as part of what moves people toward such action. However, many other components of humanity, such as politics, culture, and personal experience, also play a role. This study showcases that narrative affects people and is worthy of evaluation. Narrative, however, is not the only factor and should be considered holistically; thereby, narrative is not scapegoated. Narrative has influence and can be a powerful tool in religious education, but it is not the only tool and not a hasty remedy. In the post-secular age, one must find a balanced understanding of concepts like narrative to understand larger societal problems.

- Narrative quantity in daily use (RG1, PC1)

When major world events happen, a flood of narratives often accompanies the event. These narratives are found in digital and non-digital forms. Educators can encourage students to document when they encounter narratives that encompass such events as part of an assignment. This will include digital narratives but also interactions with everyday people. Students can be asked to document the number of narratives they encounter regarding the phenomena. They can be asked to classify the narratives as tolerant, intolerant, neutral or counter-narratives. Students can be asked to evaluate their emotional states after encountering the narratives. Students do not have to search for the narratives in question but rather observe when these narratives cross their path. This may make students more aware of the amount of narratives that they receive on such subjects. This may be very contextually bound to each student. The digital divide must be taken into consideration with such assignments.

- Balance of responsibilities (SQ10)

When identity-related phenomena are utilised in narratives, care must be taken from content creators and receivers. This is especially true with any us-versus-them narrative. If possible, content creators should not dehumanise parties, this can be achieved by showing multiple intersections and points of view on the problem at hand. Knowing that the us-versus-them narrative usually does not utilise these concepts, content consumers must evaluate these narratives critically. One of the main factors would be looking at both sides' perspectives of the phenomenon and not just taking one narrative at face value. It is always best to proceed cautiously when strong identity theories are present, especially when the narrative encourages fundamentalistic affective realism. This should raise questions about memetic, synthetic and thematic concepts embedded in narratives.

The balance of responsibilities sometimes goes beyond only the content consumer and content creator when policies influence what can and cannot be broadcasted or published. This was evident in the example from reality television shows in South Korea in the work of Istad et al. (2022). Policies regarding narrative depictions may be very helpful in mediating problems found in narratives. Four generalised problems can arise with such policies. First, freedom of expression and freedom of speech may be compromised or claimed to be compromised through such policies. Secondly, just because policies exist does not mean they are implementable within the context. Without strict monitoring, good policies may be left unimplemented. With strict monitoring, censorship may become a problem influencing freedom of expression, leading to questions of who will implement the censorship, to what degree, and how corruption can be avoided in such cases.

Thirdly, if specific narratives become unlawful because of censorship, they will probably be attained unlawfully, as the digitalisation of internet narratives makes such practices less attainable. Lastly, there is a chance that censorship will only increase the sensationalism that can accompany such narratives, thereby promoting what is being censored. It should be noted that these are theoretical problems, and policy implementation problems should not be seen as limited to these concepts. What impact policies will have on the use, creation and obtaining of digital narratives will vary widely by context. Even though there can be problems with policies and their implementation, they may be beneficial to regulating overtly harmful and discriminatory depictions. The problems that can arise should be considered but should not diminish the possibilities of policies in the future. Religious studies specialists can play a part in creating guidelines and policies.

- Content creators (SQ3, RG7)

Religion and cultural specialists can encourage content creators to create more responsible content by mediating and facilitating meetings between the depicted groups and the content creator. This will not always be possible, as the content creator and depicted groups must be willing to work on the project together. Furthermore, both parties would have to be willing to truly hear what the other has to say and make allowances based on different points of view. However, if these two groups are willing to work together, it should be encouraged as it can potentially lead to better-rounded narratives that can facilitate better para-social interaction.

- The creation of content (SQ9, PC10)

When storms of narratives arise because of large world events, finding counter-narratives can be difficult but not impossible. If educators can promote and create counter-narratives, it may be easier for content consumers to find these narratives. Counter-narratives should ideally contain protagonists from the affected groups that can have a positive para-social interaction with the audience, promoting humanisation and tolerance. Educators promoting humanising counter-narratives (for example, on university websites) may assist other educators and the general public in finding such narratives.

- Interpretation of narratives (SQ4)

With big world events, there are often storms of narratives that erupt. This can be overwhelming to the general public and religion studies educators. Those who feel up to the task should evaluate intolerant narratives and counter-narrative phenomena arising from such events. These narratives are often so vast in the news and social media that side-stepping them becomes complex when utilising internet narratives. With this in mind, Digital entertainment will likely follow the internet narratives in this content, as demonstrated throughout the Chapter, especially considering the 9/11 events and World War II narratives. Interpreting these events, creating content for the general public, and writing articles for scholarly societies can aid in acting as counter-narratives. Such evaluations can serve as part of educational programs so that students may be more prepared for these storms in the future. It should be stated that discriminatory narratives are not just prompted after major world events but can exist anytime. The storms of narratives created by major world events make it easy to find these narratives. However, this does not make narratives unrelated to such events less worthy of interpretation.

- Well-informed or ill-informed digital narratives (PC2)

Creating social awareness of intolerant narratives is part of the task of educators in a digital age. It should be noted that intolerant narratives existed before the digital age but have spread more easily in many contexts because of the digitalisation of narratives. This Chapter showcased discrimination narratives and counter-narratives. Counter-narratives are valuable tools to help create better tolerant societies through para-social interaction. Discrimination narratives often have fundamentalistic views that fuel us-versus-them simulations. These narratives are often entangled with identity-forming concepts that include but are not limited to religion, nationalism, and secularism.

Some narratives are directly discriminatory, inciting hate, violence, fear of threat, and us-versus-them phenomena. Some narratives downplay discriminatory actions and distort phenomena like the holocaust for their ideological gain. What discriminatory and counter-narratives should be taught will be very contextually bound to the curriculum, age of the students and country or region-specific problems. For example, a religion study course that focuses on Islam would benefit from also explaining Islamophobia and the role that digital narratives have played in fanning the flames. With this in mind, counter-narratives that can humanise Muslim people through para-social interaction must also be utilised in such courses. The same can be said about Antisemitism and a course on Judaism. However, many discriminatory factors exist and should not be considered limited to Judaism and Islam. Frequently, minority and majority relationships play a role in discriminatory factors, although this is not the only factor that needs to be considered in the future.

One of the things to consider when working with discriminatory narratives is that a thematic understanding of people usually fuels them. This is often linked to a real-world event (not always) that either scapegoats a group or paints a whole group in a synthetic negative light. These narratives are then fuelled with propaganda, misinformation, and negative emotive language, leading to the synthetic thematic view. Considering that the individualisation of religion is seen within the post-secular era, such thematic understandings become even more synthetic. These thematic views are often dehumanising, not showcasing people as individuals who want to live their lives and want the best for their families and the larger society. Instead, they are depicted as benevolent tricksters who pose some form of threat to society. For example, having thematic depictions of all Muslims as terrorists is a synthetic view often encouraged by intolerant narratives. Another thematic and synthetic depiction includes Jewish people being part of some economic conspiracy to control the world.

When working with tolerant and intolerant narratives, one of the aspects to consider is the narrative creator. Unfortunately, as Chapter Six shows, societal leaders often create and spread intolerant narratives. Their influence can often lend credence to the narratives, spreading the intolerant mindset more easily. The narrative examples used in this Chapter showcased different simulations of ideologies. The narrative examples also showcased how big events like 9/11 and World War II influence fictional and non-fictional narratives. These narratives can then impact narrative consumers long after the event has passed. Furthermore, many counter-narratives were also given that can act as simulators to increase tolerance. The narrative examples also included some minority-majority power relationships outside of Islamophobia and Antisemitism.

- Catalogues (PC12)

This Chapter added a catalogue of narratives containing simulations of concepts, namely, secularism, nationalism, fundamentalism, extremism, terrorism, Islamophobia, Antisemitism and minority-majority relationships. The narratives included discriminatory narratives and counter-narratives. Entertainment and internet narratives were given as examples in fictional and non-fictional forms. The narrative examples included different mediums, namely books in electronic mediums, filmography, video games, music, social media, websites and news.

- Providing new definitions to add to the ongoing conversation of scholarly definitions (PC13)

This Chapter contributed definitions of the following terms: (i) secular age, (ii) post-secular age, (iii) secularism, (iv) nationalism, (v) fundamentalism, (vi) terrorism, (vii) Islamophobia, (viii) Antisemitism, and (ix) minority and majority religious dynamics. These definitions add to the body of knowledge of scholarly definitions. These terms intersect either with religion or tolerance, thereby enhancing those definitions. Furthermore, these terms were used to explore intolerance in digital narratives. Therefore, they clarify terms used within the catalogue and narrative evaluation examples. These terms do not encompass all discriminatory and intolerant factors, and further exploration of other intolerant terms is necessary for future research. This concludes the Chapter on *Digital narratives and religious (in)tolerance*. The following Chapter addresses the *Implications for religious education and broad principles for curricula*.

Chapter Nine: Implications for religious education and broad principles for curricula

This Chapter includes the (i) *Implications for Religious Education* regarding digital narratives. The Chapter also includes (ii) *Broad principles regarding digital narratives and curricula*. The thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context, so the principles are broad and should only be seen as examples. Educators should tailor these principles to their context, curriculum, and narrative needs. However, the broad principles can assist educators who want guidance on where to start. The chapter ends with the (iii) *Chapter themes*.

9.1 Implications for Religious Education

The researcher does not propose scrapping the content of existing religious education programs. All the usual avenues can be explored. Much effort is put into religious education curriculums. It is encouraged that they continue to change as humanity changes. Religion is not stagnant; therefore, religious education cannot be stagnant. It is always necessary to reform and rework the curriculum to be presented as neutral and accurate as possible. The thesis showcased the importance and possibility of digital narrative as a resource for religious education. However, it is not implied that educators do not already utilise digital narratives, as this will be very contextually and individually bound. Instead, the thesis can inspire educators who want to know more about digital narratives in religious education. Religion education systems often include definitions of concepts such as religion and tolerance. Chapter Two mentioned that definitions of tolerance and religion may be simulated through narratives to better illustrate the different understandings of the terms to students. As Chapters One and Two mentioned, religion and tolerance have various constructs in academics and the world. These constructs can be illustrated in narratives to help students understand how these definitions are simulated. If one can spare the time for a longer narrative, students might even showcase how religion or tolerance has changed within a narrative (if there is growth, stagnation, or a decline).

Religious tolerance, conflict, similarities, and differences are essential to understanding religion in multi-religious societies (Smith 1991:loc 136; Durham 2013:9). Therefore, a well-balanced view must be taken in religious education for the view to have a realistic effect on understanding religion. The use of digital narratives within education also needs to consider this dualistic nature of religious education. As showcased in Chapters Seven and Eight, religious concepts are simulated within digital narratives. These concepts and simulations may be positive and valuable, leading to potential learning opportunities. The concepts and

simulations in digital narratives may also be harmful and intolerant. Students will inevitably encounter both types of narratives in the current era. Students should be taught to engage with both responsibly to gain from the narratives and not be impacted negatively. Green (2019:11) made the following statement:

Ideally, education develops our capacity to live, work, and continue to learn ethically and effectively with others in our interconnected world. Developing such capacities is equally important for all of our students, whether they imagine their future abroad, or in the increasingly pluralist societies of their home country.

Digital narratives are a global phenomenon and may simulate para-social interaction between the class and people of different religions (found locally and abroad). This does not mean that educators have the time to explore every religion found globally within class settings. Castiglioni and Bennett (2018:232) stated, "Consequently education cannot stop at school level but needs to encompass lifelong learning". This is a valuable statement in a world subject to much potential change over one lifetime. It is impossible to teach students about every tradition they may encounter throughout their lives. Religious education should give students the tools to learn about religions and encourage lifelong learning. Students should develop the capabilities to sympathise with the other and genuinely empathise with them (Castiglioni & Bennett 2018:234). This may be achieved by teaching students to utilise and critically view the wealth of information found in digital narratives.

Teaching people how to live tolerantly in plurality and study different religions respectfully is important (Castiglioni & Bennett 2018:234; Beyers 2017c:5; Beyers 2017b:185). Empathy is one of the greatest tools available to humanity to obtain this respectful way of living in plurality and disagreement (Castiglioni & Bennett 2018:235). Empathy can be cultivated through the use of digital narratives in educational settings. Clarifying the contexts of religions is vital as this enables students to understand that something may seem respectful in one context and can be disrespectful in another (Castiglioni & Bennett 2018:234; Beyers 2017b:185). This should be considered when working with digital narratives in education settings. Through the education system, students should learn about diversity and how to interact with different people respectfully. Many societies worldwide are pluralistic, and it will be essential to educate students to function within this reality (Beyers 2016:5). Castiglioni and Bennett (2018:232) stated that: "Valuing diversity is also valuing different ways of knowing". Therefore, how different people's constructions, simulations, intersections, and affective realism work is of value. Incorporating narrative into the religious education process can illustrate these realities.

Regardless of whether one is talking about religious education (non-confessional, the focus of the thesis) or religious instruction (confessional), morals and ethics will cross the path of the curriculum, as removing ethics from religion disfigures the construct (Arthur 2013:42, 62). Ethics and morals are not dependent on religion; an irreligious person can have as many ethical and moral values as a religious person (Carr 2013:5). Ethics can be unique to individuals. Ethics can be group-bound, forming a profound psychological phenomenon (Beyers 2016:4). Ethics form a fundamental part of individual and communal affective realism. Values are more than just the like or dislike of something but rather the belief that something is good or of value as an action (Carr 2013:7; Beyers 2016:4; Hill 2013:29). Ethics can dictate how ingroup and outgroup relationships function, creating potential us-versus-them phenomena (Beyers 2017b:202). The us-versus-them phenomena regarding ethics can be found in narratives. Ethics significantly impacts one's understanding of social responsibility, such as interpersonal relationships and ecological care (Beyers 2017b:202, 203). Affective realism lends a good or bad connotation to a construct (Wormwood et al. 2019:789). Therefore, one sees the intersection between affective realism and ethics.

Moral and ethical concerns can quickly become a wavy line when working with religious education (non-confessional) rather than religious instruction (confessional). True neutrality and objectivity are ideals to strive toward; it should be noted that these ideals are unattainable but should be refined and practised to the best of one's ability. Therefore, the ethical stance of the educator must be non-confessional, neutral and focused on not indoctrinating but educating (regarding religion and narrative). Students must learn to engage their critical thinking abilities when analysing a narrative. Within this analysis, students can also be challenged to see the ethics and morals demonstrated by the characters. When working with morals and ethics, it might be helpful to let students think about whether the values of these constructs lie within what realm of humanity. Is it a religious, cultural, judicial or political construct, or might a moral be personal because of some event within the character's past? These types of conversations will naturally increase as the age of students increases.

Students can be asked to point out memetic, synthetic and thematic information within narratives. Students may be asked to evaluate if the narrative may be true for one religious faction but not another (e.g. Reformed Judaism versus Orthodox Judaism). Alternatively, if used in class, educators can point out these facts to students. Narratives are created by humans and consumed by humans. All humans have affective realisms and biases. Not all narratives are accurate representations of real-world beliefs. If the biases and ethics of the narrative creator

dictate that groups should be depicted negatively, it may harm the affective realism of narrative consumers. This may affect real-world practices and beliefs that people hold toward others. If students feel that narratives have inaccurate information, they can be asked what they would do to remedy the inaccurate information. If they feel it is mostly accurate, they can be asked to explain what they think can be learned from the narrative. If trusted leaders of society spread inaccurate narratives, students should be made aware of the immense influence of such a narrative. This will give students the tools to navigate such narratives in the future.

By working with existing curriculums, one can add digital narratives to create a more effective and creative learning experience. Reform and refinement are always encouraged to get the most neutral and accurate course representing current society. The outcomes of religious education should include the development of tolerance, humanisation, respect, critical thinking, evaluating information and combating harmful and misleading information. Students should be given the skills to keep learning and evaluate the information they receive throughout their lives. Depending on the age group, constructs like social justice and social responsibility should also play a role in religious education (Schmid 2021c:28; Giroux & Bosio 2021:4, 6). Social transformation forms a part of social justice and social responsibility. Beyers (2021:44) gave the following statement on social transformation:

This can imply a move away from poverty, un- and underdevelopment, social injustice, poor education, and insufficient medical services. The concept "development" falls within the same field of reference as transformation [...] Social transformation thus deals with helping society reach wholeness or a condition of harmony.

These are important concepts that influence and better human lives. The role of religion within such constructs may be unclear, as it may drive or inhibit the phenomena (Beyers 2021:40, 41, 47-51). Religion can transform societies and drive constructs like social justice, social responsibility, tolerance and the building of peaceful functioning societies (Beyers 2021:41, 44, 47, 48; Beyers 2017b:186). Developing personal spiritualities and individual religious convictions can lead to better societal transformation and social justice (Beyers 2021:41, 44, 47). How and what social responsibility, justice and transformation look will also differ vastly from context to context (Beyers 2021:41, 43, 45). When working with religious education, one must never give too much leverage to one point of view when working in pluralistic societies. The problem, therefore, occurs with whose ideas of social justice and social transformation will be taught (Beyers 2021:49)? As not everyone will have the same point of view, one should always be careful with power dynamics (Beyers 2021:49). By encouraging critical thinking and personal spiritual and religious views on social justice and transformation in society,

greater heights may be reached in these concepts (Beyers 2021:52). Doing this can increase mutual concern between people in a pluralistic society while maintaining their own identities (Beyers 2021:53; Beyers 2017b:191, 193).

The context and age of the class will play a role in what is taught and to what degree. Children may be less able to work with abstract constructs such as social justice and societal transformation, where these can form a vital part of the material in advanced educational settings. By utilising narratives that showcase the reality of social injustice, one can create an awareness of current social problems and disparities and generate better humanisation. This will be especially true if narratives showcase how protagonist characters experience social injustice and inequalities. Seeing the realities people face may create greater empathy through para-social interaction. Narratives can work as simulators or sympathetic enhancers to enable social transformation in the physical world rather than just influencing the narrative world. Narratives can, therefore, help facilitate better functioning multi-religious societies. Furthermore, students should be made aware of how narratives may fuel social injustice. This was illustrated in Chapter Eight, as intolerant narratives may influence the affective realism of people who consume these narratives. Within such narratives, it would be essential to point out inaccuracies, biases and generalisations that may fuel social injustices within societies. Realising that inaccurate narratives often contain truths strategically placed to lend credit to the narrative is equally important.

Another concept to consider is how narratives and current events can help contextualise social transformation within education settings. By utilising these narratives in education, students can be made aware of the contextual problems faced within their society and abroad. Students can be taught to consider these narratives critically rather than seeing one-sided views of a social argument. Contextual social hierarchies and inequalities need to be considered when utilising such narratives within education settings. Making students an active part of the classroom experience can aid their critical thinking abilities and create better information retention (Uzunöz et al. 2018:82-83; Yerigan 2008:19, 24). Making sure that multiple senses are used, like sight and sound, can help increase active classroom experiences (Yerigan 2008:19). Digital media may be one of the several tools that one could use to make students more active in evaluating information in the classroom. Active learning should be used as an additional tool to existing curricula rather than replacing them (Yerigan 2008:20). Green

(2019:12) took this even further by stating that university students are capable of helping to co-develop curricula for what is called "global learning". The study by Green (2019:18) showed:

[...] an increased sense of empowerment, ownership, agency, self-efficacy, and resilience experienced by students and lecturers alike [...]

Co-development can aid critical thinking and help develop and pinpoint one's affective realism, which may otherwise inhibit the proper understanding of others (Green 2019:20). By utilising digital narratives in a higher educational environment, it may be possible to allocate active participation and some form of co-development where the lecturer does not necessarily dictate every narrative. Instead, educators can let the students have some choice or say in narratives used in assignments. They can later share their findings and learn from each other. Educators can ask students to give examples of digital narratives they enjoy and use applicable narratives in class. This may help keep the material used to be more relatable and help avoid stagnant curriculums. The thesis was written from the view that digital narratives and multi-religious societies are global phenomena (contextually bound). Therefore, educators are encouraged to take the theories discussed throughout the thesis and mould them to the context where they wish to be implemented. Different countries and groups will have different needs. This thesis showcased the benefits that digital literacy, religious literacy, narrative literacy, and information literacy may have on each other. Using different literacies together, especially with media literacy, is the norm and is beneficial (Aufderheide et al. 2008:2). Each literacy refers to the understanding and responsible use of these constructs while understanding that other people's understanding and use may be simulated differently.

Digital narratives may assist in showing the intersectionality of religion. In other words, digital narratives may illustrate religion within contexts. Religion does not exist in a vacuum but has different intersections, like culture and globalisation, that need to be considered (see definition of religion *Chapter One*) (Beyers 2017c:5). Again, here, it must be stated that not all narratives are responsible and accurate portrayals of reality. Therefore, showcasing the responsibility of evaluating information and intersections within digital media is necessary. Irresponsible intersections may be showcased, such as some groups being linked to violence. Typecasting, stereotypes and caricatures can be used to present points of interest for assignments and class discussions. If students are more aware of these concepts within narratives, they can evaluate them better in the future, and their affective realism may not be impacted negatively. Groups or people may also be illustrated very flatly, not showcasing intersections. There is a potential dehumanisation that takes place when people or groups are represented in this way. Students

can be asked to correct the problem by adding intersections to the narrative, as they would have if they were (hypothetical) advisors for the narrative creators.

Hate speech, stereotypical depictions, and other forms of harmful online simulations are being normalised by their prevalence in society. If there is a lack of awareness of these concepts in education systems, it may further normalise the problem. It should be noted that some educators implement these concepts and are countering this system by creating awareness. Many countries are now irreversibly multi-cultural and multi-religious, and with that comes a diversity that cannot be ignored. Intercontinental narratives are available in the palm of the narrative receiver's hand. This can equally not be ignored as it has a very dark potential of spreading intolerance. Students will encounter narratives daily. It is not whether they will encounter intolerance but when. It should be questioned whether education settings have enabled students to understand and function in this pluralistic and narrative-forward society, as this will be contextually bound to each education setting.

Equally important to remember is that narratives are not only harmful and should not just be demonised and vilified. There are so many benefits that can be gained through digital narratives. Whether it is through curiosity about phenomena found in digital narratives, creating lifelong learners, or through para-social interactions. This resource can be utilised in classes and for online learning. Digital narratives are also a resource in the homes of students. This can mean that students go through life without the tools to navigate this mass amount of information. Alternatively, it can mean that they can learn and analyse the narrative through conscious retrospective reflection. This ensures that narratives do not negatively impact their affective realism with their context in mind. Students should be able to understand that narratives impact their emotional and cognitive states. Through this, they can see their own bias and affective realism, thereby evaluating their constructs. The potential for tolerance and growth can be propagated through learning to evaluate narratives carefully.

When evaluating the context of a religious education system, it is crucial to assess what might be more critical. In other words, are extremism and propaganda recruitment more significant problems in a set context? Alternatively, is humanisation a more substantial problem? A well-rounded course is always recommended. However, the needs of the context may dictate that more attention be given to specific focal points. Educators need to review their curricula regularly to ensure they are relevant to the context of their society. The vast number of digital media available to date can be utilised and specifically chosen depending on the needs and

outcomes of the educational simulation. Reviewing new and current narratives can ensure that curricula do not become stagnant.

9.2 Broad principles regarding digital narratives and curricula

This section must be read with the rest of the thesis in mind and should not be taken out of context. It should be noted that this section is not a curriculum or an outline of a curriculum. It is a broad outline of principles that researchers can consider when working with digital narratives and curricula. This being said any usual steps can be followed to create a curriculum. Creating a curriculum specifically for a digital narrative and religion module should be considered in future research. This segment can be helpful in such a curriculum; however, it should also be considered in religious education curricula outside the topic of narratives. Narratives can be incorporated into most²⁵ religious education curricula. Curricula that are created from scratch can utilise digital narratives. If a curriculum already exists but lacks digital narratives, narratives can be incorporated to review and renew the curriculum. Updating a curriculum does not always have to be long and arduous but can involve small changes each year to keep the material updated and relevant to the ever-changing world.

One needs to consider that curricula should be tailored to contexts. As contexts change over time, curricula should also change. The foundation of curricula may stay the same, change, or expand, and this may depend on the contextual shifts in society. Some of the contextual factors that educators should consider specific to narratives have been highlighted throughout the thesis. A summary of these factors can be found in the next chapter under the heading *Factors to consider*. These factors should be considered before educators try to use digital narratives within existing or new curricula. This segment may be more relevant to tertiary education settings where educators may have a more significant margin of control over the curriculum²⁶. Educators should consider that each narrative may have unique features that this paradigm will not cover fully.

9.2.1 Phase 1: How to choose a narrative

Since the digital world has this overwhelming amount of narratives, the question must be asked: how does one choose a narrative? Educators should ask what the aim of the narrative is within the educational setting. The nature of scholarly work usually entails a great deal of seriousness. Scholarly work is often formulated through methodologies and should be able to stand up to

²⁵ This is while considering that curriculum topics might be less likely to benefit from using narratives. A conversation on this is beyond the scope of the thesis.

²⁶ Compare Ferjan and Bernik (2024:271)

scrutiny from the academic community. While this is essential, narratives may sometimes seem to juxtapose the seriousness of academia. While educators should take their job seriously, narratives can bring a bit of playfulness to educational settings. This will, of course, greatly depend on the type of narratives used. The narrative evaluation example in Chapter Eight is of a much more serious nature than some of the narratives used in Chapter Seven. However, one should not think that only serious narratives can be used in tertiary education settings. Narratives can be light-hearted while still simulating a vital point of interest for a curriculum and should not necessarily be dismissed out of hand. The seriousness of the narrative would depend on the narrative's goal.

9.2.1.1 Step 1: Ask what the goal of the narrative is²⁷

This step will be contextually bound to the curriculum; however, some broad concepts are given here for reflection and direction. It is helpful if educators have specific goals in mind to work toward “concrete competencies” (Ferjan & Bernik 2024:264). The question in this context is not to ask what the original goal of the narrative was, although this is an important question. The question instead refers to the educator's goal in using the narrative. In other words, what purpose should the narrative serve in education settings? There are many reasons why educators may want to use digital narratives in education settings, and they should not be seen as limited to the examples given in this section. Narratives can be very multifaceted and can assist in achieving more than one goal. However, setting clear goals and boundaries may assist educators in choosing a narrative. If more can be accomplished through the narrative, it should be seen as added value. By choosing a narrative with a clear goal, educators can stand a better chance of creating a meaningful educational experience by using the narrative. The following are examples of potential goals²⁸:

- To increase humanisation toward a specific group.
- To illustrate stereotypes, misconceptions, and biases often found within media and society²⁹.
- To illustrate specific religious phenomena³⁰.
- To illustrate social inequality or encourage social justice.
- To illustrate the impact of differentiating definitions or concepts.

²⁷ Compare Reuber (2011:8), who stated that she reached specific goals by using narratives in her class.

²⁸ The goals should not be seen as limited to the examples.

²⁹ See examples in Chapter Eight

³⁰ See examples in Chapter Seven, compare Johnson (2018:229, 231)

9.2.1.2 Step 2: Based on the aim of the narrative, create a list of inclusion and exclusion criteria

Using the goal identified in Step 1, educators are encouraged to create inclusion and exclusion criteria. The criteria should help narrow down the narratives that may be appropriate for the situation. The following are examples of inclusion and exclusion criteria:

- Educators can examine whether fiction or non-fiction is preferred. This would be bound to the goal of the narrative. If a real-world injustice in a specific context needs to be illustrated (e.g. the pseudo-events connected to the Israel-Hamas war), fiction would be inappropriate. However, if the goal is general humanisation or the illustration of injustices that are not that specific, like general Islamophobia, fiction or non-fiction may be used. Educators should thus examine whether fiction or non-fiction will serve the situation best.
- Educators can examine if there is a preference for a specific narrative medium. This may depend on the availability of narratives with specific content. However, this may also depend on the type of content needed. For example, educators may find that audio is enough or that audio-visual material is needed to illustrate the concept. This may also be contextually limited to the digital divide³¹.
- If humanisation is the goal, protagonistic characters should be present to create positive para-social interaction. Antagonistic and stereotypical depictions should be part of the exclusion criteria if humanisation is the main objective. If applicable, topics that may complicate the situation, such as political considerations, should be added to the exclusion criteria.
- If showcasing negative concepts like stereotypes, misconceptions, and biases is the goal, it would be beneficial if the inclusion criteria looked specifically for simulations that showcase these concepts. It would be beneficial if the narrative could show the impact of such negative depictions. For example, if other characters negate a protagonist in this manner, it may show the sociological impact of such biases. However, if this is the goal of the narrative, educators need to point out any negative concepts that may impact the student's affective realism in a harmful manner. If possible, working with these narratives in class is ideal so educators may guide students to evaluate the concepts critically.
- If the goal is to illustrate specific religious phenomena, the phenomena should be set as part of the inclusion criteria. The broadness of the criteria would depend on the curriculum. If the educator wants to illustrate a marriage ritual in the Jewish tradition, the inclusion criteria would be very narrow. If the educator wants to illustrate the general concept of rituals, general ritualistic actions can be illustrated through multiple narratives. By using multiple narratives, the educator can show the differences between concepts.

³¹ see Chapters Five and Six.

9.2.1.2 Step 3: Finding a digital narrative³²

Based on the stated goal, inclusion and exclusion criteria, educators can look at different scholars' work to see if they give examples of such narratives. Scholars can consult narratives they know or utilise search engines to help them find an appropriate narrative. Scholars are urged to create catalogues of narratives that may be helpful to them in the future.

9.2.2 Phase 2: Pre-analysis

In this phase, the educator has already located the narrative they want to utilise. They have determined that it meets their goal and fits their inclusion and exclusion criteria. It would be beneficial for educators to decide when they want to utilise the narrative, including pre-class, in-class, or post-class (Reuber 2010:25) (See Chapters Five *The use of digital entertainment in religious education* and Six *The use of internet narratives in religious education*, for more detail).

9.2.2.1 Questions that educators can ask themselves:

The pre-analysis will be very contextually bound to the narrative and curriculum. However, here are some general questions that educators can ask themselves when analysing the narratives:

- How does the narrative relate to the curriculum? Would the relation of the narrative to the curriculum be clear to the students³³? If not, how can the educator help showcase the relevance to students through instructions or questions?
- What does the educator want the person to see, hear, and generally analyse? What questions can the educator pose to guide the students toward this goal? Were these instructions given before instructing the students to watch the narrative³⁴?
- Does the goal set in *Phase 1* reflect the physical curriculum?
- Does the goal set in *Phase 1* reflect the hidden curriculum?³⁵ An example would be humanisation, where the educator would not ask the students directly if the narrative humanises the person or group in their view. A “show, don’t tell”³⁶ approach would be more beneficial in this situation. In other words, one would ask the students many character-centric questions to ensure their attention is on the character.
- What was the original goal of the narrative? Was it meant as news, entertainment, or propaganda? Was this information given to the students? How should this impact their view of the information?
- If available, information on the content creator should be given. Students can be asked how they think the content creator's background impacts their understanding of the narrative.
- Is the content simulated in an oversimplified or exaggerated manner? If yes, do the instructions guide students' attention to this fact?

³² Compare Johnson (2018:232)

³³ Compare Johnson (2018:233)

³⁴ Compare Johnson (2018:232)

³⁵ Compare Ferjan and Bernik (2024:265)

³⁶ See Gottschall (2021:62).

- Is there a possibility of teaching students narrative theories? What narrative theories may apply to the narrative the educator is evaluating? While this may not always be possible due to time constraints, it can add value to the educational setting by showcasing why narratives are important to students. This may impact students' propensity to work critically with the information they receive through narrative in the future.
- How does the narrative composition (e.g. character, plot, passive and active narrative, discourse and fiction or non-fiction) influence the interpretation of the narrative? How does this influence the instructions and information given to the students?

9.2.2.2 Examples of Questions that educators can ask students:

The relevant questions will be very dependent on the narrative and curriculum. Educators should consider questions beyond what is given here. Questions should be viewed critically to ensure they are relevant to the context. Adapting the questions to the specific medium would be prudent.

Context related questions:

- Did the narrative emanate from a trustworthy source?
- Is the title of the narrative misleading to the overall content?
- Does information on the author alter your view of the content of the narrative?
- The author of the narrative is anonymous; how does this impact your view of the content?
- When was the narrative first published? Does time contextualisation make a difference in how you understand the narrative?
- Where (geographically) was the narrative published or released? How does this impact your understanding of the content?
- Is the narrative meant to be serious or humorous?
- Are the religious elements meant religiously or implicitly? How does this impact how you view the narrative?

(In)tolerant narratives:

- Do you think the narrative showcases a clear bias?
- Are there any nationalistic ideologies in the narrative?
- Does the narrative give a hidden narrative that the mainstream politicians/scientists/society is trying to hide?
- Does the narrative invoke emotions such as fear or anger?
- Does the narrative promote discrimination?
- Does the narrative contain stereotypes?
- Are there any us-versus-them concepts embedded in the narrative?
- What social injustices are highlighted in the narrative? How does the awareness of the injustices change your view of the character? Do you think these injustices are part of your society? Is there room for change to stop these injustices from taking place?

Religious concept-related questions:

- What religious phenomena are present in the narrative? Do you feel that it is an accurate representation of the phenomena?³⁷
- How did the narrative impact your view of the phenomena?
- What religious symbols are found in the narrative?
- What are the meanings of the symbols used in the narrative?
- Did the narrative use any language related to religion? Explain what the religious-related language means and how it is used in the narrative context.
- Did the narrative use any words that you are not familiar with? What do the words mean?
- Are religious constructs simulated in an exaggerated or oversimplified manner? Does this help or hinder how content receivers can view the phenomena?
- What is your understanding of the phenomena?
- Is there an underlying mythology in the narrative?
- What mythology was used in the narrative, and how was it adapted from the original?
- Does the narrative showcase spirituality? Describe the spiritually related concepts viewed in the narrative.
- What rituals are present in the narrative?
- Do you think the rituals are showcased responsibly and accurately?

Character related questions:

- Would you say this character is a protagonist?
- What emotions are present in the scene³⁸?
- Are the characters' clothing, discourse and body language significant?
- Identify all the groups present in the narrative. How do the groups interact with one another?
- Do you feel all the groups have been depicted fairly?
- Was the character presented with multiple intersections?
- What ethical values are showcased in the narrative?

General questions:

- How do lighting and camera angles impact your view of the narrative³⁹?
- How does the musical background impact your view of the scene?
- How does the plot influence your view of the narrative?
- What impact does the discourse have on your view of the phenomena?
- What definition of the phenomena best represents the simulation in the narrative?
- Considering what you learned from the curriculum (fact-based learning), would you say the narrative is accurate⁴⁰? Please elaborate
- Please identify concepts that you feel are memetic (accurate), synthetic (inaccurate⁴¹) or thematic in the narrative.
- If you can change anything in the narrative, what would you change⁴²?

³⁷ Compare Reuber (2011:13, 15)

³⁸ Compare Reuber (2010:35) and Barnhouse (2023:15)

³⁹ Compare Reuber (2010:32, 35)

⁴⁰ Compare Reuber (2010; 2011) and Johnson (2018:232)

⁴¹ Compare Barnhouse (2023:15)

⁴² Compare Reuber (2011:17)

- What do you think can be learned from the narrative?

9.2.2.3 Additional factors to consider will include:

- Digital narratives can be very time-consuming. Educators should consider this when considering the students' educational schedules. If used in class, educators should ensure enough time for this activity and a possible explanation or discussion of the narrative. If used pre- or post-class, educators should ensure that students will have time to attend to the activity within the bounds of the module time. In tertiary education, students often receive a time layout on how much time they should spend on average on what specific task (this may vary depending on the institution). Educators need to consider that watching the narrative more than once may be needed, which should be included in the time layout.
- If class times are limited, educators can use narratives as part of pre- or post-class activities (if the digital divide is not an obstacle to this option).
- If one has a longer class time, one can consider adding narratives when students' attention might have started to wander. Educators may capture students' attention by changing from fact-based learning to something more creative, like narrative analysis. If the narrative acts as a point of illustration in the class, it should be inserted when the narrative is most relevant.
- As class times are usually limited, it would be beneficial for educators to ensure that students stay on track with the topic and that one person does not dominate the conversation. If the subject is more sensitive, like the example used in Chapter Eight, it would be beneficial for educators to gauge the emotional state of the students and keep a firm hand in the class discussion.
- Educators should consider that analysing narratives can be a creative process; students should be allowed to practise their creative thinking during these tasks. Students should be given room to interpret the narratives from their view. This means that multiple answers, even those not considered by the educator in the pre-analysis, may be correct if used in an assignment.
- If there are many students, it would be beneficial if educators use focus groups rather than a generalised class discussion. They can report back on their discussion within the class after a few minutes.
- As narrative-based assignments may be subjective, one would not always grade the assignments according to a strict memorandum. It is advisable to give students an outline of how grading would take place. The following can be added to a memorandum: general style, amount of references, following of instructions, and showcasing of critical thinking. With some assignments, multiple (even contrasting) answers may be correct as long as the students showcase that they used their critical thinking abilities.
- It is also beneficial to consider how the instruction can assist the students in becoming better writers, not only for their current level of learning but also for future studies. If such concepts are implementable in the instructions of the assignment, such as teaching students to define the concepts they are exploring, it should be added to the instructions.
- Educators should check if concepts are simulated in the narratives, which may need to be added to the fact-based learning segment of the curricula. Therefore, the analysis of narratives should lead educators to enhance the fact-based learning aspects of the curricula.

9.2.3 Phase 3: Post-analysis

After the narrative has been used in an educational setting, educators can take some steps to ensure that the quality of the educational narrative experience improves in the future. This involves learning from the experience as an educator. If students give feedback that they did not understand what was expected of them, this would mean that the narrative activity needs clarification before it is used in future educational settings. Educators should be open to learning from the students⁴³. Asking students to analyse a narrative in an assignment activates their critical and creative thinking. If they identify other relevant concepts not considered in the original assignment layout, educators can adjust the instructions to help include these factors more efficiently for future students.

If educators feel that the narrative was used successfully in the educational setting, they can add this to an educational catalogue or write an article about the experience⁴⁴. This creates resources where educators and researchers can learn from each other's experiences. Research and teaching can go hand in hand. Regular re-evaluation of curricula can potentially enhance the educational experience for the students. Research on the use of narratives in education settings need not be limited to religious education; other fields beyond the scope of the current study should also be considered. The broad principles here can be a starting point for educators who have not previously worked with narratives and education. However, each education setting is unique; the curricula and narratives may highly impact the principles needed in a specific context. Educators should thus engage creatively with the narrative and curricula to best benefit their context.

9.3 Chapter themes

- Implications for religious education and curriculum development (SQ11, RG9)

This Chapter contributed to this Objective by showcasing the broad implications of digital narrative in religious education settings. The chapter highlighted the need for education settings to adapt as new contexts (in this case, digital narratives) arise. Narratives can help students learn and expand their tolerance and intersectional sensitivity skills. Narratives can transcend space and time, bringing students into contact with places and people who would have otherwise been difficult to achieve. The Chapter showcased that lifelong learning is important and that teaching students how to understand narratives as information can help them achieve

⁴³ Compare Johnson (2018:233)

⁴⁴ Educators should consider all the normal ethical considerations when writing scholarly works like articles.

such a goal. Furthermore, religious education classes may encourage social justice and transformation with the help of narratives. Creating awareness of real-world problems and how they are simulated in digital narratives can have lasting implications for students. The Chapter also contributed broad principles that can be used when educators want to utilise narratives in education settings. This included principles for choosing a narrative, pre-analysis, and post-analysis. The following Chapter gives a detailed discussion of the objectives and themes explored throughout the study.

Chapter Ten: A discussion of the objectives and themes

This Chapter showcases how the research sub-questions (SQ), the research goals (RG) and proposed contributions (PQ) are showcased and answered throughout the thesis in a thematic analysis. These themes all contribute to answering the main research question (MQ):

- MQ1: How can religious studies professionals encourage the responsible use of information in a digital age in a multi-religious society?

Three main themes showcase how religious studies professionals can encourage the responsible use of information in a digital age. These themes include (i) *To identify the religious studies professionals' roles in using digital narratives in education environments*, (ii) *To identify religious studies professionals' roles in encouraging the responsible creation of digital narratives*, and (iii) *To identify how these professionals can play a role in interpreting digital narratives*. These three subthemes, therefore, answer the complex MQ. One last subtheme emerges in this study: (iv) *Adding to the overall conversation of scholarly definitions*, this thesis contributed many unique definitions that added to the ongoing academic conversation on definitions. Therefore, these four subthemes show the overall objectives of the study. Each Chapter contained *Chapter themes*, which are discussed in more detail under those headings; it is encouraged that those headings be consulted for more in-depth discussions.

10.1 To identify the religious studies professionals' roles in using digital narratives in education environments.

In this subsection, the following sub-themes are discussed: (i) *Factors to consider*, (ii) *Digital narrative as a creative source*, (iii) *How religious studies and media studies can benefit each other*, (iv) *The responsible and ethical use of narratives*, (v) *Critical thinking abilities and digital narratives*, (vi) *Tolerance and the responsible use of digital narratives* (vii) *Post secularism and digital narrative*, (viii) *Narrative quantity in daily use* and (ix) *Implications for religious education and curriculum development*. These subthemes help showcase how religious studies professionals can encourage the responsible use of narrative through the use of narratives within the education system.

10.1.1 Factors to consider

- SQ1: What factors of narrative need to be considered by educators when utilising narratives for educational purposes?
- RG8: To help identify essential factors educators must consider when working with narratives.
- PC11: Encouraging the understanding of essential factors educators must consider when working with narratives.

Chapters Three, Four, Five, Six and Eight added to this objective. Twenty-six potential factors were noted throughout the writing of the thesis. While this may seem like an overwhelming amount of things to consider, there is some overlap between some factors. These factors are there to assist educators rather than to overwhelm them. Some of these factors may be considered naturally by educators, others may not, and this will differ from person to person. Chapter Three highlighted the following factors that need to be considered: (i) The aim of the religious education course (e.g. confessional or non-confessional), (ii) the class demographic (e.g. homogeneous or non-homogeneous groups and age groups), (iii) new and relevant narratives, (iv) socio-political context of the country, (v) type of education (online, in person or blended learning), (vi) the digital divide (e.g. its impact on educators, institutions and students), and (vii) fair use of copyrighted material. These factors can significantly affect what narrative is chosen for a religious education class. The factors can also affect when and if narratives can be utilised in education settings.

Chapter Four illuminated the need to understand (viii) narrative theories. Narrative theories for the current study included (viii.i) simulation, (viii.ii) transportation, (viii.iii) sympathetic pleasure, (viii.iv) escapism, (viii.v) para-social interaction, (viii.vi) suspension of disbelief, (viii.vii) cultivation, (viii.viii) persuasion, (viii.ix) identification and, (viii.x) retrospective reflection. Narrative theories can highlight to religious studies specialists and students that they teach why narrative is essential and should be taken seriously. By understanding the basic theory and illustrating it through assignments (discussed in more detail in Chapter Four), educators can help students better understand their responses to narratives, as every individual is unique. Educators should use discretion in deciding how many theories to use when teaching students about narratives, not to overwhelm them.

Chapter Four also identified (ix) *Narrative composition* as a factor educators must consider. For the current study, narrative compositions included (ix.i) *Character's protagonist and antagonist*, (ix.ii) *Plot*, (ix.iii) *Passive and active narrative*, (ix.iv) *Discourse*, and (ix.v) *Fiction and non-fiction*. These different composition factors are points of interest when working with

narratives in religion education. These factors can help analyse narratives in their different parts to understand the narrative better. Narrative compositions can contain concepts outside these five factors; educators need to consider what will work best within their curriculums. These factors can help educators interpret the narrative and create questions in assignments (discussed more in Chapter Four). Narrative and religion's (x) persuasion power was also identified as a factor. The type of education discussed in this thesis is non-confessional. Narratives and religion both have the power to be used in a confessional or even indoctrinating manner. Care must be taken not to use narrative or religion in this manner in non-confessional religious education. This will entail using discretion when picking narratives for education purposes and working with the narratives critically.

Chapter Five identified that (xi) multiple mediums are present in digital entertainment, and different mediums may have different benefits and disadvantages. What narrative mediums may be utilised may depend on (xii) the digital divide, as some narratives may be more resource-demanding, and others may be less resource-demanding. When the narratives are utilised (in or outside of class), it may also be vital as it may demand that students need access to resources outside of class settings (for pre-class reading or assignments). The choice of narrative medium may also depend on the (xiii) preference within the society in which one is located. Lesser-used narratives may have a learning curve for students to get used to before properly utilising the medium. Using multiple mediums throughout a course can be advantageous as it may cater to individual needs (e.g., individual transportability may differ between mediums, affecting the course's effectiveness). When working with digital narratives (xiv), digital technology may distract from the task if personal devices are utilised. If this is the case in class, educators should try to mitigate these distractions by redirecting students' attention to the task. Educators must consider that different narrative mediums may (xv) intersect and interact. Understanding the complex relationships that digital narratives have with one another can be an essential point of interest (e.g. the use of music in audio-visual narratives). Lastly, (xvi) personal and group identity formations regarding narratives may be essential to consider, as this may impact students' reactions to the narratives.

Chapter Six highlighted the following factors: (xvii) Internet narratives consist of multiple mediums with different characteristics. These characteristics may impact the balance of responsibilities between the content creator and the content consumer. (xviii) Educators should consider their context (e.g., the popularity of specific mediums). (xix) The wide availability of internet narratives and the context of the content creator should be considered if available. (xx)

Internet narratives may vary between learning about religion and experiencing religious concepts. Educators and students should reflect on how narratives are experienced. (xxi) Internet narratives may showcase the multiple intersections of human experiences and can, therefore, add to humanisation. (xxii) By contextualising the narrative (e.g., the general purpose of a website), students may learn to look at a broader context before focusing on a phenomenon. (xxiii) Internet narratives may have a very personal nature and may have very social characteristics. Any analysis should consider this and work with the narrative respectfully. (xxiv) The mixed information on social media sites may cause turmoil in segregating well-informed and misinformed narratives in narrative consumers. (xxv) The large footprint of specific mediums like news should be considered. (xxvi) Mimetic, synthetic and thematic concepts should be considered in all mediums of narratives.

Chapter Eight showcased a critical concept to remember: (xxvii) Many identity-related concepts are simulated through digital narratives. Different concepts and ideologies are simulated, and religion is not the only concept that can influence humans' affective realism. Concepts like nationalism and secularism can play just as vital a role as religion. However, these concepts should not be limited to the examples given. The impact of a narrative is contextually bound to individuals (identification theory) and the effectiveness of the narrative (simulation and transportation). Lastly, how fundamentalistic or open a narrative is can impact what effect it has on the content consumer.

10.1.2 Digital narrative a creative source

- SQ5: How can digital narratives help with creative methods of teaching religion?
- RG5: To demonstrate how the digital world can be a resource for creative teaching within the science of religion classes.
- PC6: Showing how religious studies can benefit from the digital world and creative teaching.

Chapters Two and Four, Five, Six, Seven and Eight added to this objective. Chapter Two highlighted that definitions are not always the most exciting part of religious education classes. Students may not understand the big difference a definition may make in the tangible world. To help educators avoid students feeling overwhelmed by many definitions, it is proposed that narratives can be used as simulators to showcase their differences. Students can be asked to assign definitions to the narratives, creating interactive classroom environments. If students better understand the different definitions of religion and tolerance, they can potentially increase their tolerance skills.

Chapter Four highlighted that students consume digital narratives daily (one needs to contextualise the digital divide for this statement). The narratives that students already consume can be used as part of assignments and reports, creating a creative resource. Educators can choose specific narratives for pre-class reading, class settings, assignments, and reports if a more controlled environment is desired. What type of narrative is used will be contextually bound, both for the digital divide and the need in the context. It is encouraged that both misinformed and counter-narratives be utilised in class settings to highlight that not all narratives are responsible. Great care must be taken to showcase any possible misinformation in narratives so that negative constructs do not take root in students. Students should be shown how narratives may showcase real-world constructs and how real-world misperceptions may also be simulated in narrative forms. Students should be encouraged to be curious about phenomena found in narratives. Positive, para-social interactions with different groups should be encouraged in education settings.

Chapter Five highlighted that digital narratives that are not resource-intensive (e.g. books in electronic mediums and music) may be very portable. The portability of such narratives can add to the benefits of the medium as a resource. More resource-intensive mediums like video games or virtual reality may be less portable, but if institutions can access them, they can be good resources. The digital divide may play a role in the accessibility of digital mediums as a creative resource. Digital narratives may be a helpful teaching tool for neurodivergent and neurotypical students. However, more research should be done on the subject to understand how it benefits these groups. Furthermore, the subsection *The use of digital entertainment in religious education* gave some general but practical ideas on how the mediums can be used within education settings. The focus of this subsection was mainly on pre-class, in-class and post-class understanding of these concepts.

Chapter Six highlighted that internet narratives, especially those dealing with current events and social complexities, can be used as case studies in education settings. These narratives may showcase religious phenomena within the tangible world (as opposed to the narrative world). Furthermore, utilising narratives with diverse discourses on one event or phenomenon may be beneficial and broaden students' understanding of current events, social justice and lived religion. The heading *The use of internet narratives in religious education* gives some generalised ideas of how to utilise these narratives in education settings.

In Chapter Seven, the researcher gave a small catalogue of narratives that contained ritual, myth, symbol and spirituality. Three narratives were analysed compactly within the Chapter.

This Chapter showcased that these phenomena occur in narratives and can be a creative tool within religious education settings. In Chapter Eight, a catalogue was given of digital narratives that included simulations of the following concepts: secularism, nationalism, fundamentalism, extremism, terrorism, Islamophobia, Antisemitism, and minority-majority relationships. This showcased that these phenomena are simulated in digital narratives and can form part of creative teaching tools in education settings. An analysis of two narratives was given under the heading *Narrative evaluation example*. These two narratives stand as an example of how narratives can be implemented in religious education settings.

10.1.3 How religious studies and media studies can benefit each other

- RG4: To show how religious studies can help teach people to use information responsibly.
- PC7: Showing how digital narrative users can benefit from religious studies
- PC8: Promoting creative ways of learning about one's spirituality/religion.
- PC9: Promoting creative ways of learning about different religions and encouraging tolerance.

Chapters Two, Four, Five, Six, Seven, and Eight added to this objective. Chapter Two highlighted that religion and intolerance are often found as part of underlying messages within narratives to drive other agendas, for example, political agendas. However, one should not limit misinformation and ideological perpetuations only to religion and intolerance. The us-versus-them phenomenon is often used within intolerant narratives. These concepts are found within religion education; therefore, it is one of the ideal places to use media literacy. Chapter Four stated that educating students about the information they receive through narrative benefits religion education and digital narrative users. Misinformed narratives are not always crafted with the intent to harm, but they sometimes are created with that intent. Misinformed narratives often (not always) contain information on religion and can lead to strong us-versus-them and scapegoating concepts. These narratives are detrimental to tolerant, multi-religious societies. As non-confessional religious education aims to promote tolerant multi-religious societies, it is beneficial both to digital narrative users and religious education settings to discuss these problematic narratives.

Counter-narratives help combat misinformed narratives and should also be considered within education settings alongside fact-based learning. The combination of fact-based and narrative learning can potentiate religious education. Narratives give colour to abstract fact-based learning, while fact-based learning explains phenomena in narratives that are not always clear. The variation in teaching methods may benefit students as not everyone learns similarly. Students can learn about different religions through positive para-social interactions with

people of different religions simulated through narratives. Positive para-social interactions may also be had with people of one's religion. If that person showcases how they live and interact with others in a tolerant and humanising manner, this may positively affect the content consumer. Chapter Five added to this objective. Showcasing the diversity of humanity to students may be accomplished by using digital narratives as a resource. This may enhance their tolerance skills and help them navigate narratives and interactions with others in the future. However, diversity may not be as apparent within all mediums of digital narratives; books in electronic mediums may, for instance, be more dependent on the content consumers' imagination, as mentioned by Murrar and Brauer (2017). The benefits and pitfalls of all mediums should be considered when evaluating narratives for education settings.

Chapter Six touched on this objective. Internet narratives may be experienced differently (as educational or as spiritual) by individuals, and these experiences should be reflected on critically. Internet narratives may lend themselves to simulations of lived religion, simulating abstract concepts to students. Internet narratives may showcase and perpetuate social inequalities and should be considered critically. Current events, social dilemmas and social justice may all be simulated through Internet narratives. All these simulations can benefit a religion education class and encourage a more tolerant society. Chapter Seven showcased concepts connected to religion in digital narratives; they have the potential to act as simulators in education settings. In turn, digital narrative users can benefit from religious education if narratives are utilised to become more conscious of the information that they receive through the digital world.

Chapter Eight showcased a myriad of intolerant and counter-narratives in the digital world. At the heart of many intolerant phenomena are identity-related concepts prompting us-versus-them phenomena. These identity-related factors sometimes directly relate to religion or intersect with religion. This puts religious studies in an ideal position to promote the responsible use of narratives in an educational setting. Counter-narratives can be a tool to promote tolerance and is an ideal creative tool for teaching people about religions (if the digital divide allows). These examples illustrate how religious education can benefit from digital narratives as a creative source. Furthermore, these narratives are in the world and being consumed. In an era where intolerance spreads more easily because of the digital world, digital narrative users can benefit from religious education settings incorporating digital narratives.

10.1.4 The responsible and ethical use of narratives

- SQ2: What ethical constructs can help the responsible use of digital narratives?
- RG2: To encourage responsible and ethical use of the information found and passed on through the digital world.

Chapters Two, Four, Five, Six, and Eight added to this objective. Chapter Two discussed the term tolerance and touched on the concept of humanisation. One's ethics profoundly impacts how these two terms are understood. Students can broaden their understanding of the concept by using digital narratives to illustrate the different spectrums of tolerance and intolerance. When students identify tolerant and intolerant concepts, they can critically evaluate them and ensure that narratives do not negatively impact them with an ethos of intolerance. Chapter Four discussed how conspiracy theories and propaganda often contain misinformation that seeks to increase us-versus-them phenomena and fear of threat (e.g., toward one's way of life or ethical constructs). Showcasing these narratives to students in religion studies classes alongside tolerance theories that showcase that difference does not always imply threat can be beneficial. Furthermore, such narratives usually have other agendas, such as political or nationalistic agendas. It is essential to showcase these concepts to students as well. One of the essential factors to consider here is emotional responses such as negativity bias and sympathetic or empathetic responses from the audience toward a narrative. Depending on the narrative context, these responses can be positive or negative regarding the user's affective realism. Encouraging students to evaluate the emotions evoked by narratives may be a critical ethical concern for future narrative evaluations.

Chapter Five showcased that the choice of narrative medium may impact how critical narrative users are in their consumption. Different mediums may have different time demands on the user. A more extended narrative may be chosen more critically than shorter narratives. However, all narratives affect users' affective realism; students can be urged to choose their narratives critically, as the ethical choice in narratives can be significant. However, critically evaluating the information found and emotions evoked by all mediums is essential. Chapter Six pointed toward an ethical consideration that needs to be considered: economic gains may impact what narratives are created and to what end on the internet. This is also true for digital entertainment, but consumers may assume the economic gains of these narratives as they are more traditional forms of narrative mediums. Internet narrative creators have economic gains that do not always come directly from the consumer (e.g., advertising) and may not always be considered. Furthermore, there are ethical considerations that content consumers should have, for example, reporting harmful content and not sharing overtly biased and misinformed content.

Chapter Eight stated that by making students aware of different types and intents of narrative (e.g. neutral, intolerant and counter-narratives), students can view the narrative critically in the future. By teaching students how their minds work and that authority figures are not immune to affective realism, they can learn not to take narratives at face value. Narratives can prompt emotional responses that are not always fitting, needed or tolerant (e.g. fear, anger, and us-versus-them responses). This is not to say that such emotions do not have an appropriate place. Teaching students to evaluate such emotional responses can help them modulate their emotional responses in the future and create more responsible responses to narratives. Furthermore, if students are aware of patterns often found in narratives that prompt intolerant ideologies, they may see these narratives more clearly in the future (e.g. scapegoating). It can also include making students aware of counter-narratives that can benefit them throughout their lifetimes if utilised. Chapter Eight thereby showcased many of the concepts that were apparent in the previous Chapters.

Throughout the thesis, it has become apparent that narratives are more than just nonchalant stories, regardless of their medium. Narratives form part of the information received by humans. The information received through narrative has increased exponentially through the digital world as humans have more access than ever to digital narratives⁴⁵. There is a duality in the truthfulness and trustworthiness of the information found in narratives. Information found in narratives may be truthful and trustworthy, leading to accessible information that people can easily learn from, positively affecting their affective realism. However, misinformation, propaganda and conspiracy theories are also found in the digital world. Not all misinformation has been broadcasted to harm. The content creator may sometimes believe the misinformation they propagate, as it forms part of their affective realism.

Some ask what is truth and whose truth is legitimate (Valaskivi & Robertson 2022:155). It is beyond the scope of the thesis to answer the question of truth and legitimacy. This question becomes even more convoluted when working with religions, as each religion's Mythology is as true as the believing community (Ngcobo & Beyers 2013:1). The aim here was not to question one religious truth as relevant to other religious truths. Instead, the thesis sought to encourage an ethical stance, where the information found in the narrative should be questioned. Students should be encouraged to practice a conscious retrospective reflection, showing curiosity about the information they receive. While a religious group may not always agree on

⁴⁵ Taking the digital divide into account.

every aspect of religion, especially when religion is becoming more individualised, there are general standards to what groups believe. When narratives show obvious biases against groups, seeking to dehumanise them to create an us versus them situation, students should learn to think critically about these narratives and not just take them at face value.

10.1.5 Critical thinking abilities and digital narratives

- SQ6: How can religious studies encourage people to employ critical thinking abilities in the digital world?
- RG3: To encourage critical thinking abilities when using information.
- PC5: Emphasising critical thinking abilities when engaging with the digital world.

Chapters One, Two, Four, Five, Six, Seven and Eight added to this objective. Theoretical frameworks such as the one found in Chapter One (constructs, simulations, affective realism and intersectionality) can assist students in analysing the way they think about narratives, themselves and others. These terms can give them the tools to understand how the human mind works. It is therefore recommended that such theoretical frameworks form part of religious studies classes; If they are not utilised already, this will be contextually bound. By making students aware of how their minds work, their constructs, simulations, affective realism, and intersectionality, they may understand themselves and others better. Students can interpret narratives to showcase the different constructs, simulations, affective realism and intersectionality of specific phenomena in narratives. Students can also be asked to identify possible biases that can potentially come from the narrative creator's affective realism. Students can be asked to reflect on how narratives influence their understanding of the world.

Chapter Two stated that educators can encourage students' critical thinking abilities by giving them specific tasks like matching narratives with definitions or asking students to find specific phenomena within narratives. With such exercises, narratives become more than just "stories"; they become part of the information students receive daily. Chapter Four stated that narrative theories and compositions can be used to evaluate narratives critically. Narrative theories contribute to the understanding of the human mind and the impact that narrative has on it. This does not just contribute to a general understanding of the human mind; students can use these theories to understand their relationships with narratives, as individuals are not all impacted similarly. If students understand how their minds work, they can put more effort into evaluating situations that need them. Students may change as they age, and this gives them the tools to evaluate their relationship with narratives throughout their lives. Narrative composition can give students reflection points to focus on better understanding narratives. Narrative compositions can add to students' critical evaluation tools.

Chapter Five stated that care should be taken not to perpetuate misconceptions that specific narratives may be less prone to misinformation or bias, as any medium or source can have misinformation or bias embedded. Students should be encouraged to work critically with all mediums they encounter. Using diverse mediums in education settings may assist students in seeing that all narratives can have positive and negative information and should, therefore, be evaluated critically. Chapter Six stated that pointing out thematic, synthetic, and memetic concepts in all internet narrative mediums may help students view all narratives critically. The narrative creator's affective realism can impact any narrative medium. These narratives may, in turn, affect the content consumer. Furthermore, critical thinking may be encouraged through internet narratives that simulate different perspectives of one phenomenon. This may encourage students to consider concepts from multiple angles, increasing humanisation and tolerance.

Chapter Seven stated that by using narratives in education settings, educators encourage critical thinking when consuming narratives. Educators can potentially create curiosity in students that can cause lifelong learning. Furthermore, para-social interactions with narrative characters can help students broaden their understanding of the world throughout their lives. Chapter Eight stated that us-versus-them narratives often try to enforce unhealthy communal affective realism in communities. These narratives have prominent identity-related concepts that they try to sway in a manner that causes intolerance toward the other. If these narratives are enforced, a fundamentalistic affective realism arises that sees others as a threat and as meritless in their understanding of the world. Digital narratives may cause a suspension of disbelief, wherein para-social interaction is possible, causing an expansion of one's affective realism where others may be humanised. Thereby, digital narratives can be used as a simulator to assist educators in encouraging more tolerant societies by showcasing multiple viewpoints within humanity. As unhealthy communal affective realism can be realised through narratives, so too can healthy affective realism be encouraged through digital narratives. Making students aware of the effect of digital narratives on their affective realism can aid critical thinking when utilising narratives.

10.1.6 Tolerance and the responsible use of digital narratives

- SQ7: What means are there to promote religious tolerance in multi-religious societies in the digital world?
- RG6: To encourage tolerance in a multi-cultural society through the informed use of electronic narratives.
- PC4: Emphasising the need for responsible use of information in the digital world.

Chapters Two, Four, Five, Six, Seven, and Eight contributed to this Objective. Chapter Two stated that by encouraging students to spot tolerant and intolerant concepts within narratives, students can become more aware of the underlying messages (intentional and unintentional) spread through narratives. With this in mind, they can evaluate these underlying messages and ensure that an intolerant narrative does not negatively impact them. Chapter Four stated that different points of interest can arise between narrative and religious education to promote tolerance. One of the main concepts that can benefit students is to encourage curiosity about the phenomena they encounter in narratives. This can be toward religions or fragments of religious and (in)tolerant attitudes they encounter within narratives. Their curiosity should lead them to question whether the information received is accurate and whether there is more information on the subject. This can lead to lifelong learning where students encounter concepts throughout their lives, and rather than ignoring the phenomena or fearing it, they can expand their understanding, developing their tolerance skills. Teaching students to use the para-social interaction phenomena can lead to them interacting with a greater variety of narrative characters and learning from them. Even if this is not the case, the positive para-social interaction they experience in class can lead to better tolerance and humanisation.

Chapter Five stated that not all mediums and narratives are equal when exposing students to diversity. Some mediums, like eBooks, may not showcase diversity in a way the audience will genuinely grasp as the narrative leans on the reader's imagination (Murrar & Brauer 2017). Audio-visual narratives may assist more in this manner, yet this would also depend on casting and directorial choices in how the narrative is showcased. For example, actors may be chosen to be closer to the target audience's comfort zone. Chapter Six stated that ever-evolving technologies can impact the effectiveness of narratives. For example, news has a much bigger digital footprint than previously and will only grow as technology progresses (an example of some of the latest progress is virtual reality news). Narrative users should consider the impact of technological progress on their concepts, such as the increase or decrease in tolerance that these narratives create.

Simulations like counter-narratives and peace journalism available through internet narratives should be utilised in education settings to promote tolerance. Various perspectives on phenomena are available via internet narratives; if utilised, this may assist students in viewing phenomena from multiple angles and increase their tolerance skills. Internet narratives may showcase people from different backgrounds within their lived experiences and promote humanisation. Chapter Seven stated that by showcasing narratives with lived religious experiences, educators encourage para-social interaction that can lead to better tolerance and humanisation. Examples of such narratives can be found under *Ritual* and *Spirituality* under the *Narrative evaluation example* sections. Furthermore, encouraging students to be curious about the phenomena encountered in narratives can encourage lifelong learning, expanding constructs and tolerance in students. A narrative that showcases this can be found under *Myth and Symbol*, under the *Narrative evaluation example* section.

Chapter Eight stated that narratives that promote inclusivity, for example, nationalistic narratives that encompass all the members of a set nation, may increase tolerance. Narratives that showcase different viewpoints may create a more holistic understanding of society while promoting tolerance and humanisation. A way to counter fundamentalistic affective realism is through curiosity about concepts simulated in narratives and, thereby, concepts in the physical world. By creating curiosity and a better understanding of different simulations of constructs, others' viewpoints can be seen as less threatening and more valuable. Working critically with narratives that promote fundamentalistic ideals through seeing the memetic, synthetic and thematic concepts that the narrative tries to promote can also aid in creating tolerant multi-religious societies. The utilisation of counter-narratives is critical as it may increase the effectiveness of fact-based learning. Many examples were given under the heading *Examples from digital narratives* that showcase intolerance and counter-narratives. Furthermore, under the heading *Narrative evaluation example*, two examples of narratives that can act as counter-narratives in education settings were discussed.

10.1.7 Post-secularism and digital narrative

- SQ8: What role will the concept of post-secularism play within the analysis of the digital world?

Chapters One, Two, Three, Seven, and Eight contributed to this objective. One must understand religion in a modern and post-secular era to understand post-secularism. The definition of religion was given within Chapter One under the heading *Defining religion*, and post-secular aspects are embedded. Some of these aspects included the individualisation of religion, both an acknowledgement of religious and irreligious people, an acknowledgement that religion is not disappearing, and an acknowledgement that religious and irreligious affiliation affects people's affective realism and humanity at large. As this is a post-secular age, such post-secular concepts as those found in the definition must be considered when working with narrative in a religious education setting.

Chapter Two stated that different post-secular societies have different ideas regarding the simulation of tolerance, respect, humanisation, and religion. Students may understand the narratives better by considering the narrative creators' context. Narrative creators may perpetuate the ideologies in their context, or they may go against set ideologies. How and if narrative creators incorporate their contextual ideologies in narratives can be an essential topic of conversation in religious education settings. Chapter Three stated that previously, in the secular age, fields like religion and narrative were not valued as much for their academic pursuit. In the Post-secular age, where "irrational" concepts did not disappear as expected, these fields are valued more— as religion and narrative impact humanity and their affective realism (regardless of affiliation or non-affiliation). In a post-secular age, there is no global governmental consensus on where, how, and if concepts such as religion should be taught and to whom; educators still need to consider their countries' context and laws. Post-secular mindsets of multiple truths should be considered within religious education settings, as many countries are now multi-religious.

Chapter Seven stated that lived religion narratives can add a para-social interaction simulation to education settings. Lived religion narratives are memetic and should not be seen as synthetic. However, students should be cautioned that the narrative should not be seen as thematic. The narrative may showcase the lived religious experience that many may share. In a post-secular understanding, the individualisation of experiences is a factor that needs to be considered. Students should understand that the lived experience does not necessarily showcase the experience of everyone in the religious group, as this can make the phenomena stagnant. Other

experiences do not diminish the showcased experience, nor are they less authentic. Chapter Eight added that concepts not valued in the secular age are considered more valuable and worthy of study in the post-secular age. Religion, emotion and narrative were considered irrational and unworthy of pursuit. Today, the influence of these three concepts simulated together is immense in the digital age. They combine to influence how humans understand the world around them. In a post-secular age, these three concepts should not be viewed in isolation, as they intersect with many others. Care must be taken not to scapegoat concepts like religion, emotion and narrative; their impact on humanity should equally not be ignored. In a post-secular world, analysing something as complex as narratives would have to incorporate a holistic understanding of concepts and their intersections.

10.1.8 Narrative quantity in daily use

- RG1: To make people conscious of the digital narrative they experience daily.
- PC1: Showing that there are vast quantities of religious content within digital narratives.

Chapters Four, Five, Six and Eight contributed to this objective. Chapter Four added that the digital world has created a space where narratives are constantly available. If a less controlled environment is desirable in education settings, students can be asked to evaluate the narratives they consume daily (e.g. for a week, month or semester). This is a good assignment idea in settings where the digital divide is not very prominent. Making sure that students have access to narratives is essential for this assignment. However, as digital narratives are so numerous and varied, there is a chance that students have access to some form of digital narrative. This assignment option may help students see how much narrative they consume and how much information they receive.

Chapter Five stated that modern technology has brought different forms of digital entertainment into the average home. Previously, narratives were more challenging to access; for example, one had to go to a theatre or concert to enjoy narratives. Narratives are also more portable, as they can be taken anywhere on a digital device. Humans have an instant escape in modern digital narratives. However, this has also led to overconsumption of narratives. Critically evaluating information found within narratives is crucial for modern societies to flourish, as modern humans have a constant stream of information and misinformation through narrative. Chapter Six stated that internet narratives are highly available and can be overconsumed without any conscious retrospective reflection. Encouraging students through assignments to contemplate the time spent and content consumed through their internet narrative use may be

very important. Asking students to catalogue concepts found in internet narratives or positive and negative simulations they encountered may assist in the reflection process.

Chapter Eight stated that when major world events have thematic leanings toward religions, it can lead to storms of narratives in the digital world, starting with internet narratives, and eventually, they can also go over to digital entertainment. These narratives are not always neutral or well-intended. These storms encompass a large number of narratives. If such a storm is present within the module time, students can be asked to document the narratives connected to the world events that cross their path. They can be asked to analyse and classify the narratives. This may make students more aware of such phenomena and the amount of narratives that they receive in this regard. When giving students such assignments, the digital divide and individual narrative consumption should be considered.

10.1.9 Implications for religious education and curriculum development

- SQ11: What broad principles can educators follow when working with digital narratives and curricula.
- RG9: To help identify digital narratives' implications for religious education.

Although all the Chapters in the thesis partly answered this objective, Chapter Nine emphasised some of the most important implications digital narratives have for religious education. The Chapter emphasised that changing contexts, such as the introduction of the digital world, should impact how education takes place. Narratives can impact how tolerant a society is and whether they become lifelong learners. Narratives can assist in showcasing societal inequalities and lead students to contemplate social justice concepts. In all their different forms, narratives are more than just stories; they are a part of the information humans receive daily. Students' empathy, intersectional awareness, and tolerance skills can increase if they learn to work critically with the information they find in narratives. The Chapter also included some broad principles on curriculum development. This included three phases: (i) *How to choose a narrative*, (ii) *Pre-analysis*, and (iii) *Post-analysis*. This segment should give educators tools to navigate narrative and curricula if read in context with the rest of the study.

10.2. To identify religious studies professionals' roles in encouraging the responsible creation of digital narratives

In this subsection, the following sub-themes are discussed: (i) *Balance of responsibilities*, (ii) *Content creators* and (iii) *The creation of content*. These sub-themes help explain religious studies professionals' role in creating digital narratives and understanding the balance of responsibilities between content creators and consumers.

10.2.1 Balance of responsibilities

- SQ10: What balance of responsibilities are found within the production and consumption of digital narratives?

Chapters Four, Five, Six and Eight contributed to this objective. Chapters Four, Five, and Six focused on content creators and content receivers' responsibilities. Content creators need to create responsible content that will have the least negative impact on narrative receivers. The problem is that conflicting considerations of what responsible means may be found within society. This does not dismiss content creators from creating responsible content. Content creators do not always create responsible narratives; concepts like typecasting, stereotypes, and biased depictions may occur. These concepts often arise from the content creators' concepts, simulations, affective realism and intersectional understanding of the world. Pointing these concepts out to students in class settings can enable students to understand these depictions for what they are rather than letting them affect their affective realism.

Content receivers are responsible for maintaining their constructs, simulations, affective realism and intersectional understanding of the world in a responsible and acceptable manner within their society. Their constructs of responsibility may be very contextually bound, and this thesis was not focused on a specific context, nor does the researcher want to take away people's freedom of conscience. What is considered responsible will be contextually bound to societies and individuals. As students may be content creators and receivers today, they may need to consider both sides of the spectrum. Concepts such as narrative theories and narrative compositions may aid students in evaluating narratives and maintaining healthy constructs. Students who are content creators may also utilise these two concepts but rather reflect on how this can potentially impact the narrative receiver. Chapter Five added that content creators have a responsibility not just toward their local community but also toward their global audience. Content consumers may not find themselves in the same context as content creators. When analysing narratives, it can be advantageous if content consumers can consider the narrative creator's context.

Many pre-digital narratives are also available online. If content creators are separated in time from the modern world, their context needs to be considered. Modern understanding and norms should not be forced on classical narratives. Instead, content consumers should try to understand the writings from the context of the content creator's time. As concepts may have shifted from the era in which the narrative was written to the era in which it is consumed, the narrative consumer has a significant responsibility in such a case to maintain their constructs

healthily. It would be beneficial to add some context of the narrative creators if available within educational settings. By adding information on the narrative creator and showing the relevance of their context, educators can encourage students to consider such information in their future use of narratives. Different mediums may affect the content consumers' affective realism differently (individually bound). It would be advantageous for students to evaluate their relationship with different narratives and consider their influence. Some mediums, like documentaries, may be seen as more fact-based, putting much responsibility on the content creator to create responsible content. Content consumers should be aware of the memetic, synthetic, and thematic concepts in all mediums of entertainment and internet narratives.

Chapter Six stated that the responsibility between the content creator and the content consumer may shift depending on the medium of internet narrative used. News and websites are more passive narrative forms from the consumer's point of view. Both these narrative forms have (in their own manner) credibility and authority lent to them by the mediums. However, biased and misinformed narratives may be found in any medium, and all mediums should be considered critically. The seeming legitimacy of information found within websites and news shifts the responsibility burden toward the content creator while not dismissing the responsibility of content consumers. Social media is a more active narrative form depending on how the consumer uses the technology. The bigger the digital footprint of narrative creators, the greater responsibility lies with them. How active social media consumers are on the platform may impact their measure of responsibility. The more active the consumer is, the more responsibility is taken on; for example, someone who shares a lot of content or comments on posts has a greater responsibility toward those they may influence. Narrative consumers are responsible for maintaining their constructs regardless of how active they are. All internet narrative mediums can be shared with ease; content consumers must critically evaluate narratives before sharing or forwarding content.

Chapter Eight stated that when identity-related concepts, including but not limited to religion, nationalism, secularism, and culture, are simulated in digital narratives, it can impact the content consumer. Content creators should be aware of this impact and try to mitigate such impacts through a well-rounded depiction of the phenomena. Strong us-versus-them narratives frequently arise that do not give well-rounded views of phenomena when working with identity-related concepts. With this being the case, content consumers should especially evaluate narratives when strong identity ideologies exist. Another concept to consider concerning the responsibilities is those responsible for creating policy on narratives. Policies

from platforms or government agencies often dictate what can and can not be broadcasted or published. These policies can be beneficial in mitigating intolerant and harmful simulations that can arise. It would be beneficial for religious education specialists to be part of creating such policies. Some problems may arise with policies that seek to mitigate narrative content. This includes but is not limited to censorship, which may impact freedom of expression, non-implementation of policies, corrupt implementation of policies, unlawful attainment of banned content through the internet and promoting intolerant narratives by creating a sensationalistic phenomenon by banning the content. The responsible creation and implementation of policies should also be considered in the balance of responsibilities, as they can impact the responsible creation of narratives.

10.2.2 Content creators

- SQ3: How can religious studies encourage content creators to work responsibly with the information they contribute to digital narratives?
- RG7: To encourage content creators in digital fields to relay information accurately and responsibly.

Chapters Two, Four, Five, Six and Eight contributed to this objective. Chapter Six added that narrative creators are not only a few novelists and filmmakers; they also contribute to narratives and have much sway. However, many people, including students, create narratives today, primarily through internet narratives; it is vital to encourage students to be responsible content consumers and creators (if they create content). Religious education specialists may have direct access to content creators in their classrooms and lecture halls. Chapter Four stated that content consumers should understand narrative theories and the potential impact that their narratives can have on content receivers. This can make them more aware of the responsibility of being a content creator. Content creators should be urged to evaluate the narratives they create, break down different components of narrative and think about the possible impact of these different factors before publishing or posting narratives.

Chapters Two and Five stated that narrative creators should focus on creating humanised characters rather than stereotype marginalised groups. Antagonists will inevitably be cast; however, care must be taken not to perpetuate inaccurate ideologies. It would be advantageous not to typecast marginalised groups in antagonistic positions. Groups and traditions should not be depicted irresponsibly, for example, making them only a token or seen as exotic, neither should they be stereotyped or demonised (thematic understanding). One of the ways to humanise characters is to showcase them with multiple intersections rather than as flat characters. Chapters Five and Eight stated that it is complex for an outsider to truly grasp how

a group would receive a depiction of themselves in narrative form. It would be advantageous for narrative creators to consult the groups they depict. This can lead to more responsible narratives with well-rounded characters that can facilitate better para-social interaction. This process may be eased if religion studies professionals can help facilitate channels between religious groups and narrative creators. This is not to say that some channels do not already exist in this regard. This has limitations, as the content creator and depicted group would have to be willing to work on the narrative together and mitigate the content between them.

10.2.3 The creation of content

- SQ9: What role can religious studies professionals play in creating responsible digital content?
- PC10: The encouragement of creating accessible and accurate information.

Chapters Two, Four and Eight added to this objective. All three Chapters encouraged religious studies professionals to promote or create counter-narratives that can contrast intolerant narratives. Chapter Eight stated that discrimination patterns often emerge because of significant world events and a thematic understanding of such events. Chapters Four and Eight highlighted that intolerant narratives also emerge because of the spread of propaganda and conspiracy theories within society. If counter-narratives are to be made, it would be beneficial if religious studies professionals keep track of some of the latest propaganda and conspiracy theories that circulate. The creation of counter-narratives should consider narrative theories and composition. Counter-narratives are more effective than fact-based learning when dealing with misinformed narratives.

It is not always easy for content consumers to find counter-narratives or to know what information to trust online. By creating trustworthy, humanising counter-narratives that stand in contrast to intolerant narratives in circulation, educators can help alleviate some problems in finding trustworthy counter-narratives. If educators do not want to create counter-narratives, promoting trustworthy counter-narratives created by others would be beneficial. Working with content creators to create trustworthy counter-narratives that can be promoted through university or institution platforms may also be beneficial. Furthermore, creating humanising narratives outside the context of propaganda can help people learn about religions. However, if educators feel more comfortable creating fact-based learning information that is accessible and understandable by the general public, this will already make a difference. This will especially be the case if a connection between trustworthy information and University websites can be formed, helping content consumers find a reputable information base.

10.3 To identify how these professionals can play a role in interpreting digital narratives

In this subsection, the following sub-themes are discussed: (i) *Interpretation of narratives*, (ii) *Well-informed or ill-informed digital narratives* and (iii) *Catalogues*. This subsection showcases how religious studies professionals can encourage the responsible use of information by interpreting narratives. It should be stated that the researcher does not imply that researchers are not analysing narratives or that they are not taking these factors into account. Instead, this serves as a guide for those who wish to know more.

10.3.1 Interpretation of narratives

- SQ4: What role can religious studies play in interpreting digital narratives?

Chapters Two, Four, Five, Six, Seven and Eight contributed to this objective. The immense impact that narrative can have on the human mind, acting as a temporary affective realism, makes it crucial for educators to analyse narratives critically, as this may benefit their students and the academic community. This being said, creating such content for the public may also be advantageous as it can help them understand narratives in more detail. Chapters Five and Six stated that when educators want to utilise narratives within education settings, analysing the narrative before showcasing it to students would be advantageous. This can help the educator isolate critical elements that will be important to point out to a class, including well-informed and ill-informed simulations in the narratives. Educators can prepare some specific questions to ask the students to encourage interaction. Open or broad questions may also assist as students experience the narrative uniquely from the educator. A pre-analysis can be utilised to create articles or can become part of a catalogue to assist other educators with their class preparation.

Chapter Two emphasised the use of narratives to simulate definitions to students. It would be advantageous if educators assign definitions they believe would work with narratives in articles, as this may assist other educators in identifying such simulators. Chapter Four stated that if educators seek to evaluate narratives either for cataloguing their phenomena or writing articles, it will be beneficial to consider narrative theories and compositions as part of their analysis. This can include viewing public perceptions of narratives. This can be achieved through interviews or online opinions; this may lead educators to identify characters with favourable para-social interaction. Alternatively, narratives that are rated well by the public may indicate good transportability. Furthermore, positive and negative elements of narrative compositions should be evaluated. This can benefit other educators in locating appropriate narratives, and it may help narrative creators analyse their own work.

Chapters Seven and Eight added some compact narrative analyses and a catalogue of narratives containing religious and (in)tolerant fragments as examples. Chapter Seven focused on general religious phenomena found in digital narratives. Religious phenomena in narratives should be analysed for their potential as simulators and for promoting curiosity. Chapter Eight stated that big world events often create storms of narratives. These usually start as internet narratives and may transition to digital entertainment as time passes. These storms can overwhelm the public and scholars who follow the narratives. These narratives are very obtainable and can be interpreted by those who feel up to the task. Interpreting intolerance and counter-narratives may lead to a different view on the mass amount of information. This may aid other educators, students, and the general public in better understanding the narrative phenomena. However, the interpretation of narratives should not be limited to big world events.

10.3.2 Well-informed or ill-informed digital narratives

- PC2: Showing that not all digital narratives are well-informed on religion, even when it does contain religious concepts.
- PC3: Demonstrating that some digital narratives can be very accurate and valuable when cultivating religious tolerance in a multi-cultural society.

Chapters Four, Seven and Eight contributed to this objective. Chapter Four emphasised that misinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories exist on digital platforms. Students will inevitably encounter such narratives, some of which will have information on religion. Ensuring that students are aware of such narratives is essential. If there are underlying reasons the narratives use religion in a negative light, like scapegoating, fundamentalistic belief systems or nationalist ideological pursuits, to name a few, this should be pointed out to students. Students should also be made aware of counter-narratives; counter-narratives can act as a potent teaching tool in religious education settings. Chapter Seven added a catalogue of narratives that simulated ritual, myth, symbol and spirituality. The narratives in the Chapter had neutral or positive depictions within the catalogues. Some exceptions, such as the *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) narrative baptism scene and the news articles regarding symbols and the responsibility of spiritual leaders and songwriters, had a more negative ethos. The catalogues showcase that narratives simulate religious constructs and should be evaluated for their educational possibilities.

In Chapter Seven, there were three *Narrative evaluation example* subsections. These subsections contain the analysis of narratives in more detail to showcase the phenomena and how they can be used in education settings. Two of the narratives can be categorised as lived religious experiences. The first was under *Ritual*, and the other under *Spirituality*. The narrative

under *Ritual* was Bialik's (2018) recounting of her son's Bar Mitzvah; this was a non-fiction social media narrative. The narrative under *Spirituality* was Joseph's (2022) spiritual experience regarding Ramadan; this was a non-fiction website audio clip. Both these narratives are well-informed, positive para-social interaction simulators that can aid humanisation and tolerance in multi-religious societies. Their experiences are memetic but should not be seen as thematic. The other narrative was a fictional, filmographic clip of the *Percy Jackson And The Olympians* series created by Riordan and Steinberg (2023-2024). This narrative contains *Myth* and *Symbols* and can be used to encourage curiosity in students about the memetic and synthetic concepts in narratives.

Chapter Eight added a catalogue of narratives that showcased secularism, nationalism, fundamentalism, extremism, terrorism, Islamophobia, Antisemitism and minority-majority relationships. This Chapter showcased intolerance and counter-narratives on religion and related social phenomena. Creating social awareness of these phenomena is part of the work of educators in the digital age. Intolerant narratives are not new and have not been caused by the digitisation of narratives. Instead, the digital age spreads these narratives more easily than could be managed previously. Intolerant narratives often promote fundamentalistic us-versus-them identity theories that paint others as threatening. Other discriminatory narratives seek to distort historical and current discriminatory events. This being said, counter-narratives are also more obtainable through the digitisation of narratives. These narratives are valuable tools for creating better tolerant societies through narrative simulations and para-social interactions. The digital age makes it paramount that education settings give attention to such narratives.

In the subsection *Narrative evaluation example*, two examples of narratives were given. The two narratives act as counter-narratives to the thematic understanding of all Jewish and Muslim people as being part of the Israel-Hamas war. This thematic understanding has led to an influx of Islamophobic and Antisemitic behaviour in many countries that are removed from the war. The first narrative was a non-fiction, social media narrative with the lived experience of Meherun Hamid and Shanaz Syeda (TRT World 2023). They recount a bomb threat that was raised against an Islamic preschool in England that directly correlated with a thematic understanding of the war. The second narrative was a non-fiction social media narrative with Eyal Yakoby's lived experience (The Economic Times 2023). He recounted the Antisemitic actions taken on University Campuses in America that directly correlated with a thematic understanding of the war and the University leadership's lack of action regarding the incidents. Both these narratives stand as counter-narratives that should be able to work as a para-social

interaction simulator to the overwhelming amount of hate narratives fuelled by the current war. This is not unique to this world event, and such a thematic understanding of events transpires regularly, as seen in Chapter Eight. Therefore, big world events and their narratives are one of many points of interest for religious education specialists to explore for educational purposes.

What narratives should be utilised in education settings will be contextually bound. What problems are currently found in society will play a role in choosing narratives. What subject matter is taught and what groups are discussed will intrinsically play a role in the chosen narratives. Factors like minority-majority relationships may affect what narratives may benefit a specific context. Educators should consider if there is an intolerant thematic understanding of specific groups within their society, as this may impact what narratives may be most beneficial. Educators should consider what misinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories may be circulating, as these narratives may impact content consumers. Intolerant narratives often lead to an intolerant, synthetic, thematic view of groups. These views should be countered by counter-narratives that humanise these groups. Most of all, educators should utilise counter-narratives to counter intolerant views of some groups as threatening a specific way of life.

10.3.3 Catalogues

- PC12: Providing a small catalogue of narratives with specific phenomena relevant to religion and (in)tolerance.

Chapter Seven added a small catalogue showcasing fragments of religion. These fragments or concepts connected to religion included ritual, myth, symbol and spirituality. Chapter Eight added a small catalogue showing simulations of counter-narratives and intolerant phenomena. These themes included secularism, nationalism, fundamentalism, extremism, terrorism, Islamophobia, Antisemitism and minority-majority relationships. The catalogues found in Chapters Seven and Eight included digital entertainment and internet narratives in their different mediums; both fiction and non-fictional narratives were present. The catalogues are available under headings marked as *Examples from digital narratives*. These narratives are not explored in great detail as the thesis is not a curriculum for a specific context. In both Chapters, the headings *Narrative evaluation example* can be found where some compact analysis of narratives is present. These narratives are explored in more detail but should still be adaptable and expandable to different contexts.

10.4 Adding to the overall conversation of scholarly definitions

This subsection discussed the ongoing conversation of scholarly definitions and how this thesis contributed to this conversation.

- PC13: Providing new definitions to add to the ongoing conversation of scholarly definitions.

It should be noted that this thesis did contribute many definitions to the scholarly conversation. However, four definitions were selected from the work of other scholars. These five definitions included the definition of (i) concepts, (ii) simulation and (iii) affective realism; these definitions were selected from the work of Barrett (2018:27, 28, 284) (see Chapter One). The fourth definition that was utilised from another scholar's work was the definition of (iv) critical thinking, as given by Uzunöz et al. (2018:81) (see Chapter Four). The final definition selected from another scholars work was the definition for empathy as given by Chang et al. (2021:3-4). These five definitions were expressive enough to convey the researcher's meaning without the need for new definitions to be constructed. With this in mind, the researcher did not construct these definitions, which are not featured in the following list.

From this point on, a list follows of the definitions that were constructed for the thesis by the researcher. Chapters One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, and Eight contributed to this objective. The definitions were created by using the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework consisted of construct, simulation, intersectionality and affective realism. The definitions created by using the theoretical framework created a bridge between concepts and disciplines. The definitions established a continuity that formed a crucial part of the methodology utilised in the thesis. In Chapter One, unique definitions were constructed for (i) intersectionality and (ii) religion. These definitions contribute to the conversation on definitions for these two constructs. The definition of intersectionality is found under the *Theoretical framework* heading. The definition of religion can be found under *Defining religion*. The researcher did not produce the terms construct, simulation, affective realism, or intersectionality. However, how they are used together to create new definitions throughout the thesis also adds to the conversation of definitions within academic conversations. These four concepts were discussed under the *Theoretical framework*.

Complex terms like religion can benefit from definitions constructed in this manner as they are complex phenomena. Showcasing the intersections between concepts and simulations can provide broad but detailed definitions. As the thesis was written with a broad context in mind, having a broad but detailed definition is beneficial. The same strategy can define specific

communities, creating narrow and detailed definitions. This will depend on the needs of each particular study. Religious education and definitions of religion are deeply entangled with each other. By showcasing the complex intersections of religion, one can also see how complex religious education needs to become to create a varied understanding of the phenomena among students. The varied constructs and simulations of religion among humans need to be considered and understood to promote tolerance. By educating students about how the human mind works, they may learn intersectional sensitivity.

A definition of (iii) tolerance was created and presented in Chapter Two. Tolerance is a key term within the thesis, as religious education for the current study is in the pursuit of tolerance. However, tolerance may have different meanings. Therefore, clarification on what is meant by the term in the thesis was necessary. The thesis added to the conversation by suggesting creative learning opportunities regarding teaching definitions. Using narratives as simulators to illustrate definitions can potentially increase students' understanding of the different definitions of concepts. The researcher added a unique definition for (iv) religious education in Chapter Three. Religious education is a primary term in the thesis, and as there are many simulations of religion in education, clarification was necessary by defining the term.

The researcher constructed unique definitions of the following terms in Chapter Four: (v) character, (vi) us-versus-them, (vii) plot, (viii) passive and active narrative, (ix) discourse, (x) fiction and non-fiction, (xi) technology (xii) digital narratives (xiii) misinformation, (xiv) conspiracy theories, (xv) propaganda, (xvi) counter-narratives, (xvii) religious narrative and (xviii) narrative. Narrative is one of the main terms of the thesis. The definition of narrative contributed in this Chapter is comprehensive, but not much attention is given to the definition of narratives in scholarly works; the thesis thus adds to the body of knowledge. Furthermore, all the definitions found within this Chapter contribute to a better understanding of the definition of narrative. The definitions also contribute to the understanding of terms that are often encountered within the thesis.

In Chapter Five, the researcher added definitions of the different digital entertainment mediums discussed within the thesis. Definitions were added for (xix) books in electronic mediums, (xx) filmography, (xxi) video games, (xxii) virtual reality and (xxiii) music. In Chapter Six, the researcher contributed three definitions of internet mediums utilised within the thesis. These definitions included (xxiv) websites, (xxv) social media and (xxvi) news. Examples of the mediums mentioned in Chapters Five and Six were utilised in Chapters Seven and Eight,

necessitating the clarification of the terms. These terms form part of Chapter Four's definition of digital narrative and, in turn, narrative; therefore, these definitions enhance those definitions.

In Chapter Seven, the researcher added definitions for the terms (xxvii) ritual, (xxviii) myth, (xxix) symbol and (xxx) spirituality. These terms intersect with religion, enhancing the definition of religion found in Chapter One. The researcher contributed definitions in Chapter Eight on the following terms: (xxxi) secular age, (xxxii) post-secular age, (xxxiii) secularism, (xxxiv) nationalism, (xxxv) fundamentalism, (xxxvi) terrorism, (xxxvii) Islamophobia, (xxxviii) Antisemitism, and (xxxix) minority and majority religious dynamics. These definitions intersect with religion or tolerance, enhancing those definitions. The primary function of the definitions found in Chapters Seven and Eight was to clarify these terms as they were used as concepts to find narrative simulations. These narrative simulations were used to create catalogues that can be found under the headings *Examples from digital narratives*. Furthermore, examples of narratives containing some of the phenomena were analysed and contextualised for their educational probability. The examples can be found under the *Narrative evaluation example* headings. Therefore, clarifying what these terms meant in the thesis was important. The researcher contributed thirty-nine definitions that help contextualise critical terms and terms connected to them. These definitions should lead to a better contextualisation of what the thesis means with specific terms. The following Chapter is the conclusion to the thesis.

Chapter Eleven: Conclusion

This Chapter proceeds as a conclusion to the thesis. The first subsection of the Chapter gives a summary of the (i) *Thesis Chapters*. This Chapter also discusses (ii) To whom is this study of interest and (iii) Limitations and suggestions for further research. The Chapter ends with some (iv) Concluding remarks.

11.1 Thesis Chapters

This section gives a brief overview of each Chapter within the thesis. This section is a reminder of what was done in each Chapter, with the following subsection's *Overall objectives* in mind.

11.1.1 Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter One was primarily intended as an introduction to the study. This Chapter discussed the following headings: (i) *Background to the study*, (ii) *Problem statement*, (iii) *Objectives* ((iii.i) *Research questions*, (iii.ii) *Research goals*, (iii.iii) *Proposed contributions* (iv) *Themes*) (iv) *Theoretical framework*, (v) *Methodology*, (vi) *Defining religion*, (vii) the *Chapter outline and literature overview* and (vii) *Chapter themes*. This Chapter acted as a foundation for the thesis.

11.1.2 Chapter Two: Tolerance

Chapter Two discussed the topic of tolerance. Tolerance was a crucial term for this study. This Chapter discussed the following headings: (i) *Debate on the concept of tolerance*, (ii) *Different scholarly definitions of tolerance*, (iii) *Working definition*, and (iv) *Chapter themes*. This Chapter clarified the term tolerance in scholarly work and contextualised the term in the thesis.

11.1.3 Chapter Three: Religion and education

Chapter Three investigated the complex simulations of religion in education. This Chapter included the following: (i) *Debate on religion and education*, (ii) *Important Elements that influence religion education*, (iii) *Working definition*, and (iv) *Chapter themes*. This Chapter clarified what the term religious education meant in the thesis (non-confessional). However, many of the concepts within the thesis are transferable to other simulations of education.

11.1.4 Chapter Four: Narrative

Chapter Four investigated the term narrative. This Chapter included the following: (i) *Debate on the concept of narrative*, (ii) *Narrative composition*, (iii) *Digital narrative and digital technology*, (iv) *Conspiracy theories, propaganda misinformation, and counter-narratives*, (v) *Religious narrative*, (vi) *Different scholarly definitions of narrative*, the (vii) *Working definition*, and (viii) *Chapter themes*. This Chapter was crucial in understanding and analysing narratives in the thesis.

11.1.5 Chapter Five: Digital entertainment

Chapter Five discussed the concept of digital entertainment. The following main headings were found in this Chapter: (i) *Books in electronic mediums*, (ii) *Filmography*, (iii) *Video games and virtual reality*, (iv) *Music*, (v) *The use of digital entertainment in religious education*, and (iv) *Chapter themes*. This Chapter was vital in understanding the different mediums of digital entertainment and some of their implications for implementation.

11.1.6 Chapter Six: Internet narratives

Chapter Six focused on the concept of internet narratives. The main headings in this Chapter were: (i) *Websites*, (ii) *Social media*, (iii) *News*, (iv) *The use of internet narratives in religious education*, and (v) *Chapter themes*. This Chapter was essential for understanding the internet narrative mediums and their implications for implementation.

11.1.7 Chapter Seven: Terms relevant to religious education

Chapter Seven explored Four *Terms relevant to religious education*. The terms explored included (i) *Ritual*, (ii) *Myth and Symbol*, and (iii) *Spirituality*. Each subsection had (i.i; ii.i; iii.i) *Discussion and semantics*, (i.ii; ii.ii; iii.ii) *Working definition*, (i.iii; ii.iii; iii.iii) *Examples from digital narratives*, and a (i.iv; ii.iv; iii.iv) *Narrative evaluation example*. The Chapter then concluded with an (iv) *Chapter themes* section. This Chapter was essential to showcase that concepts connected to religion are simulated in digital narratives and can be a potential resource.

11.1.8 Chapter Eight: Digital narratives and religious (in)tolerance

Chapter Eight showcased how narrative and religious (in)tolerance interact, showcasing the implications from the previous Chapters. The following headings were utilised in the Chapter: (i) *Secularism and nationalism*, (ii) *Fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism*, (iii) *Islamophobia, Antisemitism, and minority-majority relationships*. Each section contained a (i.i; ii.i; iii.i) *Discussion and semantics*, and (i.ii; ii.ii; iii.ii) *Working definition*. The chapter then continued to the (iv) *Examples from digital narratives*, (v) *Narrative evaluation example*, and (vi) *Chapter themes*. This Chapter showcased intolerance and counter-narratives within the digital world that can affect content consumers.

11.1.9 Chapter Nine: Implications for religious education and broad principles for curricula

Chapter nine gave the overall (i) *Implications for religious education*, (ii) *Broad principles regarding digital narratives and curricula* and (iii) *Chapter themes*. The *Broad principles regarding digital narratives and curricula* were discussed in three phases, namely (ii.i) *How to choose a narrative*, (ii.ii) *Pre-analysis*, and (ii.iii) *Post-analysis*.

11.1.10 Chapter Ten: A discussion of the objectives and themes

Chapter Ten discussed the thematic analysis of the overall objectives (SQ, RG and PQ). The main themes discussed in this Chapter included: (i) *To identify the religious studies professionals' roles in using digital narratives in education environments*, (ii) *To identify religious studies professionals' roles in encouraging the responsible creation of digital narratives*, (iii) *To identify how these professionals can play a role in interpreting digital narratives* and (iv) *Adding to the overall conversation of scholarly definitions*. The subthemes included (i.i) *Factors to consider*, (i.ii) *Digital narrative a creative source*, (i.iii) *How religious studies and media studies can benefit each other*, (i.iv) *The responsible and ethical use of narratives*, (i.v) *Critical thinking abilities and digital narratives* (i.vi) *Tolerance and the responsible use of digital narratives*, (i.vii) *Post-secularism and digital narrative*, (i.viii) *Narrative quantity in daily use*, (i.iv) *Implications for religious education and curriculum development*, (ii.i) *Balance of responsibilities*, (ii.ii) *Content creators* (ii.iii) *The creation of content*, (iii.i) *Interpretation of narratives*, (iii.ii), *Well-informed or ill-informed digital narratives* and, (iii.iii) *Adding to the overall conversation of scholarly definitions*. These themes gave an overview of the findings in the thesis.

11.1.11 Chapter Eleven: Conclusion

This Chapter is the concluding Chapter of the thesis. The headings in this Chapter included (i) *Thesis Chapters*, (ii) *To whom is this study of interest*, (iii) *Limitations and suggestions for further research*, and (iv) *Concluding remarks*.

11.2 To whom is this study of interest

First and foremost, this study can interest religious studies professionals who want to know more about the relationship between religion and the responsible use of narrative. Secondly, this thesis interests digital narrative users who want to understand the relationship between digital narratives and religion. Lastly, this thesis can be helpful for narrative creators who would like to know more about the responsible creation of narratives.

11.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research

This thesis was mainly focused on quantitative research. Qualitative fieldwork and qualitative literature reviews can be helpful in future research to deepen the understanding of the phenomena of religion in narrative. Research on the topic of narrative is quantitative and qualitative. Researchers can follow quantitative and qualitative methods to understand the phenomena better in future research. Points of interest for future research include the cataloguing and analysing narratives for articles and publicly accessible knowledgebases. This may assist educators in their search for narratives for educational settings and may assist students and the public in expanding their understanding of specific narratives. It is encouraged that educators write articles on how they utilise different narrative mediums in education settings, further pointing out successes and limitations, as this can aid other educators in the future. It should be stated that educators (e.g. Reuber (2011; 2010), Kozlovic (2023), and Barnhouse (2023)) have already contributed extensively to how they use digital media within class settings. This study mainly focused on (in)tolerance factors regarding religion and narrative. However, intolerance can occur in many different phenomena. Future research can expand on how other fields benefit from narrative as a creative teaching tool. This can include tolerance toward people of different sexual orientations (as noted in the work of Schiappa et al. (2005)) people with disabilities (as noted by Chopra and Pannu (2018)) and people from different ethnicities (as noted in the work of Praszquier (2016) and Peck et al. (2013)) to name a few.

Chapter Four stated that narrative significantly impacts one's physical body. For example, it was noted that heart rate and eye blink synchronisation occur when narratives are consumed.

This can act as a bonding agent and was seen in the work of Nomura et al. (2015:2) and Pe´rez et al. (2021:7). It was beyond the scope of the thesis to do a complete analysis of this phenomenon. Future research should examine narratives' impact as a bonding agent and if they can assist in building interreligious relationships. Different mediums should be analysed for their effects on the human mind while comparing them to other mediums. This may aid educators in knowing what type of narrative may have the best effect in creating more effective learning environments. Such a study would have to consider individualisation preferences and transportability while considering learning curves with unknown mediums. Chapter Five further pointed out that future research should focus on how video games may act as a bonding agent between players. It may be possible that playing video games together can promote interreligious bonding and is a viable point of investigation for future research. The ethical implications of narratives on the human mind are an ongoing topic that needs further exploration. Although articles like the one by Kissel (2021) can be a good resource for the moral implications of video games, future research can further investigate this topic.

In Chapter Three, it was suggested that different educational programs be created for adults and children to attend together or for adults at their place of work. Educating adults can ease educating children (explained in Chapter Three); complete elaboration was beyond the scope of the thesis. Further research can explore non-traditional avenues to educate people on non-confessional religious matters. Chapter Five showed that digital entertainment may aid the learning process for all students, including neurotypical and neurodivergent students. Future research can focus on the effect of digital narratives in educational settings in both groups. Neurodivergence may include many factors, such as people who have symptoms of Dyslexia, ADHD and Autism, but are not limited to these groups. These groups may vary widely; therefore, exploring each group may also be necessary. Neurodivergent students may struggle more than their neurotypical counterparts in typical education systems (King 2022). If digital narratives can assist neurodivergent students in the learning process, it is worth exploring in future research. Chapter Five indicated that future research can focus on how different teaching styles can incorporate digital narratives into curricula.

This thesis focused mainly on the use of already existing narratives. Some researchers, like Gottesman (2017), encouraged the creation of narratives by students, and Warsihna et al. (2021) encouraged the creation of audiobooks by educators. Creating new narratives and their implications should be a point of investigation for future research. Another factor mentioned for future research in Chapter Four was the role of Artificial intelligence in creating narratives

and how this impacts the responsibility of the narrative consumer. If programs become narrative creators, narrative consumers' responsibility may increase as the narrative creator is no longer an entity that can assume responsibility. The role of Artificial intelligence in creating narratives should be explored in more detail in future research. Another point of future research for the Chapter involves whether consuming smaller narratives over time with the same content can have a similar effect as consuming one extensive narrative. Larger narratives like books may substantially affect simulation, transportation and para-social interaction, leading to cultivation. If, for example, a social media influencer posts similar content constantly and their followers consume it regularly, what would the impact of those narratives be? If it has similar effects as more time-consuming narratives, the choice in these narratives may have significant repercussions.

Another factor pointed out for future research in Chapter Four is how less important misinformation may impact people's affective realism. Not all misinformation is created with the intent to harm, nor does it necessarily have a significant effect on society. However, future research may need to look at what happens when these misinformed narratives accumulate, as this may have a more significant effect. Future research can also delve into the differentiation between dialogue and discourse as terms for verbal communication in narratives. The term dialogue is often used in narrative studies, yet discourse may be more inclusive. A study may thus be needed to delve into the semantics of the terms. In Chapter Six, there is a differentiation between social media, websites and news. These concepts often intersect and may not be seen as different. Future qualitative studies can investigate if education target groups view these concepts as different or the same, as it may impact how religious education engages with these mediums in education settings.

In Chapter Seven, it was pointed out that Myths have a transportation effect on the human mind. Future research can focus on the differences and similarities between Mythology and other narratives within the human mind (see Chapter Four for more on narrative theories). This should be conducted without reducing myths to narratives. This thesis was not overtly focused on myths. Instead, myths were only focused on where they were encountered within digital narratives. The Mythology section briefly touched on the concept of religious truth, as myths stand as truth to the believing communities. Chapter Five also mentioned that content creators should consult the groups they want to depict to ensure an accurate understanding of their religious truth and avoid stereotypical depictions. However, the understanding of truth can differ even within the same group, so a future study can thus work on the concept of religious

truth and depictions in digital narratives. Chapter Eight stated that the scope of the thesis was limited to specific religious discrimination patterns such as Islamophobia, Antisemitism and a small quantity of minority-majority relationships. Other discriminatory phenomena are not less important or less worthy of exploration. Future research should seek to explore these and other discriminatory phenomena, as narratives are everchanging.

11.4 Concluding remarks

Narratives have been used by humanity for millennia. Narratives have multiple functions, all of which are not yet fully known. Narratives are a tool to escape the physical world and are a form of entertainment. Narratives are a resource through which humans can learn. Most of all, narratives are created by humans to influence other humans. In the digital age, humans receive a massive influx of daily information through narratives. In the current era, multi-religious and multi-cultural societies are a reality. There is a need to create and maintain functioning multi-religious societies, which is a point to strive toward for religious education. Narratives contain simulations of (and about) religious phenomena. These simulations can be positive and accurate, creating a simulation of para-social interactions and creative methods of learning constructs. Narratives can potentially create lifelong learners through the mass amount of information available in the digital world.

However, narratives can perpetuate intolerance, scapegoat individuals or groups, and be used to fuel ideological agendas. Religious education is one of the ideal mediums to assist with media and narrative literacy. Two questions will remain open-ended as individual educators hold the answers to these questions. Firstly, is the resource of narrative being utilised to its full potential in religious education settings? Secondly, have religious education settings given students the tools to understand and utilise narratives responsibly? The narratives on the screen of digital narrative consumers today may perpetuate the (in)tolerance of tomorrow. Learning how to analyse digital narratives critically through religious education may help decide the outcome.

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ANNEXURE A: Ethical clearance letter



Faculty of Theology and Religion

Research Office
Mrs Daleen Kotzé

29 November 2021

NAME:	Mrs M Strydom
STUDENT NUMBER:	13246179
COURSE:	Doctoral
DATE:	29 November 2021
APPLICATION NUMBER:	T092/21

This letter serves as confirmation that the research proposal of this student was evaluated by:

- 1) **The Research committee:** This applies to all research proposals
- 2) **The Research Ethics committee:** This applies only to research that includes people as sources of information

You are hereby notified that your research proposal (including ethical clearance where it is applicable) is approved.



Prof E van Eck
Chairperson: Research committee: Faculty of Theology and Religion



Dr T van Wyk
Chairperson: Research Ethics committee: Faculty of Theology and Religion