

## ***Holi Toledo***

By Jeanine Diller and Ibtissam Gad

**Abstract:** This past spring, the University of Toledo joined the Holi craze sweeping campuses across the country with an event we titled “Holi Toledo”— a pun on the expression “Holy Toledo!” from Klinger on the TV show MASH, our local celebrity (see Figure 1). But we added a twist: we made our event a site of religious and cultural immersion and exchange that one of our diversity staff deemed the best diversity event our campus has ever had. We offer an account of why we decided to produce Holi Toledo, how we framed and executed it, and the results.

This past spring, the University of Toledo joined the Holi craze sweeping campuses across the country with an event we titled “Holi Toledo”— a pun on the expression “Holy Toledo!” from Klinger on the TV show MASH, our local celebrity (see Figure 1). But we added a twist: we made our event a site of religious and cultural immersion and exchange that one of our diversity staff deemed the best diversity event our campus has ever had. Here is an account of why we decided to produce Holi Toledo, how we framed and executed it, and the results.

As a brief reminder, Holi is an ancient Indian holiday with roots in Hindu mythology that celebrates the coming of spring and the victory of good over evil—most famously the victory of the good Prahlad over his demon father and demoness aunt Holika who tried to kill him. Undoubtedly one of the most colorful celebrations in the world, Holi is traditionally celebrated by throwing colored powder on family, friends and random passersby, though the meaning of this ritual and the addition of other rituals to it have cultic variations all over India.

### ***I. Why Holi Toledo***

We at the University of Toledo’s Center for Religious Understanding (hereafter, “UT” and “the Center”) were looking for an all-campus event that could advance our mission of enhancing understanding about and between the world’s religions on campus. We generated the idea of creating Holi Toledo as such an event after participating in two five-kilometer races – the Color Run and Color Me Rad – which are reminiscent of Holi even though no explicit mention of the holiday is made. In both, participants are sprayed with a different color at every kilometer mark and then are given bags of color to engage in a big

“color-throwing party” with other runners at the end of the race.<sup>1</sup> We hypothesized that such a Holi-style event on campus might simultaneously:

1. Constitute a vivid symbol of diversity in general in the display of colors, and of religious diversity in particular since Holi is one of the world’s oldest continuously celebrated holidays with religious roots;
2. Be a momentary immersion in a minority religious and cultural tradition on campus,<sup>2</sup> key since we take immersion to be one of the most memorable forms of awareness-raising, and
3. Create an atmosphere of joy instead of the solemnity that often characterizes the Center’s other events.

We really valued the third reason. Typically, the Center’s initiatives have been in a lecture or panel format, both of which are relatively serious. The integration of fun into Holi Toledo promised to create a positive environment which seemed to us intrinsically valuable: it is simply good to co-locate interreligious interaction and joy given the prevailing images of such interactions as tense. The jolliness also promised to be extrinsically valuable in two ways: (1) it might serve as a catalyst for open and honest interactions, and (2) it might attract those who do not normally attend our events, giving our work a wider reach.

These considerations gave us reason enough to start exploring the possibility of Holi Toledo.

## ***II. Structuring and framing***

We soon discovered that Holi celebrations were happening at campuses all over the nation: in 2014, Holi was celebrated at University of Washington, Scripps College, Lafayette College, University of New Orleans, Keene State College, Texas A&M University, University of California Los Angeles, University of North Carolina, Kansas University, Harvard University, and University of Florida, to name a few (see links under “Citations”). Holi’s popularity gave our efforts to organize it at UT some precedent and legitimacy.

We also noticed that many of these events were sponsored by an Indian or Hindu student organization on campus. Ownership of such an event by Hindus or Indians on campus is ethically crucial, we thought: it would make Holi Toledo an act of religio-cultural *sharing* instead of *co-opting*. Though one of the Center’s interns self-identifies as Hindu and Indian,

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://thecolorrun.com/> and <http://www.colormerad.com/>. For an implicit connection between them and Holi see The Huffington Post Canada 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Hindus represent 2% of UT’s student population (UT Office of Equity, Diversity and Community Engagement 2012).

the Center itself is neither. So our first step was to contact our University's Indian Students Cultural Organization (ISCO) to see if they were interested in partnering to produce a Holi event in the spring—effectively giving Holi as a gift to the rest of the campus. Happily, they were, and in fact had wanted to host a Holi event for the last couple years. We began planning together.

Interactions with ISCO made it clear that despite its religious roots, Holi was no longer only a religious holiday but also a cultural holiday, practiced by people of all religions on the streets of India. This fact changed our framing of the event. Originally, we had thought Holi would be a celebration of *religious diversity* by way of a low-stakes form of participation in an approachable religious ritual. Now we saw it as a celebration of *both religious and cultural diversity*, in keeping with Holi's expression in its religio-cultural home. This framing provided the bottom-line theme for the event. It also delimited who should be at the table—administrative structures and student groups related to religion and culture—and defined what sort of topics would be germane for any additional reflections on Holi we might want to offer in future years (this year, we kept it simple). For example, if we ever hold a lecture to reflect on Holi before or after the celebration, it would be less about religion *per se* and more about a topic related to the rich interactions between religions and cultures.

In light of this framing, and between ISCO's connections and ours, the Center and ISCO came to partner with UT's Center for International Studies and Programs whose mission is to bring international cultural awareness to campus, UT's Office of Equity and Diversity which makes campus a welcoming place for all kinds of diverse identities including religious and cultural ones, and UT's Office of Student Involvement, the institutional locus for our campus' religious and cultural student organizations whom we wanted on board. These partners gave the event a robust and germane team at the helm.

### ***III. Our recipe for Holi Toledo: Color, Music, Learn***

We noticed that on other campuses Holi celebrations usually involve two main pieces: color and music. We wanted to add a third, which we came to summarize as “learn.” Specifically, we wanted students to come away having learned something about Holi and more broadly something about other religions and cultures and the students who inhabited them. So “Color, Music, Learn” became our motto to remind us as we organized of the basic structure of Holi Toledo.

“Color” and “Music” were straightforward. The Center's intern from ISCO, Suma Kolla, bought us 70 pounds of color from a local Indian source that imported it from India. She also worked with our Student Union's deejay to create a playlist for Holi Toledo that mixed

traditional Holi and Bollywood music with current hits to set a genuine cultural tone and energize the crowd.

The “Learn” goal took more thought. In the end, we used a four-pronged strategy to create learning:

1. *Inform students about the religious and cultural significance of Holi to make the throwing a genuine immersion.*

First, as implied briefly at the start, we wanted the whole act of color-throwing to constitute an immersion in what would be for many attendees a new religio-cultural ritual, since immersion is such an important way to grasp other ways of being. But we recognized that students would be just throwing colors at each other—not really getting immersed in a new ritual—if they did not understand the religious and cultural background of what they were doing. So we did three things to inform the throwing: (1) circulated information about Holi’s religious and cultural significance in advance of the event, in the form of a promotional video for the event and an article on Holi on the Center’s Facebook page, (2) placed a one-page summary about Holi’s religious roots and current cultural expression at the entry booths and other tables on the day of the celebration for people to read as they waited or took breaks, and (3) had the President of ISCO explain some of the Hindu mythology behind and current practice of Holi at a brief opening to the celebration.

2. *Get religious and cultural student organizations to create booths at the event to raise literacy about the religions and cultures on campus.*

We also wanted UT’s many student religious and cultural organizations involved somehow in explaining their identities to our student attendees, since student-to-student interactions work. Getting a variety of organizations involved would also ensure that people from different religious and cultural backgrounds would be at the event—not only those directly involved but also their friends and acquaintances.

We decided to invite (both in writing and by follow-up texts and calls) all 26 religious and 11 cultural student organizations on campus to set up, decorate and staff a booth during Holi Toledo that would display information on the organization’s tradition and include at least five organization members to talk about it. Our aim was to create a ring of information booths around what we came to call the “color zone” where the throwing would happen (see Figure 2). To use color as a symbol of diversity and simultaneously make the ring around Holi Toledo colorful, each participating student organization was assigned a different color as their theme which they were to use to decorate their booth. We also made this the color of their free t-shirts and the powdered color they distributed (more momentarily).

To incentivize participation by student organizations, we:

- Offered three \$150 cash prizes to participating organizations with (1) the Best Decorated Booth, (2) the Most Informative Booth, and (3) the Organization with the Most Participants.
- Gave away up to 10 free t-shirts to each organization for the people who would staff their booth. Organizations had the option to purchase more, and a few organizations did.
- Underscored that the booths gave the organizations visibility and exposure on campus.

Ultimately, we had eleven different student organizations participate, including two cultural student groups (ISCO and the Chinese Student Scholars) and nine religious student groups (the Catholic Students Association, the Christian Pharmacists Fellowship, H2O Church, the Muslim Student Association, a Nonaffiliated/Agnostic/Atheist group, Toledo Campus Ministry, the UT Gospel Choir, UT Hillel, and the UT Zen Buddhist Fellowship).

We held two meetings before Holi for student leaders to learn about the event, understand their responsibilities, get handouts for the rest of the members in their organizations, be randomly assigned a color, and ensure that everybody was progressing at a reasonable pace.<sup>3</sup>

*3. Create quick but meaningful direct student exchanges about their religious or cultural identities.*

Once we realized all these student organizations would be assembled, we wanted somehow to foster meaningful dialogue between their members and the UT students attending the event. But how to do this, in the midst of what we knew would be a crazy, color-throwing extravaganza?

We knew that whatever site we developed would have to be quick—an exchange that could happen between color-throws. But we still wanted it to be meaningful. That sent us thinking about the short but important interviews on Project Interfaith’s [ravelunravel.com](http://ravelunravel.com), where people answer four questions about their perspective on religion in the span of a few minutes.<sup>4</sup> We needed a conversation like that but which lasted only 30-60 seconds.

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<sup>3</sup> The second meeting three weeks before Holi was particularly crucial. Student organizations came ready (or not) to explain on notecards how they intended to decorate their booth, the names of at least five knowledgeable people who would staff the booth, and the names of any community members who would be present at the booth to answer in-depth questions. We also discussed set up, having a banner, clean up, and more. We made both meetings mandatory for eligibility for free t-shirts and prizes.

<sup>4</sup> “What is your religious or spiritual identity? Why do you identify as such? What is a stereotype that impacts you? Is there anything you want us to know about your religion or belief?” See the video conversation between Katz and Pirigyi 2014.

Center staff put our heads together and came up with several “prompts” that could reveal something significant about a religious or cultural identity and that could be answered in a single sentence. We voted for the top three most popular among us, and the winners were: “Ask me about a meaningful *quote, experience or belief*”. We then placed this phrase on the free t-shirts we gave to the members of the participating student organizations (see Figure 3). The idea was to use the shirt as an integral method to start meaningful conversations at the booths between the student organization members wearing them and the Holi attendees reading them as a crib from which to ask questions. This made the booths not only sites for reading about a tradition and looking at artifacts but also for cross-religious and cross-cultural exchanges.

4. *Incentivize the student body to come and engage in the learning set up by 1-3.*

Members of our student body had a few reasons to come to Holi Toledo in general:

- Sheer fun and curiosity.
- Free Holi Toledo t-shirts to the first 200 people through the entry points.
- A starter bag of color, a free wristband and other freebies for all entrants signing a liability waiver.
- A variety of prizes, including a \$100 cash prize for the Most Colorful Person.

It is worth noting that the free shirts for the first 200 Holi Toledo participants were *generic* Holi Toledo shirts—that is, they did not contain the phrase “ask me about a meaningful quote, experience or belief.” This ensured that nobody felt pressured to answer personal questions except those who had voluntarily decided and prepared to answer them in advance.

Students had two reasons to visit the booths in particular:

1. The booths were the only place students could get more color to throw after they ran out of starter color.<sup>5</sup> This may sound insignificant, but color became a hot commodity
2. Students had to go to five booths to be eligible for the raffle prizes—effected by getting a sticker or punch from each of five different booths on their raffle cards. Raffle prizes included a \$100 cash prize, free passports, and more.

To claim the prizes, participants had to be present when his or her name was announced, a requirement which encouraged attendees to stay the full duration of the event.

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<sup>5</sup> Ostensibly. Next year we need to drive this rule home more, both with those staffing the booths and with participants.

#### ***IV. Results***

The turnout for Holi Toledo far exceeded our goal of 200 people. The event drew nearly 500 participants in all, including over 50 members of student organizations at the booths and over 400 participants throwing color, listening to music and learning from them.

The Center also experienced an enormous increase in traffic on its Facebook page, specifically in the numbers of visits, likes and comments there (see Figure 4). We usually hover below 20 on our page, and our total reach was 400 in March when publicizing for Holi Toledo went live online. During and after the event, Holi Toledo was trending, and people were posting photos of themselves at Holi and tagging the Center's site, making visits to our page jump from a daily average of 5 or less to 40 (see Figure 5). The Center's "likes" increased by roughly 30%, from about 160 to 210 (see Figure 6).

We took both the attendance numbers and Facebook increases as evidence that we accomplished our objective to increase the Center's reach on campus. We came to see that we increased not only our reach but also that of the eleven participating student religious and cultural organizations. We suspect more students are now aware of resources and groups which they may have not known about before.

Anecdotal comments about Holi Toledo from administrators and participants were also strong. As indicated at the start, one of the core staff at the Office of Equity and Diversity said it was the best diversity event the University has ever had. An English as a Second Language instructor told us that his students felt more welcome at Holi Toledo than at any other time they had been on campus, a sign of a bridging of the gap between domestic and international students. Many students told Center interns that Holi was one of the most fun UT events they had ever attended and that they could not wait to attend next year.

Finally, Holi Toledo produced some deep exchanges at the booths. We had planted a graduate student and an undergraduate student journalist to make separate rounds during the event to listen in on some of the exchanges. A record of some of the heartfelt and thoughtful comments they heard is available in Appendices A and B.<sup>6</sup> One student indicated that one of her conversations about religion at a booth lasted a full half hour—surprisingly long in the midst of the fray. Moreover, one advisor reported that preparing answers to the questions on the t-shirt was itself a meaningful exercise for his student group members in thinking about their own religious or spiritual identity. What was for them a meaningful belief, experience, quote? How did they want to relay their tradition, if they had less than a minute?

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<sup>6</sup> Appendix B is an advertisement that the Center placed in a UT student paper after Holi to spread the reach of the exchanges.

Holi Toledo's success is significant for our campus: we may have just started a new regular spring tradition that can keep producing inter-religious and inter-cultural immersion, exchange and joy on campus for years to come. Holi Toledo may also be significant for interfaith work more generally: it could represent a new kind of front for the field with a youthful and fresh vibe and a "play and learn" strategy to encourage young adults to interact honestly and openly across lines of religious and cultural difference. This is important work if we can do it. As Eboo Patel wrote after attending several interfaith conferences in his twenties: "The faces of religious fanatics were young; the faces of interfaith cooperation were old. Something had [and has] to change" (2007, vxiii).

**Jeanine Diller** is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy and Program on Religious Studies and Director of the Center for Religious Understanding at the University of Toledo, with a PhD in philosophy of religion from the University of Michigan. She teaches and researches in philosophy of religion and religious studies, concentrating especially on the nature of ultimate reality, the diversity of traditional and secular views of religion, and the power of religion to change the world for ill and for good. She co-edited *Models of God and Other Alternative Ultimate Realities* (Springer 2013), authored several articles, and served as a Fellow in the American Academy/Luce Seminar on Comparative Theology and Theologies of Religious Pluralism. She has also engaged in poverty reduction work in the federal legislative, state executive, and local non-profit sectors. She lives in Ann Arbor with her husband and two sons.

**Ibtissam Gad** is a student at the University of Toledo College of Medicine (UTCOCM) pursuing her Doctor of Medicine. She was an intern at the Center of Religious Understanding and the President of the Muslim Student Association while attending the University of Toledo. She has also worked with the North American Interfaith Network (NAIN) and spoke at the closing ceremony during the NAIN Connect Conference in 2014. She is currently researching the relationship of faith and medicine with a group of medical students at UTCOCM and regularly volunteers at the Community Care Clinic. She lives with her mother, father, and two brothers in Sylvania.



## Appendix A

### Quotes from Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Exchanges Overheard at Booths

Sophomore in jazz guitar performance:

“I took a year off of school, just experiencing life and getting into a little bit of trouble. I ended up in the hospital... and ever since I went through that strange period of my life, I came back out and emerged into the experience of Zen Buddhism and living in the moment and doing no harm.”

Pharmacy P1 student:

“One scripture that means a lot is Thessalonians 1:8, which talks about ‘putting on your faith and love as a breast plate’ and ‘putting on your faith as a helmet for your hope, your salvation... It’s interesting, because why is it faith and love? Faith and love are the way we should express our actions.”

Second-year graduate student, philosophy:

“I think there might be something bigger than us, but I don’t think it makes sense to use human terms to describe it. We often say things like, ‘There is a god and it wants something.’ To me, that doesn’t make a lot of sense, but we use metaphor to conceive of the world around us. It’s not that any one faith is wrong, it’s that none of them are right – they’re all man-made institutions.”

Junior exercise science major

“Jeremiah 29 is big for a lot of college students who don’t know their future and their plans. It’s nice to read that verse and trust in God, the he knows these plans for you and already has plans for you since you were born. You don’t necessarily know them, but there’s something out there for us and we really just have to trust in God.”

Junior education major

“Over the summer, my family went to Jerusalem in Israel, and there’s this thing called Dome of the Rock... It touched me, because when the call for prayer went off, you could see everyone coming in. It made me cry and made me realize I’m part of a beautiful religion and I’m very proud of that.”

**Appendix B**

**More Quotes from Exchanges at Booths**

**Published in the *Independent Collegian* (UT Student Newspaper)**

*See attached pdf.*

## Figures

The flyer features a vibrant background of a Holi festival celebration with people throwing colored powders. At the top, the title 'होली तोलेदो' is written in large, stylized yellow Devanagari script, with '2014' in a blue brushstroke font to the right. Below the title, the event details are listed in yellow and blue text. A bulleted list of activities is provided in black text. A warning about water-soluble colors is highlighted in yellow. The bottom section lists sponsors in black text and includes logos for the Toledo Community Foundation, The University of Toledo, and the President's Lecture Series on Diversity. Contact information is provided at the very bottom in yellow text.

**होली तोलेदो** 2014

**Wednesday, April 9 from 3 to 5 p.m.**  
Field next to the Memorial Field House, Main campus, University of Toledo

**An all-campus celebration of Holi, an Indian holiday with Hindu roots**

- Welcome spring
- Throw colors
- Discover religions and cultures on campus
- Enjoy Indian music
- Win \$100 cash prizes for most colorful and for raffle
- First 200 people into the color zone receive a free Holi 2014 t-shirt

**Colors are water soluble but may stain some fabrics so dress accordingly.**

Sponsored by the UT Indian Students Cultural Association, the UT Center for Religious Understanding, the UT Center for International Studies & Programs, the UT Office of Student Involvement, the UT Office of Equity and Diversity, Toledo Community Foundation and President's Lecture Series on Diversity.

 Toledo Community Foundation  THE UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO  President's Lecture Series on Diversity

**For more information**  
**cfriu@utoledo.edu or 419-530-6187**

Figure 1: Holi Toledo Promotional Flyer

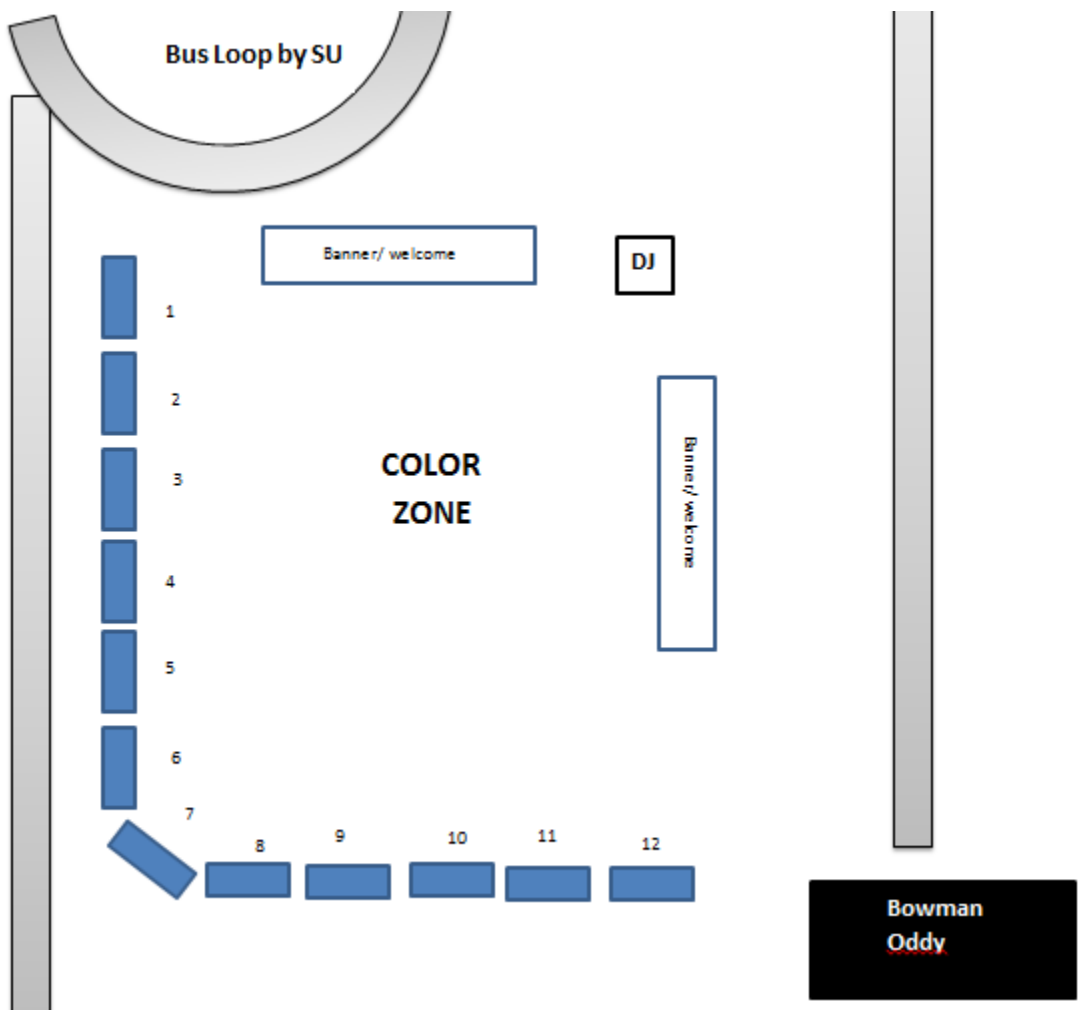


Figure 2: Schematic of Set-up for Holi Toledo



*Figure 3: Holi Toledo T-shirt for student organizations*

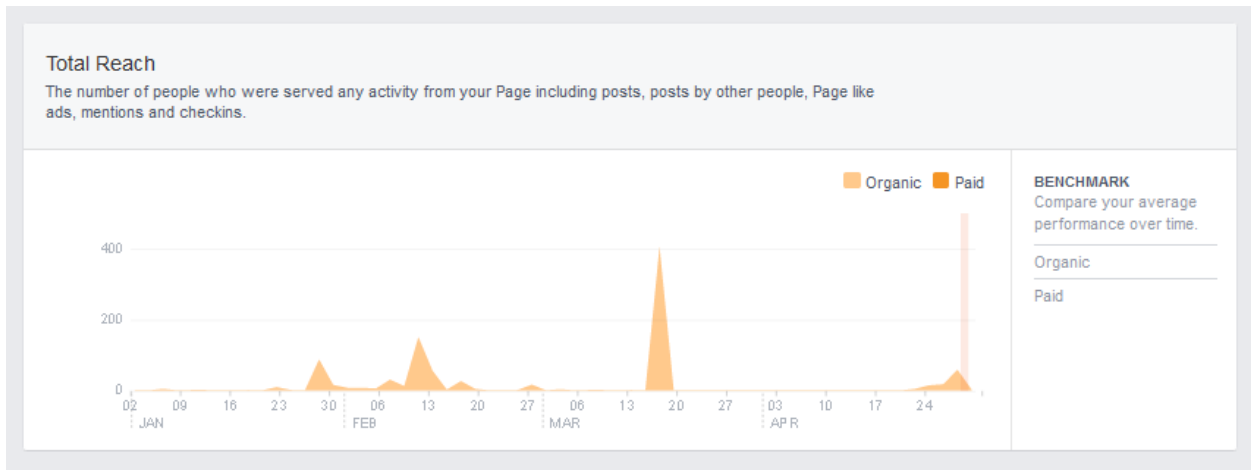


Figure 4: Facebook Statistics – Increase of Reach on Facebook weeks before Holi (all Organic, none paid)

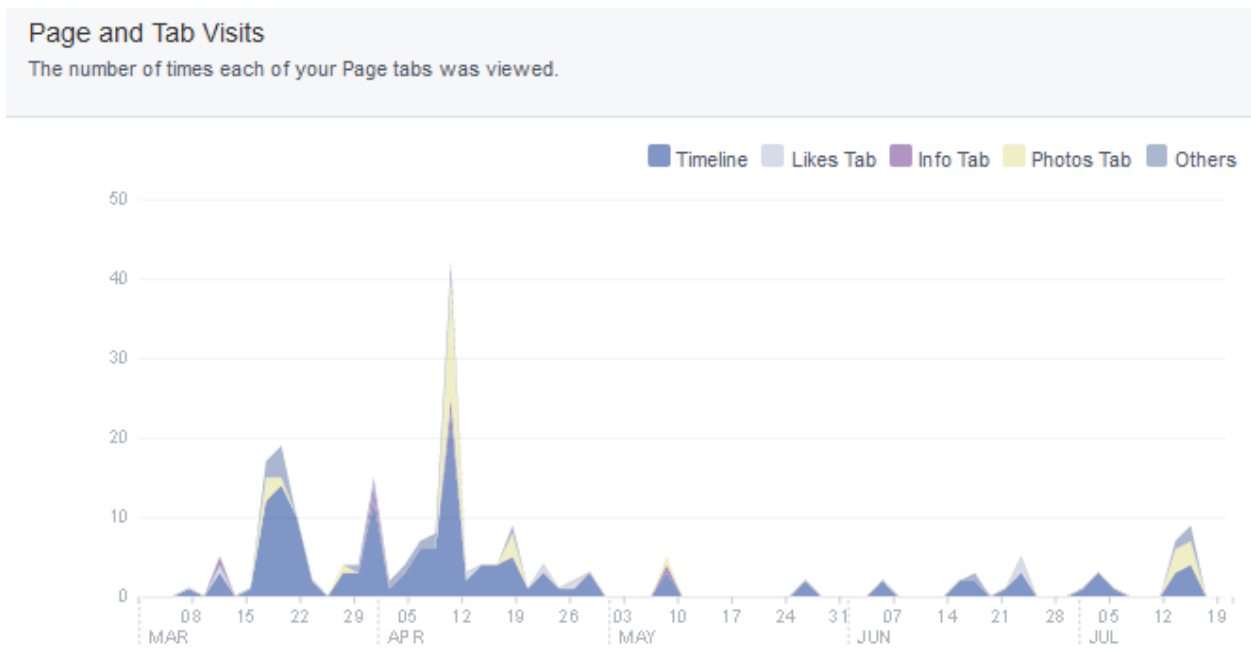


Figure 5: Facebook Statistics – Increase of page visits on Facebook during Holi Toledo



Figure 6: Increase of 30% of Likes on Facebook

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<http://asc.asuw.org/2014/04/28/holi-festival/>

<https://www.scrippscollege.edu/news/features/a-festival-of-colors>

<http://www.lafayette.edu/about/news/2014/04/15/photo-gallery-a-festival-of-colors/>

<http://www.uno.edu/news/2014/UNOCelebratesHoli.aspx>

<http://keene-equinox.com/2014/04/ksc-celebrates-in-festival-of-colors-holi/>

<http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/festival-of-colors-holi-spring-interfaith-celebration>

<http://dailybruin.com/2014/04/14/students-celebrate-cultural-connections-at-ucla-holi-festival/>

<http://thebluebanner.net/holi-festival-traditional-indian-festival-helps-unca-welcome-spring/>

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