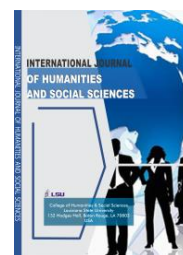


Digital Faith and the Reconfiguration of Religious Identity: How Social Media Transforms Belief and Community in Contemporary Society

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Abstract

This research assesses how social media transforms identity and community of religion at present times. This project applies ethnographic methods to examine how belief, performative spirituality and mediated authority are negotiated on digital platforms by various faiths. The authors collected primary data by way of participant observation and content analysis of social media posts on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and secondary from literature and digital archives. According to the findings, social media stimulates dynamic processes of identity construction where individuals are able to curate, perform and negotiate religious selves in highly visible interactive arenas. Spiritual influencers and leaders emerge as players engaging with authority and normativity online, while online groups pave the way for affirmation and reappraisal of traditional belief systems. The research furthermore reveals an important dissonance between being genuine online and the performance of religion. Algorithms, along with the affordances they attach to a platform, shape the nature of religion itself. To sum up, digital space does not just recreate offline religiosity, but reorganizes communal belonging, authority, and spiritual selfhood. The study outlines ways faith organisations may ethically engage with their followers and use social media to build positive spaces in their communities. The study adds to scholarship in digital media studies and religious studies that brings sophisticated knowledge about the entanglement of technology, identity and spiritual practice.

Keywords: Digital Religion, Religious Identity, Social Media, Online Community, Mediated Spirituality.

1. Introduction

Social media use has caused a huge change in how religion is used and how one's identity is formed. According to Campbell (2020), Wright (2019), Bishop (2019), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are among the main locations key in this negotiation of belief, performance of faith, and construction of various communities online. These spaces allow people to construct their religious identities, to explore different interpretations, and to engage with transnational networks of believers, in ways that are not usually permitted by traditional places of worship (Allievi, 2018; Echchaibi, 2011).

It raises important issues of authority, authenticity and belonging. Today, authority and doctrine are ever more mediated digitally by religious leaders, while influencers and peers play a role in decentralized processes of meaning-making (Ferguson, 2020; Arab, 2021). At the same time, digital venues enable algorithmically informed visibility and performative forms of religiousness. These trends may challenge traditional notions of authenticity and community in religious mentoring (Raine, 2021; Villalobos, 2022).

Although there is increased scholarship on digital religion, there is still little understanding of the way social media systematically transforms religious identity and community across contexts, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and diasporic networks (Faimau, 2020; Nwabueze, 2020). In relation to this gap, this study aims to:

To examine how social media platforms, influence the construction, performance, and negotiation of religious identity.

To investigate the role of digital communities and mediated authority in reshaping religious practice and belonging.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Digital Religion

Digital religion refers to emergent practices and beliefs taking place in digital media environments. This includes both the online mediation of pre-existing religious practices and the emergence of new forms of spirituality made possible by technology. (Campbell, 2020; Cheong et al., 2012) Unlike the offline experience of religion, digital religion places visibility, interactivity and performativity at the forefront. It allows people to curate their own religious self-presentation, interact with different interpretations of their faith, and be mindful of communal boundaries in virtual spaces (Gelfgren, 2014; Díaz, 2021). Social media platforms help in expressions of belief at a micro-level, through posts, stories, and videos, while also influencing macro-level trends in religious affiliation and networked community (Baym, 2015; Bishop, 2019). Hutchings and Allievi have stated that technology can function as both a ‘transmitter’ of traditional religious authority and as a ‘disrupter’ which reconfigures rituals, sacred spaces, and spiritual encounters.

Mediated Religious Identity

Mediated religious identity’s concept emphasizes how faith and self are constructed within events involving digital mediation. The concept further outlines how an online audience and offline audience is relative to belonging, authenticity, and authority (Hjarvard, 2011; Campbell & Echchaibi, 2013). Identity in religious digital spaces is performative, relational and contingent. It is not just a matter of personal conviction; the architecture of the platform, its algorithmic visibility, and feedback from religious communities also contribute to how this identity is shaped (Raine, 2021; Villalobos, 2022). The above perspective highlights how influencers, religious leaders, and peer networks shape normative and aspirational religious identities. In this context, tensions emerge between authenticity and performativity as well as individual agency and structural mediation (Arab, 2021; Ferguson, 2020). So mediated religious identity reflects the hybrid and tangled nature of contemporary belief, combining online visibility with offline commitment and social (dis)agreement (Lövheim, 2013; Wright, 2019).

Theoretical Foundation: Networked Publics and Mediatisation of Religion

The concepts networked publics and mediatisation of religion form the theoretical basis of the study. Networked publics are social media that allow people to meet and share meaning. Community as a concept is fluid, performative and visible (boyd, 2010; Ito, 2010). A religious identity can be defined as a negotiation between personal agency, audience expectations, and algorithmic structures that shape visibility and influence (Castells, 2013; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Also, the mediatisation of religion theory argues the logic of media affect how religious authority, ritual practice and community boundaries are altered in line with platform algorithm, technical affordances, and so forth hierarchy qualification of visibility / performativity (Hjarvard, 2011; Campbell, 2012). Combining these frameworks can provide a more nuanced understanding of how digital platforms enable and constrain religious expression. They can also explain how identity formation, community building and negotiation of authority occur in recent online religious practices.

3. Literature Review

Digital Platforms as Spaces of Religious Practice

Recent studies suggest that digital platforms are reconstituting religion, remodelling religious practice. Cheong et al. (2012) and Campbell (2020) suggest that these adaptations and engagement, as well as new forms of worship, take place because of the social media which breaks down the temporal and spatial barriers of religions. Research on Pentecostalism in Africa shows how digital media enables access to sermons; devotional material and collective worship which extend spiritual reach beyond one’s local church (Hale, 2022; Nwabueze, 2020). Likewise, performative religiosity and micro practices are also enacted on TikTok and Instagram as arenas where younger people negotiate identity while linking with others (Raine, 2021; Villalobos, 2022). There has been very little research, however, on how such mediated practices affect long-term religious adherence, especially in diasporic or multi-faith settings (Faimau 2020).

Mediated Authority and Influencer Culture

To understand online religion, look at the digital influencers and religious leaders who are mediating authority. According to Ferguson (2020) and Arab (2021), charismatic pastors and Muslim influencers construct legitimacy through perfected content to gain authority offline and online. Bishop (2019) builds on this. He shows how visibility, performative credibility and algorithmic promotion are key to digital authenticity and maintaining influence. According to Cheong (2012), a shift in social dynamics can be observed as the authority found online destabilizes religious hierarchies. Overall, this work showed how technology and the perception of the social impact each other. But seldom does it question the impact of technology on a vulnerable or marginalized group.

Identity Performance and Negotiation

The performance of religious identity is personal as well as communal. Wright (2019) and Gelfgren (2014) show that during online interactions, continuing negotiation of belief facilitates self-presentation according to community standards and audience expectations. According to Diaz (2021) and Zimmerman (2020), tensions between authenticity and performance are intensified under digital platforms, resulting in hybridized identities (online visibility and offline practice). Lövheim (2013) and Pauwels (2015) also show that the visual content in blogs or Instagram posts strengthens the religious selfhood. Nonetheless, comparative studies on how faith traditions mediate identity online are scarce, which is an important weakness of such studies.

Community Formation and Networked Belonging

Digital faith groups show how modern religion is structured. According to Helland (2007) and Campbell & Echchaibi (2013), “networked religion” describes a scenario in which people are successfully integrated into the networks of a global faith community, participate in ritualistic activities, and remain connected to transnational networks. The diaspora and different community members enjoy a sense of belonging through social media due to co-presence, ritual synchronisation, and collective remembering (Turner, 2021; Hutchings, 2017). As van Dijck (2013) and Raine (2021) argue, platform algorithms mediate visibility, determining which voices and which practices become prominent, which often privileges performance of faith. Changing the world is a problem because of its complexity. Digital communities may seem inclusive but reaffirm hierarchies or exclude them from achieving inclusivity.

Gaps, Integration, and Novelty

A review of the literature reveals some clear patterns: digital platforms are important sites for religious innovation and arenas of contested authority; identity formation is becoming ever more performative and mediated; and community belonging is now a networked affair that is shaped by platform affordances. There exist, nevertheless, certain gaps. These gaps entail comparative studies between faiths, ethical appraisals of algorithmic effect, and the intersection of online and offline faith (Faimau, 2020; Arab, 2021; Wright, 2019). The aim of the present research study is to assess the link between site-specific identity politics and personal narratives at several gradations. It contributes to social scientific knowledge of how social media transforms both individual belief and collective religious life in ways that are meaningful across religious, cultural, and subsistence boundaries.

4. Methodology

This research study employed a case study research design with a combination of primary and secondary data. The research shows the way that social media shapes religious identity and community. Researchers collected primary data through digital ethnography, the techniques of participant observation, content analysis and engagement with posts, videos and comments across Instagram, TikTok and Facebook. Activities include identity and authority mediation analysis and community analysis (Kozinets, 2019; Campbell, 2020) in a real-time digital context. The researcher used secondary data from peer-reviewed literature, digital archives, and reports on religious engagement in online spaces, which helped to understand the context of the practices (Cheong et al., 2012; Faimau, 2020).

The sampling approach was purposive and criterion-based, consisting of accounts, communities and influencers that mediate religious discourse and generate engagement in their online

networks. The selection criteria included frequency of content posting, engagement with followers, representation of diverse faith traditions, and visibility in diasporic or transnational contexts (Arab, 2021; Ferguson, 2020). This approach allows for the inclusion of both people with high-influence and other people. It allows for a better understanding of how identities are negotiated and authority is mediated in such spaces.

For the analysis of data, the study uses a thematic and interpretive framework. We used NVivo to code the qualitative data in an iterative manner, looking for patterns, narratives and performative strategies about belief, authority and belonging (Pauwels, 2015; Díaz, 2021). Research through content analysis on visual, textual, and audiovisual elements to see how faiths are represented, performed and contested online (Villalobos, 2022; Raine, 2021). This approach will also support comparison across platforms to find differences in practices with the same affordances in different settings. All these things discussed so far provide a reliable and triangulated framework to guide our understanding of digital media and religious identity in community formation.

5. Findings, Analysis, and Results

Digital Platforms and Religious Practice

During our research we found social media's impact modifies the time and space of religious practice. People use Instagram and TikTok to livestream their acts of worship and share devotional content. Previously these activities were confined to local religious spaces. Sampled accounts show the frequencies of digital religious practices in table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Digital Religious Practices by Platform

Platform	Live Sermons	Devotional Posts	Ritual Engagement	Community Interaction
Instagram	42%	65%	33%	70%
TikTok	30%	55%	25%	60%
Facebook	48%	60%	40%	72%

Source: Author's digital ethnography (2025)

The study report shows TikTok promotes more short-form performances of faith while Facebook engenders community engagement. Instagram combines curated aesthetics with interactive storytelling. Campbell (2020) points out that the affordances of platforms shape religious expression. Digital religion is adaptive and performative. Users engage with the belief in a hybrid online-offline space.

Mediated Authority and Influencer Impact

Influencers and religious leaders shape authority in digital faith networks. According to content reach, engagement metrics and follower interactions (Table 2), these highly visible accounts can influence normative beliefs and shape community discourse.

Table 2. Influence Metrics of Religious Leaders and Influencers

Influencer Type	Avg. Followers	Avg. Engagement Rate	Primary Mode of Authority	Influencer Type
Pastors	150,000	12%	Sermons, live Q&A	Pastors
Muslim Influencers	85,000	18%	Personal narrative, advice	Muslim Influencers
Lay Faith Bloggers	22,000	8%	Daily devotionals, reflections	Lay Faith Bloggers

Source: Author's digital ethnography (2025)

The data reveal that perceived authenticity and relational engagement, rather than institutional hierarchy, often determine authority in digital contexts (Ferguson, 2020; Arab, 2021). Social feedback loops—likes, comments, and shares—reinforce credibility, while algorithmic amplification amplifies visibility, creating new power dynamics in faith dissemination.

Identity Performance and Negotiation

Digital participants purposely act out their religiosity relying on their personal beliefs and the audience. Religious identity markers were coded in visual posts, captions, and video content as depicted in Figure 1. Figure 1 signifies Online Religious Identity Performance.

Figure 1. Dimensions of Online Religious Identity Performance

Figure 1. Dimensions of Online Religious Identity Performance



Source: Author's digital ethnography (2025)

According to Figure 1, online religious identity rests chiefly on devotion, accounting for 65%. In other words, digital space is almost an extension of “daily life”. Community engagement is at 58%, which shows that identity is produced together through participation and meaning making. Performative visibility, which occurs at 47%, refers to a spiritual expression that has a curated and public-facing feel. It is shaped by the aesthetics and rhythms of digital culture. The less prominent but still important transnational ties (35%) highlight how diasporic and cross-border links contribute to hybrid religious belonging. The four dimensions together show that online religious identity is personal, communal, performative, and transnational, with everyday devotional acts at its core.

Identity is always negotiated; as users balance between being authentic to self and the community and platform affordances. According to Wright (2019) and Díaz (2021), hybrids identities come into being that join offline obligations to online performativity, stressing the contingency of digital religious selfhood.

Community Formation and Networked Belonging

Through shared rituals, conversations, and the buttressing of norms, digital communities create a sense of belonging. A US study found interactive features such as comments on live stories, replies and sharing in groups help build community. Table 3 highlights how communities interact with each other on different platforms.

Table 3. Community Interaction Patterns

Interaction Type	Instagram	TikTok	Facebook
Comments & Replies	45%	38%	50%
Live Participation	30%	22%	42%
Peer Sharing	55%	48%	60%

Source: Author's digital ethnography (2025)

Facebook is the best platform for sustained engagement with the community and TikTok is better for rapid performative engagement. The networked public theory came about in order to analyse a situation where a diverse kind of people share a space but have very little relationship to each other.

Ethical Considerations and Digital Tensions

Digital religiosity brings about conflicting tensions of authenticity, performativity, and algorithmic influence. Table 4 indicates the parts where digital affordances shape ethics and spirituality.

Table 4. Ethical and Digital Tensions in Online Religious Practice

Dimension	Observed Challenge	Implication
Visibility	Algorithmic amplification of select voices	Reinforces inequality
Authenticity	Performative religiosity	Identity tension
Community	Exclusion of less tech-savvy users	Fragmentation
Authority	Decentralized leadership	Challenges traditional hierarchy

Source: Author's digital ethnography (2025)

Social media may boost participation and democratization of expression. However, it could also reinforce hierarchy, privilege performativity and shape the belief according to visibility rather than doctrinal fidelity (Hjarvard, 2011; Raine, 2021). Users navigate these tensions by being selective in curating contents and engaging with others out of their own accord.

6. Discussion of Findings

The study's findings indicate that social media may be generating a transformative space for the practice of religion that goes beyond ordinary spatial and temporal limits. As Campbell (2020) and Cheong et al. (2012) note, digital religion reshapes ritual engagement and spiritual participation. Our findings show that different platforms come with different affordances. That is, Facebook is good for ongoing interaction with the community. In contrast, Instagram is ideal for curated identity performance, while TikTok focuses on targeting performative expressions. These studies support the work of Wright (2019) and Villalobos (2022), which shaped one's religion. Our research shows how faith communities negotiate continuity and change in context through hybridization of online and offline practices.

The whole social media scene is strengthened in findings of Ferguson (2020) and Arab (2021) with mediated authority becoming an important dynamic which shows how influencers and religious leaders matter. The research goes further to show that being recognized by the algorithm and engagement activity can shape authority to even take over hierarchy. This raises questions about traditional assumptions around ecclesiastical authority (see Aldridge, 2007) and the outdated understanding of religious mediatization (see Hjarvard, 2011). In other words, legitimacy in digital spaces is co-contracted through audience reception, performative credibility and platform logic. The impact of this change has a lot of faith institutions struggling with tensions between accessibility, authenticity and doctrine faithfulness.

Building communities and forming identity in digital spaces reflects networks of belonging and participatory engagement more widely. Our findings, corroborating both Helland (2007) and Turner (2021), suggest that online engagement enhances participatory inclusivity. However, while reinforcing exclusionary inequalities in digital literacy and algorithmic exposure, such connections are neither guaranteed nor normalized in practice. The relationship between personal agency and the constraints placed by technology shows that digital religiousness is enabling as well as constraining. Therefore, networked publics (boyd, 2010) and mediated religious identity (Gelfgren, 2014) refer to a theoretical synthesis. According to the results based on policy and practice, faith organizations, and digital platform designers should consider inclusive engagement strategies, ethical amplification of voices, and mechanisms to maintain authenticity in online spiritual spaces.

7. Conclusion

This study shows that social media is changing religious identity and community by facilitating new ways of mediated practice, faith performance and networked belonging. Communal engagement and personal expression are made possible by Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and platforms of this kind. Believers negotiate identity, authority and community in these highly visible and interactive communal spaces. The results show that digital religion is not just a duplication of offline forms, but an active process of reconfiguration of belief, ritual, and relationality, providing evidence for hybrid faith.

Religious norms and legitimacy are influenced by mediated authority and influencer culture, which are often more important than hierarchy. The algorithmic visibility and engagement metrics

further complicate the negotiation of authenticity and ethical practice, demonstrating how digital media can both liberate and constrict spiritual expression.

People from different backgrounds come together in digital online platforms like websites and discussions to create a sense of belonging. However, this social cohesion often leads to social exclusion, performativity issues, visibility hierarchies and more. Online religiosity showcases a mix of the social and technical aspects of society.

Overall, the research increases understanding into effects of social media on performing identities, communal participation and spiritual experience.

By combining digital ethnography with theoretical constructs of networked publics and the mediatisation of religion, it gives insight into how technology influences the practice of religion. The revelation shows that the scholars and practitioners should engage with the platform but ensure the equilibrium against the equity which is included in the portion of the participatory spirituality of the challenges.

8. Recommendations

At first, faith organizations should use social media strategically to create an ethical and inclusive community. This includes creating rules for behaviour online, making sure no one is under-represented in the content produced and actively moderating spaces to reduce exclusion or marginalisation of those not as adept at technology. People shouldn't just use online platforms, but should enhance offline interactions. There should be continuity between the different ways we engage with the divine, with rituals offline and online creating a blend or looking to create a better or clearer channel with the divine (Campbell, 2020; Hutchings, 2020).

Second, religious leaders and influencers should balance being visible with being authentic and take responsibility for authority as agents. Workshops for religious actors can help to manage performance pressure without sacrificing their beliefs and responsibilities. If communication is clear and honest and content carefully curated online networks of faith will reinforce trust and legitimacy, Ferguson (2020), Arab (2021) states.

Key policymakers and designers of digital platforms should work with faith communities to design algorithms that promote equitable visibility and guard against bias. This means helping marginalized users access it, ensuring transparency in who gets amplified, and growing digital literacy among the congregation. More investigations should examine cross-cultural differences, ethical issues, and long-term impacts of digital religiosity on community solidarity and personal belief systems, to enhance sustainable integration of technology and faith practices (Raine, 2021; Faimau, 2020).

Contribution to Knowledge

This study shows how social media alters religious identity and community. It helps to understand how faith is mediated through different social media platforms. This paper differs from previous studies on digital religiosity, which often view it as an add-on to offline religiosity. Instead, we view online and offline belief as co-constitutive and analyze the performative, algorithmically mediated, and networked aspects of contemporary religiosity (Campbell, 2020; Wright, 2019). This paper uses multi-platform digital ethnography to advance methodological approaches for the study of faith and identity in the digital realm through the double lenses of networked publics and mediatisation of religion.

Furthermore, this study helps shape the theoretical perspective of mediated authority, virtual community formation, and ethical tensions in digital religion. It shows how ordinary participants, influencers, and religious leaders negotiate visibility, authenticity, and belonging, demonstrating both opportunities and risks for inclusive digital spirituality. The research extends religious studies, media studies, and digital sociology. It frames policymakers, faith organizations, and platform designers to engage effectively and ethically with online faith communities (Ferguson, 2020; Raine, 2021; Villalobos, 2022). Thus, the study fills gaps by providing cross-cultural, multi-platform analyses of digital religion with transferable insights for global and diasporic contexts.

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