



Exploring the Lived Experience of Religious Identity Construction Among Muslim Women in Digital Spaces

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 28-05-2025

Revised 07-07-2025

Accepted 17-07-2025

Keyword:

Muslim Women, Religious Identity, Digital Media, Online Religiosity, Modesty, Algorithmic Pressure, Phenomenology, Social Media

ABSTRACT

The intersection of religion, culture, and digital media has become a critical field of inquiry in understanding how faith is expressed and negotiated in contemporary life. Within this landscape, the religious identity of Muslim women in online spaces remains underexplored, particularly from the lens of their lived experience. While prior research has examined digital piety through visual representation and discourse analysis, little is known about how Muslim women internally interpret and emotionally navigate their religious expression in algorithmic environments. This study addresses the question: How do Muslim women experience and construct their religious identity on social media platforms shaped by sociocultural expectations and algorithmic visibility? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study explores the reflective and affective dimensions of online religiosity. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven urban Indonesian Muslim women and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The findings reveal four core themes: digital modesty, sincerity under surveillance, algorithmic pressure, and communal judgment, each reflecting the complex negotiation between personal faith and public performance. These themes illustrate how religious identity is actively lived, mediated, and reinterpreted within digital environments that both enable and constrain self-expression. The study highlights the emotional labor and moral agency involved in being visibly religious in a technologically curated space. These insights advance our understanding of contemporary Muslim religiosity and offer a phenomenological foundation for future research on digital faith, identity, and gender across sociotechnical contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the intersection between religion, culture, and digital technology has become a fertile ground for academic inquiry, particularly in examining how religious identity is constructed and expressed in online spaces. As digital platforms increasingly mediate daily life, they also reshape the ways individuals engage with spiritual practices and communal beliefs. Among these transformations, Muslim women's experiences stand at a particularly complex nexus of tradition, visibility, and modernity.

Within the broader social and cultural context, the visibility of Muslim women in digital environments has sparked diverse conversations, ranging from debates on modesty and authenticity to questions of empowerment and performativity. These women often navigate competing expectations: religious devotion on one hand and social media norms on the other. While earlier studies have primarily emphasized the visual display of piety (e.g., images of veiling or Quranic quotes), they often overlook the internal processes of negotiation, reflection, and affect (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Baker & Harms, 2020). This study builds on these gaps by attending to the micro-level, subjective experiences that shape digital religious identity.

Rather than merely reiterating the visibility of religiosity online, this research foregrounds the interpretive and affective dimensions of Muslim women's engagement with digital spaces—dimensions that remain underexplored despite their centrality to identity formation (van Doorn, 2011; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Such navigation occurs not only in public discourse but also in the intimate, reflective spaces of individual meaning-making and identity negotiation.

The significance of this phenomenon extends beyond its visual representations or online interactions. It touches upon core aspects of human experience belief, belonging, autonomy, and moral responsibility. Importantly, the rise of algorithmic culture complicates this landscape by introducing an unseen layer of influence—one that subtly prioritizes certain types of content and behaviors (Gillespie, 2014; Noble, 2018), thereby affecting what is seen, liked, or amplified. In this sense, religious identity online is not simply expressed but also curated and constrained through sociotechnical processes. Despite a growing body of literature exploring Islamic representation in digital contexts, there remains a notable gap in understanding the lived, subjective experiences of Muslim women as they engage with these platforms. Much of the existing scholarship tends to analyze content rather than context, symbols rather than stories, and appearance rather than interpretation.

Consequently, there is a pressing need to explore how Muslim women make sense of their religious expressions in the digital sphere not just how they are portrayed, but how they feel, interpret, and internalize these experiences. Phenomenology, with its commitment to capturing the richness and depth of lived experience, offers a suitable lens for examining these meanings as they are lived and embodied by individuals. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how faith is lived in mediated spaces, grounded in the real, reflective voices of those who inhabit them.

Research focusing on the lived experiences of individuals navigating religious identity in the digital age has increasingly gained scholarly attention, particularly within the domains of digital religion, cultural studies, and gender discourse. As Muslim women continue to assert their presence across social media platforms, their experiences offer rich, layered insights into how religious values, cultural norms, and technological affordances intersect in shaping identity and belief.

However, capturing the depth and complexity of such experiences presents notable methodological challenges. Many existing studies rely on quantitative tools such as surveys or social media analytics, which are often limited in their ability to illuminate the affective, existential, and interpretive dimensions of identity construction. While these methods may highlight patterns of representation or general user behavior, they frequently fall short in uncovering the personal meanings, internal negotiations, and moral tensions that shape how individuals embody religiosity online.

Furthermore, prior research tends to emphasize observable phenomena such as the aesthetics of hijab representation or patterns of religious posting without sufficiently engaging with the inner, subjective realities of the users themselves. This approach risks reducing religious identity to mere visual or textual outputs, overlooking the nuanced processes of self-reflection, spiritual struggle, and cultural adaptation that occur beneath the surface.

Given these limitations, previous methods appear insufficient for fully grasping the essence of digital religious experience, particularly as lived by Muslim women navigating highly mediated and culturally charged spaces. A qualitative, phenomenological perspective is thus essential for capturing the depth of meaning embedded in their experiences going beyond appearance to uncover the interpretive structures that inform their digital expressions of faith.

In addressing the phenomenon of religious identity construction among Muslim women in digital spaces, most existing research has adopted practical frameworks rooted in media representation theory, digital literacy, or sociological models of online behavior. These studies often utilize tools such as content analysis, discourse analysis, or surveys to examine how religious values are expressed and negotiated on platforms like Instagram or TikTok. While such approaches offer valuable insights into patterns of religious symbolism, trends in visual representation, or the influence of online communities, they largely remain confined to surface-level observations.

A major limitation of these conventional approaches lies in their inability to capture the subjective, emotional, and existential layers of participants' experiences. The nuances of inner conflict, spiritual reflection, and identity negotiation especially as lived by Muslim women navigating algorithmically mediated environments are often reduced or overlooked entirely. The overreliance on observable data and quantifiable patterns results in an incomplete understanding of the rich, personal meanings that underlie digital expressions of faith.

This gap calls for a methodological shift that prioritizes the voices, perspectives, and lived realities of those who experience the phenomenon firsthand. A phenomenological approach, particularly the interpretative tradition, offers a powerful alternative by emphasizing the meaning structures that individuals assign to their experiences. Rather than analyzing what is merely visible or measurable, phenomenology seeks to explore how religious identity is consciously lived, emotionally felt, and reflectively constructed within specific sociocultural and technological contexts.

By centering the subjective dimension of experience, phenomenology allows for a more holistic and human-centered understanding of how Muslim women perceive, embody, and articulate their faith in digital settings. It opens space for themes such as spiritual struggle, authenticity, and the affective tensions of online visibility to emerge organically from participants' own narratives thereby enriching academic knowledge with depth, context, and meaning that previous models have failed to fully uncover.

Previous research has explored the presence of Muslim women on social media, often focusing on visual representation, religious branding, and public discourse. Studies such as those by Jones (2021) and Nisa (2020) have analyzed how Muslim women use digital platforms to express piety, but mostly from a representational or content-driven perspective. These works provide important insights into patterns and symbols but fall short in uncovering how women themselves interpret and live these expressions. Very few studies center on the lived, personal experiences behind digital religious identity. This indicates a gap in understanding the deeper meaning-making processes shaped by both faith and digital environments.

This study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore how Muslim women construct religious identity in digital spaces. The method was selected to capture the emotional, reflective, and existential dimensions of their experiences. IPA allows participants' voices to lead the analysis, offering nuanced insight into how they negotiate faith, modesty, and public visibility online. Through this approach, the study responds to the limitations of prior methods and provides a richer understanding of how identity is lived and interpreted. The phenomenological lens brings depth to the exploration of what it means to be visibly religious in algorithmic spaces.

This article begins with an introduction to the phenomenon and its broader social context. It then presents the methodological framework, including the phenomenological perspective and rationale for choosing IPA. The following sections detail the process of data collection and thematic analysis. The findings are organized thematically, with participant quotes used to support each theme. The discussion and conclusion reflect on the meaning of these experiences and their implications for digital religious life.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Muslim women in constructing religious identity within digital spaces. Phenomenology, rooted in philosophical traditions, focuses on understanding how individuals perceive and make sense of their personal experiences. Specifically, the interpretative variant (informed by Heideggerian hermeneutics) was adopted to uncover the subjective meanings embedded in participants' narratives, emphasizing the contextual, relational, and existential dimensions of their online religiosity.

This design was chosen to allow in-depth examination of how participants interpret and internalize their interactions with digital religious symbols, communities, and algorithms. The approach facilitated an exploration of the phenomenon beyond surface-level descriptions, enabling access to deeper layers of belief, tension, and meaning construction.

Participants

Participants consisted of Muslim women who actively engaged with social media platforms and shared content related to religious identity or expression. Selection was conducted through purposive sampling, ensuring relevance to the phenomenon under investigation.

Inclusion criteria comprised: (1) self-identification as a practicing Muslim woman; (2) aged between 20 and 35 years; (3) active use of at least one social media platform (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, or Twitter) for religious expression in the past six months; and (4) willingness to share personal experiences related to online religious engagement. Individuals who did not publicly reflect on their religious identity or who had been inactive online for more than six months were excluded.

A total of seven participants were included, all residing in urban areas across Indonesia. The average age was 27 years, with varied educational and professional backgrounds, ranging from university students to digital content creators. This diversity enriched the contextual understanding of how digital religiosity intersects with cultural and social factors.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by a flexible protocol that encouraged narrative openness. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via secure online video calls, depending on participant preference and location, ensuring accessibility and comfort.

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a setting chosen by the participant to promote psychological safety and confidentiality. All sessions were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide included open-ended questions addressing digital religious engagement, feelings about visibility and modesty online, algorithmic influence, and experiences of community or exclusion in digital spaces.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, with no new meanings emerging in the final interviews. Participants were invited to review their transcripts to ensure accuracy and authenticity (member checking).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following the stepwise approach proposed by Smith et al. (2009). Transcripts were read repeatedly to gain familiarity, followed by initial noting of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments.

Meaning units were identified, coded, and clustered into emergent themes. These themes were then organized across cases to identify shared patterns and divergent experiences. NVivo 12 software was utilized to assist with data organization and retrieval, although interpretative decisions were made based on manual thematic synthesis.

The analytical process aimed to uncover essential meanings by examining how participants made sense of their digital religious practices, negotiating between personal faith and public presence. Each theme was supported by verbatim excerpts to ensure transparency and depth of interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assurances of voluntary participation, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any point.

Personal identifiers were removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were assigned to ensure confidentiality. All procedures adhered to the ethical guidelines set by the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant local standards for research involving human subjects.

RESULTS

This study explored the lived experiences of Muslim women in constructing their religious identity in digital spaces. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis, four major themes emerged that captured the participants' reflections, struggles, and negotiations in navigating their online religious presence.

The Digital Veil – Negotiating Visibility and Modesty

Participants frequently described their experience of "wearing the hijab" online as an act fraught with internal negotiations about modesty, visibility, and public judgment. While the digital space provided a platform for self-expression, it also introduced heightened scrutiny, often more intense than in physical spaces.

"Sometimes I feel wearing the hijab on Instagram is heavier than in real life. One photo, one caption, and people start judging whether I'm pious enough." (P3)

This theme reflected a perceived tension between spiritual authenticity and social expectation, as the digital realm blurred the boundaries between private belief and public performance.

Curated Piety – Between Sincerity and Self-Branding

A recurrent dilemma among participants was the conflict between sincere religious expression and the unintended creation of a personal religious brand. Many women expressed concern that their online posts though stemming from genuine faith could be interpreted as self-promotion.

"I post Quran verses because they speak to me, not because I want to look religious. But I'm afraid people will think I'm doing it for likes." (P1)

This theme revealed the algorithmic pressure to maintain consistent engagement, subtly pushing participants toward patterns of self-censorship or overcuration in expressing their beliefs.

Sacred Algorithms – Feeling Watched by More Than Just God

Participants described a dual form of surveillance: divine accountability and digital audience visibility. The constant awareness of being observed not only by peers but also by an invisible algorithm was psychologically and spiritually taxing.

"It feels like Allah is watching me, but so is Instagram. The algorithm watches how long I stay on a religious post. It's strange." (P5)

This emergent theme illustrated the spiritual implications of algorithmic curation, where religious engagement became entangled with data tracking and platform logic, influencing both content consumption and production.

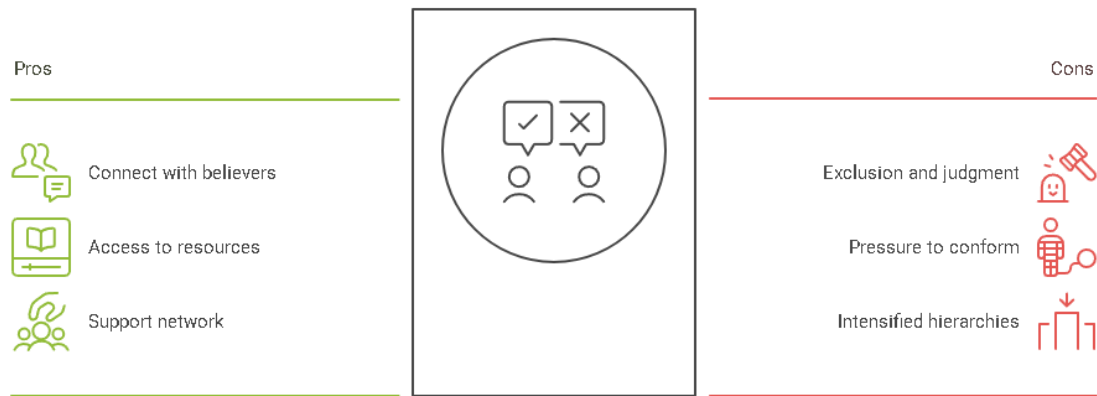
Community and Contradiction – Finding and Losing Solidarity

While digital spaces offered opportunities to connect with fellow believers, participants also reported experiences of exclusion, judgment, and fragmented solidarity. The notion of an ideal Muslim woman, often shaped by dominant narratives, created pressure and emotional fatigue.

"I joined a Muslim women's online group, but I left after a month. There was too much judging about who was 'really' religious." (P2)

Despite the intended inclusivity of such platforms, many participants felt that the community dynamics online often mirrored, and sometimes intensified, existing societal hierarchies and religious dogmas.

Online Muslim communities



The lived experiences of Muslim women in constructing their religious identity online reflect a continuous negotiation of faith, authenticity, and social presence. These narratives reveal the layered complexities of being religious in a digital world where belief is performed, judged, and mediated not only by community norms but also by platform algorithms. The findings suggest that the construction of online religiosity is not simply an act of self-expression but a reflective, and at times, burdensome process shaped by the intersection of faith, culture, and technology.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed four core themes that illuminate how Muslim women construct and navigate their religious identity in digital spaces: negotiating visibility and modesty, curating sincerity amidst algorithmic pressures, experiencing dual surveillance, and seeking community while confronting exclusion. These themes collectively address the central research question by showing that digital religiosity is a deeply personal yet socially and technologically mediated experience.

These results provide a nuanced answer to how Muslim women experience and interpret their religious identity online. Rather than simply adopting or resisting online religious norms, participants engaged in continuous negotiation with themselves, their audiences, and the algorithmic systems shaping their visibility. This study contributes uniquely to the field by uncovering the internal tensions and reflective processes that are often masked by outward expressions of piety. It demonstrates that the performance of faith online is not only a public act but also an intimate spiritual journey shaped by sociocultural expectations and technological affordances.

In comparison to previous studies such as those by Jones (2021), which examined digital hijab cultures through the lens of representation, and Nisa (2020), who analyzed Muslim women's engagement with piety politics, this study advances the discourse by foregrounding lived experience rather than symbolic display. The interpretative phenomenological approach provided a deeper insight into the emotional labor, moral considerations, and affective dilemmas experienced by participants. These findings are in alignment with Mahmood's (2017) theoretical proposition of religious agency as embodied and situated, yet they also extend it into the algorithmic domain, where spiritual expression is filtered and shaped by invisible digital logics. Thus, this research adds to the literature by highlighting the entanglement of faith, gender, and technology from an experiential standpoint, offering a richer, more contextualized understanding of contemporary Muslim religiosity.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study offer both scholarly and practical implications for understanding the dynamic interplay between religion, gender, and technology. At a sociocultural level, they underscore how Muslim women's online expressions of religiosity are shaped not only by internal convictions but also by external forces such as digital visibility norms and algorithmic systems. This contributes to a broader understanding of how faith is performed and experienced in contemporary digital life, offering insights for religious scholars, digital sociologists, and cultural practitioners. On a practical level, these insights may inform community leaders, educators, and platform designers about

the emotional and ethical dimensions of religious identity negotiation in online spaces. The emergent themes provide a lens to better support digital religious expression that honors both spiritual integrity and contextual complexity, especially among marginalized or scrutinized faith groups.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The sample was relatively small and demographically homogeneous, composed primarily of urban, educated Muslim women in Indonesia, which may affect the transferability of the findings to other contexts. As is characteristic of phenomenological research, the goal was not to generalize but to provide deep insight into lived experience; however, variations across geographical, denominational, or socioeconomic contexts were not fully captured. The reliance on self-reported narratives and retrospective reflection may also introduce interpretive bias or selective memory. Additionally, the study focused on experiences within a specific socio-technological framework, limiting the exploration of how different digital platforms or religious traditions might shape identity in distinct ways.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could build on these findings by exploring similar experiences across a broader range of cultural and technological contexts, including Muslim women in diasporic communities or in regions with different religious dynamics. Comparative studies involving multiple religious traditions could also provide a richer understanding of how algorithmic environments influence spiritual expression across belief systems. Additionally, longitudinal studies may offer insight into how digital religious identity evolves over time, particularly as platform cultures and sociopolitical discourses shift. Finally, integrating interdisciplinary perspectives from theology, media studies, and gender theory can further deepen the analysis of how digital environments mediate personal and collective faith in the modern era.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Muslim women construct and navigate their religious identity in digital spaces shaped by social expectations and algorithmic influence. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, the research uncovered four major themes: digital modesty, curated sincerity, algorithmic surveillance, and community tensions. These findings reveal that digital religiosity is a reflective and dynamic process, shaped by both internal convictions and external technological pressures.

Rather than merely reiterating the visual and performative aspects documented in prior studies, this research offers a more nuanced understanding of how religious identity is emotionally and morally negotiated under conditions of algorithmic mediation. By foregrounding subjective experiences, the study contributes to ongoing conversations in digital religion, gender studies, and cultural analysis. However, this study is limited by its sample size and cultural specificity—focusing on urban Indonesian Muslim women—which may constrain the generalizability of its findings. A broader cross-cultural comparison could reveal additional layers of complexity in how faith is digitally enacted.

Notably, one novel insight emerging from this research is the concept of ‘curated sincerity’, which captures how religious expression is simultaneously authentic and strategically managed in response to digital visibility. This concept offers a potential entry point for theorizing agency and piety in sociotechnical environments. Future research may expand on these insights across diverse cultural or religious contexts to further explore how digital environments shape faith and identity over time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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