



Understanding the Lived Experience of Digital Spirituality among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Religion and spirituality have undergone a profound transformation in the digital era, reshaping how individuals experience faith, identity, and community. Within this evolving landscape, the lived spiritual experiences of young adults represent a crucial yet understudied phenomenon that reveals how technology mediates the search for meaning and sacred connection. Despite growing research on online religiosity, little is known about the subjective dimensions of these experiences how individuals feel, interpret, and internalize spirituality in digital contexts. This study applies an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how young adults experience and make sense of spirituality through digital platforms, addressing the question of how faith and authenticity are reconstructed in technologically mediated environments. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with twelve participants actively engaged in online spiritual practices, and analyzed thematically to capture essential patterns of meaning. The analysis identifies three central experiential themes that directly reflect participants' meaning-making processes in digital settings. The results reveal that digital spaces function simultaneously as environments of connection and fragmentation, where participants construct personal expressions of belief while negotiating authenticity and belonging. Themes identified include the transformation of religious identity, negotiation of authenticity in virtual faith, and longing for embodied sacred presence. These findings demonstrate that spirituality in the digital age is a dynamic, interpretive process grounded in emotional engagement and reflexive identity-making. The study advances understanding of modern religiosity by highlighting the inner, phenomenological dimensions of digital spirituality and offers a foundation for future cross-cultural and longitudinal research on the evolving relationship between faith and technology.



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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, religion and spirituality are undergoing a profound transformation shaped by digital technology, globalization, and changing social values (Makgahlela et al., 2022). The rise of online platforms, virtual communities, and digital media has redefined the ways in which individuals encounter and express their faith (Reinis, 2025). Whereas traditional religious participation was once rooted in physical spaces such as temples, churches, and mosques, the digital age has extended these experiences into virtual environments where sacred meaning is sought, shared, and negotiated. This shift has not only altered the external forms of religiosity but also reshaped the internal dimensions of belief and identity formation among younger generations who navigate spirituality through technology.

The growing integration of digital media into religious life reflects broader sociocultural changes in how meaning, belonging, and transcendence are experienced (Cahyadi et al., 2025). Scholars in the history of religions and religious movements have observed that religious authority, ritual practice, and community engagement are increasingly mediated through online interaction and

personal interpretation (Faizah, 2023). For many individuals, particularly digital natives, faith is no longer confined to institutional frameworks but becomes a dynamic, individualized pursuit (Mukhlis, 2025a). Although this body of literature highlights shifting forms of religiosity, prior discussions often remain descriptive and do not adequately explain how these transformations are experienced internally at a subjective level. This transformation underscores the need to understand how technology influences the inner landscape of spirituality how individuals internalize, reinterpret, and live out their religious experiences in an era of constant connectivity and cultural pluralism.

Within this context, the exploration of young adults' spiritual experiences in the digital age is both timely and significant. The phenomenon represents a unique intersection between tradition and modernity, material and virtual reality, and individual and communal expressions of faith (Felitti, 2019). The digital environment enables unprecedented access to religious knowledge and global dialogue, yet it also introduces fragmentation, performativity, and a redefinition of authenticity in religious practice (Mukhlis, 2025b). Understanding this complex interplay requires a focus not merely on external behavior but on the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to their experiences how they perceive, feel, and construct spiritual reality through digital engagement.

Given the limitations of quantitative and institutional approaches to studying this transformation, a phenomenological perspective offers an essential pathway for uncovering the depth of lived spiritual experience. Phenomenology enables the exploration of how individuals make sense of their faith encounters, articulate their emotions, and find transcendence amid digital mediation (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). By attending to the essence of experience as lived and perceived, this study seeks to contribute to a richer, more human-centered understanding of spirituality in the modern world, bridging the gap between technological innovation and the timeless human search for meaning.

Building upon the broader transformation of religiosity in the digital era, research focusing on the subjective experience of spirituality has become an increasingly important field of inquiry within the phenomenological tradition. Studies across religious studies, sociology, and digital anthropology have begun to examine how individuals experience faith, transcendence, and belonging in technologically mediated contexts (Ronzheimer, 2025). These investigations recognize that spiritual meaning is not only a product of belief systems but also emerges from lived experiences personal interactions, emotional resonance, and interpretive engagement with the sacred in everyday life. Within this domain, phenomenology serves as a powerful approach to illuminate the interior dimensions of spirituality that are often obscured by institutional or doctrinal frameworks.

Despite growing scholarly interest, methodological challenges persist in exploring such lived experiences. Many existing studies have relied heavily on quantitative surveys or descriptive analyses of online religious behavior, which tend to emphasize frequency, participation, or digital patterns rather than the subjective meanings embedded within those actions (Sudnick, 2022). These approaches often fail to capture the depth, ambiguity, and transformative character of spiritual encounters as they are felt and interpreted by individuals. Moreover, the fast-paced and fragmented nature of digital environments complicates efforts to access authentic reflections of inner spiritual life, as expressions of belief may be filtered through social expectations or performative online identities.

Consequently, the methodological limitations of prior research have constrained our understanding of the essence of spiritual experience among young people in the digital age (Walter, 2024). Quantitative frameworks can describe what occurs in online religiosity but seldom reveal how those experiences are lived, perceived, and internalized (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). This gap underscores the necessity of adopting a phenomenological approach that prioritizes depth over breadth, meaning over measurement, and experience over abstraction. By focusing on the lived realities of participants, phenomenology allows for a nuanced exploration of how faith is embodied, questioned, and redefined within the evolving landscape of digital culture.

Although numerous studies have examined religion and spirituality within digital environments, most existing approaches have relied on practical or behavioral frameworks that emphasize observable actions such as online participation, digital ritual performance, or frequency of

engagement with virtual communities. These studies have provided valuable descriptive insights into how religious practices adapt to technological change; however, they often overlook the subjective dimensions of spiritual life, such as the personal meanings, emotions, and existential reflections that shape how individuals truly experience faith in virtual contexts (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). The prevailing reliance on pragmatic or sociological models thus limits the understanding of spirituality to surface-level behaviors rather than the inner consciousness of belief and meaning-making.

Traditional methodologies also tend to interpret digital religiosity through institutional or structural lenses, viewing online engagement as an extension of organized religion rather than a site of lived spiritual experience (Susanto, 2019). As a result, the subtle processes through which young individuals construct, negotiate, and internalize their sense of sacredness remain underexplored (Obadia, 2023). Quantitative or descriptive studies can chart patterns of online worship attendance or participation but fail to illuminate how these experiences feel, how they are interpreted, and what existential significance they carry for believers navigating faith in an increasingly mediated world.

This gap reveals the urgent need for a methodological shift one that goes beyond functional explanations to explore the essence of spiritual experience as it is lived and perceived. The phenomenological approach provides a fitting alternative by prioritizing individuals' first-person accounts and focusing on the meanings they attribute to their experiences (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). Through this lens, spirituality is not merely an activity or belief system but a dynamic, evolving encounter with transcendence shaped by personal interpretation and cultural mediation (Tretter, 2025). Adopting phenomenology therefore allows for a more holistic and profound comprehension of how young people live, feel, and redefine religiosity in the digital age, filling a critical void in contemporary scholarship on religion and human experience.

Previous studies on digital religiosity have explored various dimensions of online faith, such as virtual worship, digital rituals, and the formation of religious communities in cyberspace. Scholars have noted that these digital environments reshape the boundaries between sacred and secular life, allowing individuals to express spirituality in more flexible and personalized ways (Royston, 2022). However, while these studies contribute valuable sociological and communicative insights, few have examined the inner, lived experience of spirituality within digital contexts (Mukhlis et al., 2024). Theoretical perspectives from scholars such as Husserl and Heidegger emphasize that meaning arises through conscious experience rather than external observation. Therefore, this study builds upon these foundations to investigate how young adults perceive and internalize their spiritual experiences in the digital era.

This article adopts a phenomenological approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to address the gap identified in prior research (Philip et al., 2022). The phenomenological method is appropriate for uncovering the essence of spiritual experiences as lived and interpreted by individuals, rather than as abstracted data points or observable behaviors. By focusing on the participants' reflections, emotions, and interpretations, this approach reveals how faith is constructed, negotiated, and redefined in technologically mediated spaces (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The study responds to the central question raised earlier: how do young individuals experience and find meaning in spirituality amid digital interactions? Through IPA, the analysis seeks to uncover the structure and significance of these experiences in their own voices and contexts.

The article is structured as follows: the Introduction outlines the conceptual background and the need for phenomenological inquiry; the Method section details the phenomenological design, participant selection, and analytical procedure; the Results section presents the key themes emerging from the participants' lived experiences; and the Discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). The final Conclusion synthesizes the essential meanings uncovered and their implications for understanding modern religiosity. Together, these sections aim to contribute a deeper and more holistic comprehension of spirituality in the digital age, grounded in authentic human experience.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived spiritual experiences of young individuals in the digital era (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). Phenomenology, as a qualitative approach, seeks to understand how individuals perceive and interpret their lived experiences, uncovering the essence of a phenomenon as it is consciously experienced. This design was selected because it aligns with the study's purpose of examining the subjective meaning and interpretive depth of spiritual engagement within digital contexts. The study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, with particular sensitivity to the spiritual and personal nature of the accounts shared.

An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was applied to capture both the descriptive elements of participants' experiences and the interpretive dimensions that reveal how those experiences are understood and internalized. The approach emphasizes an idiographic focus, allowing detailed, nuanced insights into each participant's encounter with spirituality amid technological mediation. This framework supports the identification of essential meanings that transcend individual accounts, offering a coherent understanding of the broader phenomenon.

Participants

Participants consisted of young adults aged 20 to 35 who actively engage in spiritual or religious practices through digital platforms such as online worship, virtual study groups, and social media communities (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Selection followed a purposive sampling strategy, focusing on individuals with direct and reflective experience of seeking or expressing spirituality in digital settings.

Inclusion criteria required participants to (1) identify as practicing believers within any religious or spiritual tradition, (2) have at least one year of experience in digital-based spiritual engagement, and (3) demonstrate the ability to articulate reflective insights about their experiences. Individuals with limited digital access or unwillingness to discuss personal experiences were excluded.

A total of twelve participants (six female and six male) contributed to the study, representing diverse religious backgrounds including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and non-denominational spirituality. This diversity enriched the contextual understanding of spiritual experiences across differing traditions while maintaining focus on the shared generational context.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' spiritual experiences in digital spaces (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participants' preferences and logistical considerations. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

An interview guide was used to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for emergent narratives. Key questions focused on participants' experiences of spiritual connection, authenticity, community, and meaning-making in online contexts. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data collection occurred in environments that ensured comfort and privacy, allowing participants to engage in open reflection. The process emphasized empathy, confidentiality, and non-judgmental listening to foster genuine disclosure of personal experiences.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method that involves detailed examination of personal lived experiences to identify patterns of meaning (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Analysis followed a systematic, iterative process:

1. Reading and re-reading transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of each account.
2. Identifying significant statements and meaning units that reflected core experiential aspects.
3. Developing initial codes and clustering them into emerging themes.
4. Refining themes into higher-order conceptual categories that captured shared experiential structures.
5. Synthesizing these into essential themes representing the collective meaning of the phenomenon.

NVivo software facilitated data organization and supported transparency in tracking codes and themes, though interpretive understanding remained grounded in manual, reflective engagement with the text (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The analytical process remained faithful to participants' voices while interpreting how their experiences illuminate broader dynamics of religiosity and identity in the digital era.

RESULTS

The Digital Quest for Spiritual Meaning

Participants described their spiritual journeys in the digital age as a complex interplay between connection and confusion. Many perceived online spaces as both gateways and obstacles to authentic faith. Through digital communities, podcasts, and virtual sermons, young believers sought understanding and belonging. However, the saturation of information often led to spiritual fragmentation and uncertainty.

One participant expressed:

“Scrolling through spiritual content makes me feel connected for a moment, but sometimes I wonder if I’m losing the real essence of what faith means.”

This sentiment illustrates the ambivalence of digital religiosity where accessibility coexists with superficiality. The participants' narratives reveal that the search for meaning online is not merely informational but deeply experiential, reflecting an existential struggle to reconcile immediacy with authenticity.

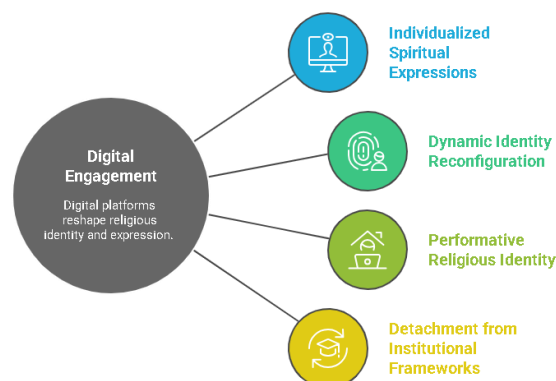
The Transformation of Religious Identity

Digital engagement redefined how participants perceived and expressed their religious identity. Traditional markers of religiosity rituals, congregational participation, and communal practices were increasingly replaced by individualized spiritual expressions facilitated by digital media. The findings suggest that online spaces allow for a reconfiguration of religious identity that is dynamic, performative, and often detached from institutional frameworks.

A participant shared:

“In my online prayer group, I can express my doubts without judgment. It feels more real than attending a formal service.”

Unveiling the Dimensions of Digital Religious Identity



This quote highlights the emergence of “fluid religiosity,” where belief and belonging are negotiated through virtual encounters rather than inherited traditions. The theme captures a generational shift toward personalized spirituality, characterized by introspection, autonomy, and selective adherence to religious norms.

Negotiating Authenticity in Virtual Faith Practices

A central concern among participants was authenticity how to distinguish between genuine faith experiences and performative displays of spirituality online. Many participants admitted feeling pressure to present a spiritually polished version of themselves, particularly on platforms like Instagram or YouTube. The phenomenon reflects a paradox: the digital environment that enables self-expression also fosters performativity.

One respondent remarked:

“Sometimes I post verses or reflections not because I feel them deeply, but because it’s expected in my community.”

This insight underscores the tension between inner conviction and public visibility. The participants’ reflections reveal an ongoing negotiation between personal sincerity and social validation, suggesting that authenticity in digital faith is continuously constructed and contested.

The Sense of Disconnection and Longing for Sacred Presence

Despite the abundance of spiritual content online, many participants conveyed a persistent longing for physical, embodied experiences of sacredness. Virtual worship, while convenient, lacked the emotional and sensory depth of traditional religious gatherings. Participants expressed nostalgia for sacred spaces and tangible rituals that evoke a sense of divine presence.

As one interviewee described:

“Online worship feels like watching someone else’s faith. I miss the smell of incense, the sound of voices, the touch of hands in prayer.”

This longing indicates that digital religiosity, though expansive, cannot entirely substitute embodied spirituality. The theme emphasizes the irreplaceable role of sensory and communal dimensions in sustaining deep religious experience.

The Reimagining of Community and Belonging

Participants demonstrated that digital spaces also fostered new forms of community. Through online study groups, interfaith forums, and spiritual mentorship via messaging apps, they experienced belonging beyond geographical and denominational boundaries. These virtual connections often became sources of emotional support and theological dialogue.

One participant stated:

“I’ve met people online who helped me rediscover my faith. It’s not about the church anymore it’s about the people who walk with you, even if you’ve never met them in person.”

This finding reveals that digital platforms can transform religious community from a spatial entity into a networked and dialogical experience. It redefines what it means to belong, emphasizing shared journeys over shared locations.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that young adults experience spirituality in the digital age as a continuous negotiation between connection and authenticity. The phenomenological analysis showed that while digital spaces expand opportunities for spiritual engagement, they also fragment sacred meaning, compelling individuals to reconstruct faith through personal interpretation and emotional introspection.

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question

The findings directly address the central question of how young individuals experience and find meaning in spirituality amid digital interactions (Qureshi et al., 2024). The analysis demonstrates that spiritual experience in digital contexts cannot be reduced to religious participation or online ritual practices. Rather, it is an existential and affective process through which individuals reinterpret faith, belonging, and sacredness within an environment saturated by media and mediated relationships.

The study contributes uniquely to the understanding of digital religiosity by uncovering its dual nature simultaneously liberating and alienating. Participants reported feelings of empowerment and community through online platforms while also expressing a longing for embodied sacred presence (Bingaman, 2020). This duality reflects the complexity of spirituality as both personal transcendence and social construction (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025).

Instead of merely describing participants' experiences, this study interprets these tensions as indicators of a broader paradigmatic shift: digital environments cultivate a mode of spirituality that is increasingly self-curated, emotionally driven, and negotiated in real time.

Thus, the findings do not simply restate the results but clarify their conceptual significance—namely, that digital spirituality emerges as a reflexive practice shaped by both technological affordances and existential desires for meaning. These insights enrich current discourse by moving beyond descriptive models of online religion toward a more human-centered comprehension of digital spirituality.

Relation to Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The present findings align with previous phenomenological and sociological research that emphasizes spirituality as a lived, dynamic experience rather than a static adherence to doctrine (Crockford, 2024) theory of networked religion, the participants' narratives illustrate how digital media facilitate decentralized yet meaningful encounters with the sacred. However, this study extends those perspectives by focusing on the experiential dimension how individuals feel and interpret these interactions rather than how they simply perform them.

Furthermore, the tension between authenticity and performativity observed in participants' accounts resonates with (Innocenti, 2024) concept of self-presentation, reframed here within the context of digital religiosity. Unlike earlier studies that viewed online spirituality primarily as a form of identity expression (Okolie et al., 2023), the current findings reveal a deeper ontological concern: the struggle to sustain sincerity and sacred intimacy in a hyperconnected world. This reinforces the phenomenological proposition that spirituality, as lived consciousness, is always situated shaped by cultural, technological, and existential conditions.

By integrating these theoretical insights, the discussion underscores that phenomenology provides not only a methodological framework but also an epistemological bridge connecting the inner meanings of digital faith with broader transformations in contemporary religious life (Baker, 2024). The study thereby contributes to an evolving understanding of how sacred experience endures and adapts within the ever-expanding landscape of digital modernity.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical and practical implications for understanding spirituality in the digital age. From a social and cultural perspective, they illuminate how technology-mediated environments reshape traditional forms of religious participation into individualized and interpretive spiritual practices (Lutfiyah et al., 2025). The narratives of young adults reveal that digital platforms are not merely tools for religious dissemination but spaces where sacred meaning is reimaged, negotiated, and embodied in new ways. This has implications for religious institutions, which must recognize the growing importance of virtual spaces as legitimate sites of spiritual formation and community.

Moreover, the results highlight an emerging cultural shift toward reflexive religiosity, where individuals assume active roles in constructing their spiritual identities rather than passively inheriting

them. Such findings contribute to interdisciplinary discussions on identity, authenticity, and belonging, particularly within globalized, media-saturated societies (Asmuni, 2021). On a professional level, these insights may inform educators, counselors, and spiritual leaders in supporting digital generations who experience spirituality through hybrid online–offline modes of engagement. In the broader phenomenological context, the study reaffirms that spirituality remains an enduring human pursuit adaptable, contextual, and deeply experiential, even within the virtual realm.

Limitations of the Study

While this research offers valuable insights into the lived experience of digital spirituality, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The study's interpretative phenomenological design, by nature, focuses on depth rather than breadth, making the findings contextually rich but not statistically generalizable (Fayemi et al., 2025). The participant group, though diverse in religious background, was limited to young adults with active digital engagement, which may exclude other demographic or cultural perspectives. Additionally, the data relied primarily on self-reported narratives, which are inherently shaped by memory, reflection, and social desirability biases.

Despite these constraints, the study's phenomenological rigor through strategies such as triangulation, reflexivity, and member checking ensured that interpretations remained grounded in participants' authentic accounts (Kalyanwala, 2025). These limitations do not undermine the validity of the findings but rather underscore the contextual nature of phenomenological inquiry, emphasizing meaning over generalization. Future research can build upon these foundations by incorporating broader participant diversity or comparative cross-cultural analysis.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The insights gained from this study open several pathways for future exploration. Further research could examine how digital mediation influences the long-term evolution of spiritual identity, particularly as technology continues to blur boundaries between sacred and secular spaces (Usman, 2025). Longitudinal or cross-generational studies might reveal how digital spirituality transforms across different life stages or cultural contexts (Liogier, 2020). Additionally, expanding phenomenological inquiry to include embodied practices and sensory dimensions of online worship could deepen understanding of how technology shapes the phenomenology of sacred presence.

At a theoretical level, integrating phenomenological findings with perspectives from media philosophy or cognitive religious studies could enrich interdisciplinary frameworks for analyzing digital religiosity (Tudor & Ladjouzi, 2020). Ultimately, future studies should continue to investigate spirituality not as a fixed construct but as a lived and evolving human experience, responsive to the cultural and technological conditions of modernity. In doing so, researchers can further illuminate how faith, meaning, and transcendence persist within the fluid realities of the digital world.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived spiritual experiences of young adults in the digital age, focusing on how technology mediates their search for faith, authenticity, and belonging. The phenomenological analysis revealed that digital environments serve as both spaces of connection and fragmentation, prompting individuals to reconstruct sacred meaning through personal reflection and emotional engagement. The findings addressed gaps in previous research by uncovering the inner dimensions of digital religiosity, which quantitative and institutional approaches have often overlooked. Through interpretative phenomenological inquiry, this study provided a deeper understanding of how spirituality evolves as a lived, dynamic process shaped by digital culture. These insights contribute to contemporary discussions on identity, meaning-making, and the transformation of religious experience in modern society. Future research could deepen this inquiry by further examining the nuanced processes through which digital platforms shape spiritual meaning-making and the evolving dynamics of online religious engagement, ensuring theoretical continuity with the present study's phenomenological focus.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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