

DIGITAL CULTURE AND VIRTUAL SPIRITUALITY: THE METALLIZATION OF THE CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS PRACTICES, SYMBOLS, AND AUTHORITY

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ABSTRACT

Dalam masyarakat kontemporer, budaya digital telah memainkan peran penting dalam mentransformasi cara manusia mengalami dan mengekspresikan spiritualitas. Kemunculan komunitas keagamaan daring, ritual virtual, dan dakwah digital menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman keagamaan tidak lagi semata-mata bergantung pada ruang-ruang sakral lokal maupun otoritas kelembagaan yang mapan. Artikel ini mengkaji fenomenologi spiritualitas virtual dalam budaya digital yang kompleks dengan menganalisis transformasi baru pada agensi, tatanan otoritas, sistem simbol-simbol sakral, serta pengalaman keagamaan yang bersifat afektif. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif-analitis yang berlandaskan telaah pustaka secara komprehensif dan didukung oleh sejumlah studi empiris sekunder yang relevan, analisis ini mengintegrasikan perspektif sosiologi agama, antropologi simbolik, dan kajian agama digital. Empat temuan utama dihasilkan, yaitu: (1) komunitas keagamaan berbasis jaringan berfungsi sebagai infrastruktur dukungan psikososial dan spiritual; (2) praktik ritual dan devosi digital merekonfigurasi bentuk-bentuk mediasi kehadiran yang sakral; (3) otoritas keagamaan hibrida muncul melalui visibilitas dan interaksi di platform digital; serta (4) rekontekstualisasi simbol-simbol sakral terjadi melalui proses remediasi dan personalisasi dalam suatu "pasar spiritual" (spiritual marketplace). Temuan-temuan tersebut mengindikasikan bahwa spiritualitas virtual bukan sekadar bentuk adaptasi terhadap perkembangan teknologi, melainkan menandai perubahan ontologis dalam proses produksi dan negosiasi kesakralan di dalam ekologi digital.

Kata kunci: *budaya digital; spiritualitas virtual; agama digital; simbol-simbol sakral; otoritas keagamaan..*

ABSTRACT

In contemporary society, digital culture has played a major role in transforming how people experience and express spirituality. The advent of online faith communities, virtual rituals, and digital preaching hints that religious experience is no longer exclusively reliant on local sacred spaces or established institutional authority. This article studies the phenomenology of virtual spirituality in complex digital culture by analyzing the novel transformations of agency, orders of authority, sa-

cred-symbol systems, and affective religious experience. Using qualitative-analytical methods guided by a thorough literature review, supplemented by select secondary empirical studies, this analysis integrates the sociology of religion, symbolic anthropology, and digital religion studies. Four findings are central: (1) networked faith communities function as infrastructures of psychosocial-spiritual support, (2) digital ritual-devotional practice that reconfigure sacred presence mediations, (3) hybrid religious authority emerging from platform visibility-interaction, (4) recontextualization of sacred symbols through remediation-personalization in a “spiritual marketplace.” These findings imply that virtual spirituality is not simply a technological adaptation and signal an ontological change in the production and negotiation of sacrality in digital ecologies.

Keywords: *digital culture; virtual spirituality; digital religion; sacred symbols; religious authority*

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies are changing how humans make meaning, establish identities, and experience our daily spiritual lives. Digitalization has become more than a technological innovation; it is a cultural condition that alters human relationships with symbols, emotions, and transcendence (Castells, 2010; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Thus, religion and spirituality are not untouched by the light of change but are instead among the most fiercely contested arenas within the rationale of digital culture.

The evidence is mounting that the online space is carving out an increasingly important place as a new symbolic arena for religious practices and experiences (within the discipline called digital religion studies). According to Campbell (2010, 2013), religion and technology have a reciprocal relation: religious communities use technology, but at the same time, it is shaped by the ways religion is performed, mediated, and interpreted. So digital spirituality does not translate to “online religion,” but rather to religious practices operating through connectivity, mediation, and affection.

In the sociology of religion, this process is consistent with the de-institutionalization and privatization of religion. Luckmann (1967) has demonstrated the implications of religion in modernity: it does not disappear but indeed transforms into a system of personal meaning (invisible religion). The digital culture compounds this trend by offering ways for individuals to access, curate, and express spirituality in spaces that lie beyond the direct control of traditional authorities (Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Beyer, 2013).

Another defining feature of late modernity is the reflexivity of identity. Identity as a reflexive project? From Giddens (1991), including re-

ligious orientation factors, which are constantly negotiated. The digital space amplifies this reflexivity through cross-tradition and symbolism, as well as access to authority, which pushes spiritual practice toward greater individualism, selectivity, and context sensitivity (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Roof, 2015).

The digital medium is not simply a “channel” but a meaning-space. Symbols, faith narratives, and religious experiences are generated and reframed in the media system (Hoover, 2016). These include the rise of digital proselytization, online worship, app-based meditation, and virtual prayer communities (Hjarvard, 2011; Lövhelm, 2017; Lövhelm, 2019), demonstrating an increasingly blurred line between the sacred and the profane in the mediatization/mediation of religion. The COVID-19 pandemic hastened the already normalizing of online worship, and many institutions have been forced to remap their presence, rituals, and community (Hutchings, 2020; Campbell, 2021; O’Brien, 2020).

This article starts with the question of whether virtual spirituality is merely a pragmatic adaptation or points to an ontological change in religious experience. Several scholars note that the internet plays a role in the production of sacredness through visibility, algorithms, and attention economies (Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Possamai, 2020; Possamai & Lee, 2022). By taking an interdisciplinary approach, this article affirmatively argues for virtual spirituality as a new symbolic space where sacredness is reconstituted through the mediations of technology and affect, network relations (Triguna 2025), even while creating opportunities for critically reading exclusions of symbolic power in the digital ecology. Though digital religious studies has emerged as a field with

great energy, much of the work still treats online practices in isolation, often focusing on communities, rituals, or authority, without tying together the processes that connect platform mediation and affect to symbolic work in making something sacred. In this article, I synthesize the conceptual findings of four dynamics networked communities, digitalized ritual-devotion, hybrid authority, and symbolic remediation to elucidate how religious experiences are shaped through symbol circulation, emotion, and network relations in the digital ecosystem. The message conveyed is that virtual spirituality in Indonesia (as well as in the Global South context) must not be read solely as a technological adaptation, but as a complex site of power and the negotiation of meaning, which requires digital wisdom to serve as an ethical horizon for religious practice in the current era.

II. METHODS

This movement from an “institutional” religion to a more personal experience or practice of spirituality is related to the shift in modern spirituality. According to Luckmann (1967), religion does not decline but becomes a private system of meaning within the realm of subjective experience. Digital culture accelerates this transition by creating a fluid space for flexible, global religious expression.

Spirituality is also incorporated into the reflexive project of identity in late modernity. In this respect, Giddens (1991) notes that the religious orientation has become less taken for granted and more a sense of design negotiation and evaluation. You have the crossover and source access possibilities to increase reflexivity, the curation of beliefs, and the geographical/cultural transcendence of religious relationships.

In the context of that transformation, religious symbols served as a crucial bridge between internal experience and social order. From a symbolic perspective, it is argued that symbols do not exist in isolation but only within social relationships and processes of interpretation. In virtual spirituality, sacred symbols are consequently decontextualized and remediated to be given new meaning through repetitive gestures of love performed within a networked time-space (Bolter & Grusin,

1999; Hoover, 2016a, b; Triguna, 2025).

Campbell (2010; 2012) clarifies the relationship between religion and technology by distinguishing between, for example, religion online and online religion, which exposes how digitalization can change religious authority, sacred presence, and spiritual experience. But digitalization does not happen without its own biases: platform logic, visibility, and the attention economy determine meaning as well as authority materialists. In this context, the ambivalent potential of virtual spirituality of freedom from and integration into commodification (Lövheim, 2019; Possamai & Lee, 2022; Triguna, 2025) can be better read through critical-theory perspectives.

III. DISCUSSION

1. Faith Online and the Ecological Nexus of Digital Spirituality

Digital technology is changing the way we form religious communities and even engage with spirituality. WhatsApp prayer groups, Zoom religious classes, and worship communities on social platforms, previously deemed merely alternatives to in-person meetings, have quickly morphed into spaces where meaningful social, emotional, and symbolic spiritual experiences can occur.

WhatsApp and Zoom are recorded as digital ethnography that changes the rhythm and routine of religious practice, with participation occurring even when members are physically distant from each other (Wirawan & Sukanadar, 2024). This finding is evidence of the digital space as an ecology of religious practices: networked communications structures sustain teachings, disciplines, and social relations.

This is the way YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok affect Generation Z, who consume religious content/reflections which expand their religious horizons, and have affective effects: inner peace, closeness to God, and a sense of purpose in life that strengthens (Sirun & Surawan, 2025). Thus, digital spiritual communities and content can be interpreted as an important part of a networked spiritual infrastructure that provides both personal inner wellbeing and a sense of religious belonging in blurring social environments.

2. The Sacred Presence, and Ritual, Devotion, and Transformation of the Sacred Presence

Rituals and liturgy are likely some of the most obvious sites for change in digital culture these days, both in the wake of COVID-19 and as we look beyond it. That includes online worship practices, livestreamed rituals, and the outpouring of devotional sentiments on social media, which exist in many religious traditions. Within a Hindu framework, online-streamed puja, darshan, and satsang sometimes permit transnational dharma conversations, thus making digital space a fresh platform for ritual and devotional engagement.

Studies conducted in the present day, however, demonstrate how digital bhakti can serve as a vehicle for preserving tradition within the community and extending devotion across temporal and spatial boundaries. While the actual medium shifts, the essential components of devotion, divine love, seva, and spiritual connection can stay constant and even grow in online participation (Rahayu, 2025). So the digitalization of rituals does not imply a disappearance of sacredness, but a transformation in how sacred presence is manifested and experienced.

But the transition to digital rituals raises questions of experience and presence: does a screen sanctify much like a physical sacred space? This debate is entangled with the discussion of “aura” and the immanence of sacred experience (Benjamin, 2008), but within a digital context, communion at a distance can be recast through emotional investment, symbolic looping, and mediated collectively. Online satsangs, online prayer groups, and guided pujas are examples of networked devotionism that digitally revitalizes familiar rituals even as they are modified in ways negotiated by the logics of the digital medium.

meaning (Luckmann), the reflexivity of modern identity (Giddens), and the logic of digital religion, which reshapes relations among believers, institutions, and technology (Campbell), lies virtual spirituality. Hence, virtual spirituality is not “religion online,” but a recontextualization of sacredness in terms of orientations towards networks, platform mediation, and digital affection.

The analysis identifies each of these in four co-existing dynamics: (1) online faith communities as a vascular psychospiritual support infrastructure that operate beyond mode presence, regularity and proximate mutualism; (2) ritual-devotional transformation via extended reach through livestream practices alongside the culturing of experience with sacred presence; (3) hybrid religious authority as traditional legitimacy conjoined with new digital legitimacy by visibility and interaction; and (4) symbol remediation and practice personalisation within the spiritual marketplace that can promote relational intimacy or commodification.

The article contributes theoretically by confirming virtual spirituality as a reflection of an ontological change in religious experience: presence, authority, and symbolic efficacy are being produced through the dynamics of symbol circulation, affective resonance, and network relations within the platform ecosystem. The ambivalence is palpable: it opens access and fosters dialogue across borders, risks undermining authority, diminishes the potential for depth of reflection, and distills symbols for speed. The tension in front of us is not between Tradition and Technology, but between digital wisdom: the ethical-critical ability to use digital space as a site of reflective and substantive spiritual deepening.

IV. CONCLUSION

Digital culture cannot be contextualized merely as a technological medium for religion; it is best understood as a symbolic relational space that reconstructs the forms of spiritual practice, authority, and experience in the modern contemporary world. Between the de-institutionalization and privatization of

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