



Social Media's Influence on Young Adults' Spiritual Development and Positive Religious Coping: A Qualitative Investigation

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Abstract: This study examines how social media shapes spiritual development and positive religious coping among young adults aged 18–25. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, eleven participants from India, the United States, Russia, and Mauritius engaged in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework yielded four themes: (1) Underlying Spiritual Structures and Spectrum of Socialization; (2) Digital Awareness as a Catalyst for Knowledge Fortification and Pluralism; (3) Negotiating Religious Coping: From Digital Sanctuary to Manual Ritual; and (4) Digital Distrust and the Crisis of Authenticity. Findings indicate that while social media expands access to spiritual content and provides short-term emotional comfort, most participants retained greater trust in offline, embodied practice for sustained religious coping. Participants with stronger pre-existing spiritual foundations demonstrated greater cognitive resilience when engaging with digital faith content. A pervasive concern regarding misinformation, algorithmic curation, and the commercialisation of faith was evident across the sample. These insights contribute to the growing literature on digital religion and psychological well-being, with implications for clinical practice, educational settings, and platform ethics.

Keywords: *Digital Spirituality, Religious Coping, Generation Z, Social Media Algorithms, Qualitative Descriptive Design*

1. Introduction

The boundary between online and offline life has become functionally indistinct for today's young adults. Social media is not merely a communication tool they elect to use; it is the primary environment within which identity, meaning, and community are actively constructed. Within this landscape, religious and spiritual content is proliferating at an unprecedented scale. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube host expansive spiritual subcultures, from theological debate and communal prayer to testimony and devotional aesthetics, yet mainstream psychological research has been slow to examine what this shift means for the inner life.

Campbell (2012) described this transformation as digital religion, arguing that the internet has become a central site where spiritual practices are enacted, renegotiated, and experienced. Within this framework, Helland (2005) distinguished between religion-online—traditional institutions establishing a digital presence and online-religion, describing interactive, user-led spiritual engagement that occurs largely independent of institutional structures. The latter form predominates among Generation Z, for whom algorithmic curation increasingly acts as a mediator of existential content (dos Santos, 2024).

Religious coping, as theorised by Pargament (1997), involves the use of faith-based frameworks to manage life stressors and locate meaning in adversity. Pargament et al. (2000) distinguish between positive religious coping characterised by spiritual support-seeking, connection with the divine, and meaning-making and negative religious coping, associated with spiritual abandonment and divine punishment attributions. Whether digital spiritual engagement can support or undermine these coping processes among young adults remains an underexplored question.

Despite the volume of research on social media and mental health outcomes, the spiritual dimension of digital life has received comparatively little empirical attention, particularly in relation to positive religious coping. This study addresses that gap by exploring how young adults experience and interpret social media's influence on their spiritual development and religious coping, using a qualitative descriptive approach that prioritises lived experience over statistical aggregation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The Shifting Terrain of Digital Spirituality*

The sociological role of digital media in religious life has evolved considerably. Early scholarship focused on how established religious institutions adapted to online environments (Helland, 2005). More recently, attention has shifted to the grassroots, decentralised spiritual engagement that platforms afford what Sadiku et al. (2022) identify as a mediated religious relationship that no longer depends on physical community. This shift is compounded by algorithmic gatekeeping, wherein platform architectures determine which spiritual content reaches which users, effectively replacing elder-mediated socialisation with engagement-optimised curation (Yust, 2014; Zhang, 2025).

Tiwari (2024) identifies a trend of theological content merging with self-help and wellness rhetoric, creating a form of aestheticised spirituality that is visually appealing and emotionally resonant but potentially lacking in doctrinal depth. Liu et al. (2025) caution that for Generation Z, spiritual practice risks becoming a lifestyle accessory—occasionally engaged with but insufficiently transformative. This observation raises critical questions about the capacity of digital spirituality to sustain individuals through genuine adversity.

2.2 *Religious Coping and Digital Contexts*

Pargament's (1997) framework remains the dominant theoretical lens for understanding faith-based coping. When applied to digital contexts, its utility depends on whether online spiritual engagement offers the kind of meaning-making scaffolding that facilitates genuine psychological integration, rather than mere emotional distraction. Park (2010) argues that lasting coping requires the alignment of central beliefs with painful experience a slow, reflective process that the pace of social media may not readily support.

Oh et al. (2013) found that platforms such as Facebook can enhance social support and self-efficacy, though they cautioned that the transient quality of digital interaction may not replicate the sustained holding environment that long-term resilience requires. Demiroglu and Tas (2021) identified a significant negative correlation between spiritual awareness and social media addiction, suggesting that stronger spiritual foundations may serve as a buffer against maladaptive digital consumption. Wood et al. (2016) further noted that heavy social media use could amplify negative religious coping patterns among those already experiencing psychological distress.

2.3 Authority, Influence, and the Decentralisation of Sacred Knowledge

One of the most substantive changes wrought by digital religion is the decentralisation of religious authority. Purbiyati and Amelia (2025) observe that for Generation Z, relatability now frequently outweighs formal theological training as a criterion of spiritual credibility. The spiritual influencer has emerged as a new pastoral figure, mediating the divine through personal branding and parasocial intimacy. Zhang (2025) identifies three digital spiritual pathways, religious maturation, pluralistic expansion, and critical deconstruction, each carrying distinct psychological implications. While this decentralisation enables previously marginalised voices to reach spiritual audiences, it also creates what Chirima (2025) terms cognitive risk, wherein echo chambers reinforce existing beliefs at the expense of genuine theological engagement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, prioritising depth of lived experience over quantitative breadth. The central questions guiding this inquiry—how young adults perceive and negotiate online and offline religious practice, and whether digital spiritual content supports or undermines positive religious coping—are not readily addressable through numerical data. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive framework was used to identify patterns across participant data, proceeding from initial familiarisation through iterative coding to the production of coherent, analytically grounded themes.

3.2 Participants

Eleven young adults aged 18–25 were recruited through purposive sampling via digital outreach. Participants represented diverse religious affiliations (Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Albanian Folk, Hellenist, and non-religious), varied social media usage intensities, and four nationalities: India, the United States, Russia, and Mauritius. Consistent with Arnett's (2000) framework of emerging adulthood as a period of identity exploration, this age group was selected for its particular salience to the research questions. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and anonymity was maintained through participant codes (P01–P11). All data were stored on encrypted hardware and will be deleted following academic assessment.

3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting approximately 20–30 minutes. Interviews included 15 core questions progressing from general social media use to specific spiritual engagement and coping experiences. Interviews were conducted in person or by telephone depending on geographical proximity. Intelligent verbatim transcription was employed, retaining meaningful content while removing non-substantive fillers. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection to monitor positional bias, consistent with the epistemological demands of interpretive qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis proceeded through the six-stage process described by Braun et al. (2022): familiarisation with data, initial code generation, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and write-up. Codes captured instances of spiritual engagement, coping behaviour, trust, and disruption. Recurring codes were clustered into preliminary themes, which were subsequently refined to ensure coherent alignment with participants' original meanings. The analytical process aimed to illuminate not merely what participants described, but the interpretive frameworks, psychological, spiritual, and cultural, that structured their experiences.

4. Results and Findings

Thematic analysis yielded four themes, each capturing a distinct dimension of participants' engagement with digital spirituality and religious coping.

4.1 Theme 1: Underlying Spiritual Structures and Spectrum of Socialisation

Participants entered the study with markedly varied spiritual starting points. For several, particularly those of Hindu and Muslim backgrounds, faith was seamlessly embedded in daily life through primary socialisation. P11 described it as "naturally integrated," while P10 articulated a personally engaged Islam that she inhabited critically rather than received passively. For others, faith had emerged through crisis and independent searching. P04 described a period of profound distress that drew her back to Christian practice, and P02 and P03 had constructed personal spiritual frameworks without institutional grounding. A third group had experienced significant rupture with inherited religion. P06 described a deteriorating relationship with Islam, P08 had distanced from Russian Orthodoxy in response to familial constraint, and P01 had made a deliberate transition to Buddhism under qualified guidance. These diverse starting points carried

forward throughout the study, shaping how each participant engaged with and evaluated digital spiritual content.

4.2 Theme 2: Digital Awareness as a Catalyst for Knowledge Fortification and Pluralism

For participants with established faith, platforms functioned primarily as a resource for deepening existing beliefs. P04 described this as "knowledge-based fortification," noting that digital content opened interpretive possibilities she had not previously encountered. P09 engaged actively with theologians and apologists online, treating platforms as an intellectual archive rather than a passive feed. A second function was pluralistic expansion: P08 attributed their departure from exclusivist beliefs to the exposure to diverse religious perspectives facilitated by online access. P05 similarly described how encountering varied viewpoints prompted harder reflection on previously rigid frameworks.

Community belonging also emerged as a significant digital function, particularly for participants with diasporic family connections. P02 described digital content as removing "geographical barriers," sustaining cultural and religious proximity to family abroad. However, the same platforms that deepened and broadened faith for some participants produced scepticism in others. P06 described online content as providing scientific evidence that reinforced a growing agnosticism. This divergence underlines the primary finding of this theme: the direction of digital influence on spiritual awareness is determined by the orientation the user brings to the encounter, not by the content alone.

4.3 Theme 3: Negotiating Religious Coping: From Digital Sanctuary to Manual Ritual

Participants' coping strategies fell into three distinct patterns. The first, characterised by digital immersion, was represented by P02, P04, P08, and P11, who turned to social media as a first point of contact during distress. The round-the-clock availability of digital content was its primary appeal. P11 described it as a constant source of reminders, and P04 relied on online sermons and worship music when she was unable to cope independently. For these participants, digital access approximated the availability of a supportive community in the absence of one.

The second pattern, functional hybridity, was evident in P05 and P09, who used digital content as a starting point but identified its limitations explicitly. P05 differentiated between "quick comfort" online and the "embodied connection" found in offline practice, and P09 described watching others navigate difficulty online as a catalyst that he then processed independently

through prayer. For these participants, digital and offline coping were complementary rather than equivalent.

The third pattern was offline preference. P01, P07, P03, and P10 actively rejected digital coping. P01 called social media an "unhealthy pit" and consistently turned away from it during personal challenges. P10 described the embodied act of making dua as producing a physical and psychological release that no digital encounter could replicate. P03 emphasised the reflective depth afforded by ritual practice, contrasting it with the reactive pace of online engagement. For this group, the turning off of digital noise was itself a coping mechanism.

4.4 Theme 4: Digital Distrust and the Crisis of Authenticity

Despite the diversity of perspectives across the preceding themes, nearly all participants converged on a shared concern: they did not trust what they encountered in digital spiritual spaces. The most frequently cited problem was accountability. P03 described online spiritual communities as frequently led by inexperienced individuals who "parrot information" or fabricate answers with unearned confidence, producing what he termed "accidental syncretism"—an undifferentiated fusion of pop culture and occult philosophy. P04 identified clout-chasing preachers whose primary motivation was follower accumulation rather than spiritual truth.

Platform-level concerns were equally prominent. P09 described the quantity of misinformation as overwhelming, and P07 characterised much circulating content as deliberate deception constructed for personal gain. P10 described platforms as hosting persistent inter-faith conflict, with participants seeking to argue rather than learn. The emergent consensus was clear: digital spirituality may serve as a useful supplement, but it cannot function as a primary vehicle for serious faith or sustained coping. P01 articulated this directly, noting that full religious devotion cannot be achieved through a medium too shallow to contain it.

Table 1: *Summary of Themes, Representative Contexts, and Analytical Codes*

Theme	Representative Participant Context	Participant Code	Analytical Code
Theme 1: Underlying Spiritual Structures	"Committed, confident Buddhist; transitioned from Protestant Christian upbringing"	P01	Personal Faith Evolution
	"Follows Albanian Folk religion; full devotion and faith; involved in prayer and rituals"	P02	Cultural/Ancestral Heritage
	"Faith personal and evolving; source of inner peace and strength rather than rigid belief"	P05	Faith as Inner Strength

	"Muslim; highly religious; does not follow blindly—reads and prays independently"	P10	Individual Belief Structure
Theme 2: Digital Awareness as Catalyst	"Easy access to personally curated faith content; exposed to relatives' religious content across borders"	P02	Virtual Community Connection
	"Knowledge-based fortification; facilitates religious maturation through social media"	P04	Digital Knowledge Fortification
	"Exposed to varied opinions triggering re-evaluation of preexisting beliefs; developing open-minded outlook"	P05	Pluralistic Exposure
Theme 3: Negotiating Religious Coping	"Actively rejects digital coping; labels social media an 'unhealthy pit'; prefers offline sources"	P01	Manual/Offline Ritual Preference
	"Helps stabilize emotions; serves as reminder that faith is greater than problems"	P04	Digital Sanctuary
	"Uses content for reassurance, strength, and reflection; shared experience reduces isolation"	P05	Online Community Support
	"Prefers offline methods; making dua provides inner peace and physical release"	P10	Hybrid/Manual Ritual
Theme 4: Digital Distrust & Crisis of Authenticity	"Faith-based content online considered harmful; full devotion cannot be achieved via social media"	P01	Crisis of Authenticity
	"Recognises misinformation and hate speech; cold absence of physical person"	P02	Digital Dehumanization
	"Warns of clout-chaser preachers; spread of misinformation and digital manipulation"	P04	Commercialization of Faith
	"Induces inter-faith conflict; confidence placed in action rather than passive online observation"	P10	Digital Conflict/Toxicity

5. Discussion

5.1 Digital Authority and the Aestheticisation of Faith

The findings extend Purbiyati and Amelia's (2025) observation that relatability has superseded formal theological training as a criterion of spiritual authority for Generation Z. Across participant accounts, the spiritual influencer occupied a genuinely functional pastoral role, particularly for those whose institutional religious ties had weakened. Yet as Zhang (2025) cautions, the structural logic of engagement-driven platforms systematically privileges emotional resonance over theological rigour. The result is what several participants experienced as aestheticisation: faith content that appears accessible and comforting but lacks the doctrinal depth required to function as a genuine holding environment during sustained adversity.

This finding aligns with Liu et al.'s (2025) concern that spiritual practice risks becoming a lifestyle accessory for this generation - selectively engaged rather than inhabited as a stable worldview. Participants who experienced this limitation most acutely were those who had sought digital content as a primary coping resource, only to find that its emotional register could not sustain them through protracted difficulty.

5.2 Coping Patterns and the Limits of Digital Mediation

Consistent with Park's (2010) framework, genuine religious coping requires meaning-making - the alignment of core beliefs with painful experience. This process is characteristically slow, iterative, and deeply personal. The pace and visual logic of social media are structurally misaligned with this process. The functionally hybrid participants in the present study appeared to navigate this tension most effectively, using digital content as an initiating resource while directing sustained coping work toward offline practice. Their accounts support Oh et al.'s (2013) findings regarding the capacity of platforms to provide short-term support, while confirming the limitations of digital connection as a substitute for embodied community.

The offline preference group went further, treating the withdrawal from digital environments as itself a coping strategy. P10's description of dua as a physical release, and P03's emphasis on the reflective depth of ritual, suggest that the embodied, slowed character of traditional religious practice is not incidental to its psychological function, it may be constitutive of it. This cannot be replicated by content whose primary logic is speed and aesthetic engagement.

5.3 Spiritual Awareness as a Protective Factor

A consistent finding across participant accounts was that robust pre-existing spiritual foundations moderated the psychological risks of digital faith engagement. Participants who entered the study with settled, critically examined beliefs were more likely to use digital content instrumentally, selecting and evaluating material in relation to an internal framework—rather than consuming it passively. This aligns with Demiroglu and Tas's (2021) finding that higher spiritual awareness is associated with more regulated digital use, and with Chirima's (2025) concept of cognitive resilience. For these participants, faith functioned as a filter, enabling discernment in a space otherwise characterised by overload and inauthenticity.

5.4 The Crisis of Authenticity and Platform Design

The near-universal distrust of digital spiritual content reported by participants points beyond individual misuse to structural features of platform design. P04's identification of the

"clout-chaser preacher" and P10's account of inter-faith conflict reflect the consequences of engagement-driven algorithms applied to spiritually sensitive material. As Zhang (2025) notes, the same mechanisms that distribute spiritual content also create echo chambers that prioritise confirmation over transformation. The psychological risk is not simply exposure to inaccurate information, but the gradual erosion of the epistemological conditions—trust, consistency, depth—upon which meaningful religious coping depends.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how social media shapes spiritual development and positive religious coping among young adults, using a qualitative descriptive design with eleven participants across four countries. Four themes emerged: a spectrum of spiritual starting points that structured digital engagement; a dual function of platforms as both deepening and broadening spiritual awareness, or eroding it, depending on the user's orientation; three distinct patterns of religious coping that ranged from digital immersion to determined offline preference; and a pervasive crisis of authenticity reflecting structural concerns about algorithmic curation, misinformation, and the commercialisation of faith.

The overarching finding is that social media functions most constructively as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, embodied religious practice and community. It expands access, maintains cultural connection across distance, and provides short-term emotional comfort during distress. It cannot, for most participants, replicate the reflective depth, relational warmth, and theological substance of in-person faith. Those who enter digital spiritual environments with strong, critically examined beliefs are better positioned to navigate its risks; those who enter without such foundations are more vulnerable to its structural distortions.

These findings have implications for mental health practitioners working with religious young adults, for educational institutions considering digital literacy programmes, and for platform designers engaging with the ethical implications of algorithmic curation of spiritual content. Future research should pursue longitudinal designs capable of tracking whether digital engagement supports durable spiritual growth, and mixed-methods approaches capable of connecting algorithmic structures to psychological outcomes.

6.1 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample of eleven participants, while appropriate for qualitative descriptive inquiry, cannot represent the full diversity of young adult religious experience globally. Self-reported data carry inherent risks of social desirability bias, particularly on topics as sensitive as faith and spiritual struggle. Voluntary participation via digital recruitment may have over-represented participants with strong views on the topic, potentially underrepresenting more ambivalent or passive users. Variability in interview medium—in-person versus telephone, introduced some inconsistency in relational depth across the data. The researcher's own developing relationship with religion, while managed through reflexive journaling and adherence to semi-structured protocols, represents an interpretive positionality that shaped the analytical process.

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