

## The Influence of Social Media on Religious Perceptions and Behaviors

\*Abdul Rahman, Suheri Harahap

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, JL. Willem Iskandar Psr. V Medan Estate, Medan, Indonesia 20221

\*Correspondence e-mail: [ainaannurradi@gmail.com](mailto:ainaannurradi@gmail.com)

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### Abstrak

This study examines the influence of social media on religious perceptions and behaviors among university students in Medan City within the context of digital religiosity. Employing a qualitative research design with an interpretative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten active university students who regularly access religious content on social media platforms. The findings indicate that social media has become a primary source of religious information and spiritual engagement for students, shaping their understanding of religious values, tolerance, and ethical conduct. Exposure to digital religious content contributes to positive behavioral changes, including increased motivation for worship, enhanced moral self-regulation, and greater spiritual awareness. However, the study also reveals the ambivalent nature of digital religiosity. Alongside its constructive potential, social media presents significant challenges, such as interpretive confusion, misinformation, and exposure to intolerant or polarized religious narratives. These challenges are exacerbated by the lack of clear religious authority in digital spaces and the algorithmic tendencies of social media platforms that reinforce echo chambers. The study underscores the importance of strengthening Religious Digital Literacy to enable students to critically engage with online religious content and to foster inclusive, moderate, and reflective forms of religiosity in the digital era.

**Keywords:** Digital Religiosity, Social Media, Religious Perception, Religious Behavior, Religious Digital Literacy

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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed various aspects of social life. One of the most significant manifestations of this transformation is the emergence of social media as a central arena of social interaction. Social media is no longer limited to a medium for communication and entertainment; rather, it has evolved into a powerful platform for shaping opinions, values, identities, and individual behaviors. Within this context, religious practices and meanings have also undergone substantial changes, as religiosity is no longer shaped solely by formal religious institutions but is increasingly influenced by interactions that take place in digital spaces.

Social media enables individuals to access, produce, and disseminate religious content with unprecedented speed and reach. Consequently, digital platforms have become new arenas for religious discourse, where diverse interpretations, beliefs, and practices coexist, compete, and sometimes conflict. This condition signifies a shift in religious authority from hierarchical and institution-centered structures toward more open, horizontal, and participatory forms. Therefore, understanding the influence of social media on religiosity has become a critical issue that warrants in-depth scholarly examination.

Conceptually, social media has been defined from various scholarly perspectives. Kotler and Keller (as cited in Intan & Rahmat, 2021) define social media as media used by consumers to share text, images, audio, video, and information with others. This definition emphasizes the role of social media as a channel for information exchange. Taprial and Kanwar describe social media as platforms that enable individuals to become "social" in online environments by sharing content, news, photographs, and other forms of information. This perspective highlights the function of social media in facilitating online social networking.

Kaplan and Haenlein provide a more comprehensive definition, describing social media as a group of internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that enable the creation and exchange of *User-Generated Content*. This definition underscores the participatory nature

of social media, where users are not merely passive consumers of information but also active producers of content.

Drawing from these definitions, social media can be understood as a virtual social space that facilitates interaction through the creation, sharing, and exchange of information in various formats. Supported by internet connectivity, individuals are able to interact with others beyond geographical and temporal boundaries. In essence, social media represents a form of social interaction in digital contexts, where ideas, values, symbols, and meanings are continuously constructed, negotiated, and modified. The convenience, accessibility, and diversity of content offered by social media make it highly attractive, often encouraging users to spend extended periods engaging with these platforms.

Over time, the number and variety of social media platforms have grown significantly, each with its own distinctive characteristics and affordances. The primary objectives of social media use facilitating communication and accessing information have made these platforms an integral part of everyday life. Nearly all segments of society are now connected to social media for personal, professional, and socio-religious purposes. Global data from January 2018 indicate that the number of internet users reached 4.021 billion, representing approximately 53% of the world's total population of 7.593 billion. In addition, mobile phone users numbered 5.135 billion (68% of the global population), while active social media users totaled 3.196 billion. These figures demonstrate the massive scale of social media penetration in contemporary society.

From a sociological perspective, the influence of social media on religiosity can be examined through multiple theoretical lenses. Symbolic interactionism, for instance, provides a useful framework for understanding how religious symbols are produced, interpreted, and shared through social media, as well as how such interactions shape users' religious perceptions and identities. In digital interactions, religious symbols are continuously interpreted and reinterpreted, contributing to the dynamic construction of religious identity rather than its static preservation.

Social network theory offers another important analytical perspective by explaining how religious information and discourse spread through online networks. Network structures, the position of actors within those networks, and the intensity of interactions all influence how religious messages are received and internalized by individuals and groups. In this context, prominent social media figures such as digital preachers or religious influencers often play a strategic role in shaping religious opinions, attitudes, and practices among their followers.

In addition, the social constructionist approach emphasizes the role of social media in shaping religious reality through collectively constructed discourses, narratives, and representations. Social media functions as a space where religious meanings are not merely reflected but actively produced and negotiated. These processes have broader implications for religious culture, giving rise to new forms of religious expression and practice that are more personal, open, and flexible. Online religious communities, in particular, have emerged as important arenas for examining how religion is lived, negotiated, and reinterpreted in digital contexts.

Despite the growing body of research on religion and social media, previous studies continue to reveal significant gaps, particularly in exploring the depth of meaning-making processes associated with digital religiosity. Much of the existing literature relies on quantitative or descriptive approaches that focus on measuring usage intensity or identifying causal relationships. While such approaches are valuable, they often fail to capture the interpretive, subjective, and reflective dimensions of religious experience in digital environments.

For example, a study conducted by Ali, Hayati, and Umar (2023) identified negative tendencies associated with high levels of social media use among university students, such as neglect of religious obligations. Although these findings are important, the study primarily focuses on observable behaviors and correlational data. It does not sufficiently explore the internal processes through which individuals interpret religious content, experience uncertainty or doubt, and negotiate meanings amid the overwhelming flow of digital information.

In response to these limitations, the development of Religious Digital Literacy emerges as a crucial necessity. This form of literacy extends beyond technical competence in using digital media to include critical capacities for evaluating the credibility of online sources, navigating the plurality of religious

interpretations, and engaging with social media in a reflective and responsible manner. Religious Digital Literacy plays a vital role in fostering inclusive, moderate, and tolerant religious values, while also addressing the interpretive vulnerabilities individuals face amid competing digital religious narratives.

Strengthening Religious Digital Literacy requires active intervention from formal religious institutions and educational systems through digital education initiatives that emphasize critical thinking and reflective engagement. Through such efforts, social media can be leveraged as a constructive medium for reinforcing positive religious values, while mitigating potential risks such as informational bias, misinformation, and the emergence of religious exclusivism.

## METHODS

Digital religiosity involves complex processes of meaning construction and identity negotiation, which require a research approach that prioritizes in-depth understanding (*verstehen*) of individuals' lived experiences. An interpretive qualitative approach, particularly phenomenology, is well suited to explore how social media is present within students' spiritual consciousness. By adopting a qualitative methodology, rich narratives and informants' quotations collected during the study can be fully legitimized as primary sources of knowledge. Accordingly, the research design employed in this study is a qualitative method using an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach. This approach is particularly relevant because the core focus of the study lies in the interpretation of experience, wherein the researcher seeks to understand how individuals filter, interpret, and assign meaning to religious content encountered on social media.

The study focuses on active university students enrolled in higher education institutions in Medan City. This context was selected because university students represent one of the most intensive users of social media and are simultaneously situated at a critical stage of religious identity development. This transitional phase makes them particularly susceptible to the influence of digital religious narratives. Their extensive engagement with social media platforms positions them as an ideal population for examining the dynamics of digital religiosity and the processes through which religious meanings are constructed and negotiated in online environments.

Snowball sampling was employed as the most appropriate non-probability sampling technique for this qualitative study. This technique relies on the social networks of initial informants to recruit additional participants in a chain-referral process, beginning with a small number of participants and expanding progressively as new informants are identified through recommendations from earlier participants. Snowball sampling is especially suitable for phenomenological research, as it facilitates access to participants who share relevant experiences and are willing to articulate their personal reflections on sensitive topics such as religiosity and spirituality in digital contexts.

Through this sampling strategy, the study was able to capture diverse yet interconnected perspectives on how students experience, interpret, and respond to religious content on social media. Data were collected until thematic saturation was reached, that is, when no new significant meanings or patterns emerged from subsequent interviews. This approach ensured both depth and credibility in capturing the lived experiences of students navigating religiosity in the digital era.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to identify and analyze the influence of social media on perceptions and behaviors of religiosity, focusing on active university students in Medan City. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten informants selected based on specific criteria, namely students who are active users of social media and who regularly access religious content. The qualitative phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to capture rich narratives regarding how students experience, interpret, and negotiate religious meanings within digital environments.

The findings reveal that social media has become an integral part of students' religious lives, influencing not only how they access religious knowledge but also how they construct perceptions and enact religious behaviors. The results are organized into four major thematic issues: (1) patterns of religious social media consumption, (2) the influence of social media on religious perceptions, (3) the influence of social media on religious behavior, and (4) negative aspects and emerging challenges of digital religiosity.

**Table 1.** Summary of Key Findings on Digital Religiosity among University Students in Medan

No	Issue	Perception	Informant	Illustrative Statement	Notes
1	Patterns of Religious Social Media Consumption	All informants follow at least one religious account on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. The most frequently consumed content includes short sermons, Islamic lectures, religious quotes, and spiritual podcasts.	Informant 3, Faculty of Law	"I usually watch lectures by Ustadz Hanan Attaki on YouTube, especially when I feel emotionally down. His content is calming and motivating."	Social media functions as a primary source of religious information and spiritual reinforcement.
			Informant 7, Faculty of Economics	"I like watching short sermons on TikTok. Sometimes they're only 30 seconds long, but they really touch my heart."	
2	Influence on Religious Perceptions	Exposure to religious content on social media shapes students' perspectives on tolerance, pluralism, and broader interpretations of religious teachings.	Informant 1, Faculty of Social Sciences	"I used to be quite exclusive in viewing people of other religions. After watching more tolerant religious content, I've become more open-minded."	Social media influences not only normative beliefs but also social attitudes toward diversity.
			Informant 5, Faculty of Psychology	"I've become more aware of the importance of moral conduct, not just ritual worship. I realized this because many contents discuss social ethics in Islam."	
3	Influence on Religious Behavior	Most informants reported positive behavioral changes, including increased frequency of	Informant 2, Faculty of Engineering	"I used to miss prayers quite often. After watching religious content regularly, I	Social media motivates religious practice but also creates

No	Issue	Perception	Informant	Illustrative Statement	Notes
		worship, more consistent Qur'an reading, and greater self-restraint in online communication.		became more motivated to perform the five daily prayers."	interpretive challenges.
			Informant 6, Faculty of Communication	"I complain less and avoid posting negative things because I often see reminders from religious figures about guarding one's words."	
			Informant 9, Faculty of Education	"Sometimes I feel confused because one preacher says A while another says B. It made me doubt which one is correct."	
4	Negative Aspects and Challenges	Informants highlighted difficulties in identifying valid and authoritative religious content amid the openness of social media platforms.	Informant 4, Faculty of Literature	"Some religious contents are very harsh and tend to attack other groups. It makes me uncomfortable."	Lack of critical literacy increases vulnerability to intolerant or misleading content.
			Informant 8, Faculty of Medicine	"I once shared content from preacher A, but a friend told me it was a hoax. Since then, I've been more careful."	

### Patterns of Religious Social Media Consumption

The findings indicate that all informants actively follow at least one religious account across major social media platforms, particularly YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. These platforms are favored due to their accessibility, audiovisual appeal, and algorithm-driven personalization. Students reported consuming various forms of religious content, ranging from short motivational sermons and recorded Islamic lectures to inspirational quotes and spiritual podcasts. This pattern suggests that social media has become a routine

and convenient source of religious engagement, particularly for young adults with busy academic schedules.

Short-form religious content, especially on TikTok and Instagram Reels, was frequently mentioned as being emotionally impactful despite its brevity. Informants described such content as “touching,” “relaxing,” and “motivating,” indicating that emotional resonance plays a crucial role in content consumption. Longer formats, such as YouTube lectures and podcasts, were typically accessed during moments of emotional vulnerability or personal reflection. These findings demonstrate that students use social media strategically to fulfill spiritual and emotional needs, rather than merely for entertainment.

### **Influence of Social Media on Religious Perceptions**

Beyond consumption patterns, the data reveal that social media significantly shapes students' perceptions of religiosity. Several informants acknowledged that exposure to diverse religious narratives online has broadened their understanding of religious teachings, particularly regarding tolerance, pluralism, and ethical conduct. Informants reported becoming more open-minded toward people of different religious backgrounds and more attentive to the social dimensions of religion, such as compassion, empathy, and moral responsibility.

These findings suggest that social media plays a role in redefining religiosity from a purely ritualistic orientation toward a more holistic understanding that includes ethical and social considerations. Religious content that emphasizes kindness, humility, and respect for diversity appears to resonate strongly with students, influencing how they interpret religious values in everyday life.

### **Influence of Social Media on Religious Behavior**

In terms of behavioral outcomes, most informants reported positive changes linked to their engagement with religious content on social media. These changes include increased consistency in performing daily prayers, heightened motivation to read the Qur'an, and greater self-regulation in speech and online behavior. The visibility of religious reminders and role models in digital spaces appears to function as a form of continuous moral reinforcement.

However, the findings also reveal ambivalent effects. While social media can encourage positive religious behavior, it can simultaneously generate confusion due to contradictory interpretations presented by different religious figures. Informants expressed uncertainty when encountering conflicting religious opinions, highlighting the absence of clear authority structures in digital religious spaces. This ambiguity underscores the need for interpretive skills and religious literacy to navigate digital content critically.

### **Negative Aspects and Emerging Challenges**

Despite its positive potential, social media also presents significant challenges for digital religiosity. Informants emphasized difficulties in distinguishing between credible and non-credible religious content. The open nature of social media allows individuals without formal religious training to disseminate religious interpretations, which may be misleading, intolerant, or ideologically driven.

Several informants expressed discomfort with harsh and judgmental religious content that marginalizes certain groups. Others reported experiences of sharing religious content that later turned out to be inaccurate or hoax-based, leading to increased caution in future engagement. These challenges highlight the vulnerability of students to misinformation and polarizing narratives in the absence of adequate digital and religious literacy.

The interview findings support the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which posits that individuals actively select media to satisfy specific needs, including spiritual and emotional fulfillment. In this study, social media functions as a new arena for religious practice that was traditionally conducted offline. This finding aligns with Kencana (2023), who argues that social media has formed a digital religious ecosystem in which activities such as preaching, discussion, and the sharing of spiritual experiences increasingly occur online. Thus, social media operates not merely as a communication medium but as a dynamic space for religious expression and identity formation among young people.

Furthermore, the behavioral changes reported by informants are consistent with Social Learning Theory proposed by Bandura (1986, as cited in Irama, 2024), which suggests that individuals learn



behaviors through observation and imitation of role models. In digital contexts, religious leaders, preachers, and religious influencers serve as symbolic models whose behaviors and messages are internalized by followers. This process encourages the adoption of religious norms and practices in everyday life. Similar findings were reported by Dalimunthe (2025), who found that exposure to religious preaching on YouTube and Instagram positively contributed to increased worship motivation and spiritual awareness among Muslim youth.

Nevertheless, the study also confirms the presence of negative consequences associated with digital religiosity. The emergence of information bias and religious exclusivism reflects broader critiques of social media algorithms that create filter bubbles and echo chambers. These mechanisms limit exposure to diverse viewpoints and reinforce existing beliefs. Kustiawan (2025) demonstrates that social media algorithms contribute to religious information segregation, reducing cross-sectarian understanding and increasing intolerant attitudes. Such conditions pose serious challenges to religious moderation in digital spaces.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the influence of social media on religious perceptions and behaviors is fundamentally ambivalent. On one hand, social media offers unprecedented opportunities for spiritual growth, religious learning, and moral reinforcement. On the other hand, it presents risks related to misinformation, interpretive confusion, and ideological polarization. Addressing these challenges requires the development of robust religious digital literacy initiatives supported by formal religious institutions and digital education policies that promote critical engagement and moderate religious content.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social media plays a significant and multifaceted role in shaping university students' religious perceptions and behaviors in the context of digital religiosity. The findings reveal that social media has become a primary source of religious information and spiritual engagement, enabling students to access religious content that influences their understanding of tolerance, ethical values, and religious identity. Exposure to digital religious narratives contributes positively to increased motivation for worship, moral self-regulation, and spiritual awareness. However, the study also highlights the ambivalent nature of social media's influence. Alongside its constructive potential, social media presents notable challenges, including interpretive confusion, information bias, and exposure to intolerant or misleading religious content. These risks are amplified by the absence of clear religious authority and the algorithmic tendency of social media platforms to reinforce echo chambers. Therefore, the study underscores the urgent need to strengthen religious digital literacy among university students to ensure that social media functions as a medium for inclusive, reflective, and moderate religious development rather than a source of fragmentation and misunderstanding.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed. First, higher education institutions should integrate Religious Digital Literacy into student development programs and relevant courses to strengthen students' critical abilities in evaluating the credibility, authority, and ideological orientation of religious content on social media. Such initiatives are essential to help students navigate diverse interpretations and avoid misinformation or intolerant narratives. Second, formal religious institutions and credible religious scholars are encouraged to actively engage in digital platforms by producing inclusive, moderate, and educational religious content that aligns with students' media consumption patterns. This engagement can help balance the dominance of unverified religious narratives in digital spaces. Third, policymakers and social media platform stakeholders should collaborate to promote ethical digital governance by supporting content moderation mechanisms and algorithmic transparency that encourage exposure to diverse and moderate religious perspectives. Finally, future research is recommended to explore longitudinal and comparative approaches to better understand the evolving dynamics of digital religiosity across different sociocultural contexts.

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