

Social Media and Religious Engagement: Opportunities and Challenges in the Digital Era

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped how individuals encounter, practice, and express religious identity in the twenty-first century. This paper examines the relationship between social media and religious engagement, exploring both the opportunities these platforms create for expanding religious participation and the challenges they pose to religious authority, community cohesion, and social harmony. Drawing on a review of literature published between 2019 and 2026, the study investigates how religious individuals, communities, and institutions use platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and X to preach, evangelize, worship virtually, and build transnational faith communities, alongside the ways these same platforms facilitate the spread of religious misinformation, extremism, and interreligious polarization. The paper adopts a qualitative, desk-based research methodology, synthesizing peer-reviewed studies and case-based research from diverse religious and cultural contexts. Findings indicate that social media substantially lowers barriers to religious participation, enabling transnational congregations, novel forms of religious content creation, and expanded access to religious guidance, particularly for geographically dispersed or minority faith communities. At the same time, the analysis reveals that these platforms can reinforce echo chambers, amplify sectarian tension, and provide fertile ground for religious misinformation and radicalization, particularly where algorithmic amplification rewards emotionally charged content. The paper concludes that the net effect of social media on religious life is shaped by platform design, religious institutional strategy, and digital literacy rather than being inherently positive or negative. Recommendations include strengthening digital media literacy among religious communities, encouraging platform accountability for religious content moderation, and supporting religious institutions in developing intentional, values-aligned digital engagement strategies.

Introduction

Religion has always adapted to the communication technologies of its era, from the printing press that enabled the mass distribution of scripture to radio and television broadcasts that carried sermons into millions of households. The rise of social media represents the latest, and arguably most transformative, chapter in this long history of technologically mediated religious life. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X have become central spaces where religious individuals encounter sacred texts, follow spiritual leaders, participate in worship, and construct religious identity, often blending online and offline religious practice in ways that would have been unimaginable to previous generations of believers (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Hutchings, 2017). What distinguishes social media from earlier religious media, however, is its interactive, participatory, and algorithmically mediated character, which fundamentally reshapes not only how religious content is distributed but who gets to produce it, how it circulates, and which voices gain visibility within religious discourse (Cheong, 2022).

This transformation has generated genuine opportunities for religious communities. Social media has dramatically lowered the barriers to religious participation, allowing geographically dispersed believers, religious minorities, and individuals unable to attend physical services due to illness, disability, distance, or persecution to maintain meaningful connections to faith communities and religious practice (Ntlatywa, 2025). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this capacity proved especially consequential, as religious institutions across traditions rapidly adopted livestreamed services, virtual prayer groups, and digital religious education to sustain congregational life amid widespread closures of physical worship spaces (Campbell, 2020; Parish, 2020). Beyond crisis response, social media has enabled the emergence of new categories of religious actors, often termed digital religious influencers, who build substantial followings through platform-specific content strategies, reaching audiences that traditional religious institutions frequently struggle to engage, particularly younger generations who increasingly encounter religious content primarily through digital channels rather than institutional settings (Zeiler, 2024).

At the same time, the same technological features that enable these opportunities generate significant challenges for religious communities and broader social cohesion. Social media platforms are structured around algorithmic systems that tend to reward emotionally charged, novel, or polarizing content with greater visibility, a dynamic that has proven particularly consequential in religious contexts where beliefs are often deeply held and emotionally significant (Al-Zaman, 2024; RSIS Centre of Excellence for National Security, 2025). Research increasingly documents how these platforms can become vectors for religious misinformation, ranging from fabricated theological claims to blasphemy accusations that provoke real-world violence, particularly in contexts with weak content moderation infrastructure or high levels of interreligious tension (Al-Zaman, 2024). Scholars have also identified concerning patterns of digital echo chambers and selective exposure, wherein religious social media use, rather than broadening believers' exposure to diverse perspectives, often reinforces existing in-group boundaries and deepens polarization between religious communities (Ul Haq & Kwok, 2024). In more extreme cases, social media platforms have served as recruitment and radicalization tools for religiously framed extremist movements, exploiting the sense of belonging and identity that online religious communities can provide to draw vulnerable individuals toward violent ideologies (RSIS Centre of Excellence for National Security, 2025).

These dynamics raise important questions that sit at the intersection of religious studies, communication scholarship, and digital media research. Does social media, on balance, expand or constrain authentic religious community and practice? How do algorithmic content curation systems, designed primarily to maximize engagement rather than religious or social welfare, interact with the deeply held emotional and identity-based dimensions of religious belief? And what strategies might religious institutions, platform companies, and policymakers adopt to preserve the genuine opportunities social media offers for religious life while mitigating its documented risks for misinformation, polarization, and radicalization?

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to critically examine the relationship between social media and religious engagement in the digital era. The paper pursues several specific objectives. First, it reviews recent scholarly literature published between 2019 and 2026 to map current understanding of how social media shapes religious participation, community formation, and religious authority. Second, it identifies the specific mechanisms through which social media both enables and constrains meaningful religious engagement across diverse cultural and religious contexts. Third, it analyzes evidence concerning the challenges of religious misinformation, polarization, and radicalization associated with religious content on social media platforms. Finally, the paper offers recommendations relevant to religious institutions, platform governance, and digital literacy initiatives aimed at maximizing the benefits and minimizing the harms of social media for religious communities.

The significance of this study lies in its timely engagement with a rapidly evolving and consequential dimension of contemporary religious and social life. As social media platforms continue to shape how billions of people across the globe encounter and practice religion, understanding the conditions under which these platforms support versus undermine healthy religious community and interreligious relations carries substantial implications for religious leaders, technology companies, and policymakers alike. This paper is structured into five main sections. Following this introduction, Section Two presents a review of relevant literature published between 2019 and 2026. Section Three outlines the research methodology adopted for this study. Section Four presents the analysis and discussion of findings drawn from the literature. Section Five concludes the paper with a summary of key findings and their implications for practice and future research.

Review of the Literature

The scholarly literature on social media and religious engagement has expanded considerably in recent years, reflecting the growing centrality of digital platforms to religious life worldwide (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Ntlatywa's (2025) systematic literature review of social media use by religious communities finds that platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram have expanded opportunities for religious participation and engagement, enabling religious groups to transcend geographic boundaries and conduct practices ranging from preaching and evangelism to communal prayer and virtual religious services. The review notes, however, that research remains unevenly distributed across religious traditions and gives limited attention to privacy and ethical risks associated with religious social media use, identifying an important gap in the current evidence base.

A substantial strand of research examines the emergence of digital religious content creators and influencers as new forms of religious authority. The special issue on "God's Influencers," published in the *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, explores how social media users shape religion through pious self-fashioning, documenting the considerable "authenticity labor" religious content creators invest in performing genuine and spontaneous religiosity for online audiences (Zeiler, 2024). This research identifies digital media as a social space where offline inequalities, prejudices, and power structures can be simultaneously reinforced and challenged, complicating any straightforwardly optimistic narrative about the democratizing potential of religious social media. Complementary research on Generation Z's digital religious behavior in China finds that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly shape young people's willingness to participate in digital religious activities, extending established theoretical frameworks from Muslim-majority contexts to previously understudied populations (Malik et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2024).

Cross-cultural research further illuminates how social media reshapes interreligious dynamics specifically. Ul Haq and Kwok (2024) examine encounters with religious "others" on social media among Muslim users in Pakistan and Buddhist and Christian users in Hong Kong, finding that while religious social media can expand exposure to diverse perspectives, it frequently reinforces in-group boundaries and amplifies polarization through echo chamber effects. Their research develops a theoretical framework of "digital othering" to explain how believers navigate religious identity and community online, while also identifying emergent "religious bridge-builders" who develop new competencies for interreligious digital communication, suggesting that platform effects are not deterministic but are shaped by user agency and cultural context.

The challenges dimension of this literature has grown substantially, particularly concerning misinformation and radicalization. Al-Zaman's (2024) mixed-methods analysis of religious misinformation engagement in Bangladesh demonstrates that blasphemous religious misinformation is especially likely to provoke extreme user behavior, given the emotionally and socially sensitive nature of religious belief, with documented links between online religious misinformation and real-world violence against minority communities. Complementary research from the RSIS Centre of Excellence for National Security (2025) highlights how the manipulation of religious content, combined with global conflicts and algorithmic emotional amplification,

contributes to online radicalization, underscoring the urgent need for stronger platform regulation and enhanced digital literacy among religious communities.

Research on religious peacebuilding offers a counterpoint to this challenges-focused literature, documenting cases in which social media has been mobilized constructively for interfaith cooperation and conflict mitigation. Case evidence from interfaith prayer movements and cross-religious digital solidarity campaigns demonstrates that social media's capacity to create "networked publics" can be harnessed for peacebuilding as readily as for polarization, depending on the framing, leadership, and community norms shaping specific digital religious spaces (Boyd, 2010, as cited in Cheong, 2022). Collectively, this literature suggests that social media's impact on religious engagement is highly context-dependent, shaped by platform architecture, cultural and religious context, and the specific communicative strategies religious actors and communities choose to employ.

Emerging research on immersive and next-generation digital platforms adds further depth to this picture. Recent digital ethnography examining religious communities operating within social virtual reality platforms treats these digital environments as lived religious spaces rather than merely communication channels, offering a deeper understanding of emerging forms of digitally mediated religious practice that extend well beyond conventional text- and image-based social media (Głębocka et al., 2025). This methodological shift toward immersive digital approaches suggests that the boundary between online and offline religious experience is becoming increasingly porous, complicating earlier scholarly frameworks that treated digital religion primarily as a supplement to, rather than a genuine site of, religious practice (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). At the same time, research on cross-platform religious influencer engagement finds that specific communicative strategies, including hashtag use and message framing, substantially shape audience engagement with religious content, indicating that platform-specific technical affordances meaningfully influence how religious messages circulate and gain visibility (Cheong, 2022).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, desk-based research design grounded in a systematic review and thematic synthesis of secondary literature. Given that the paper's objective is to map the evolving relationship between social media platforms and religious engagement, identify mechanisms underlying both opportunities and challenges, and synthesize evidence across diverse religious and cultural contexts, a qualitative literature-based approach is well suited to capturing the interdisciplinary breadth of research spanning religious studies, communication and media studies, and security and radicalization research relevant to this topic (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Cheong, 2022).

The research draws on a purposive sample of peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and case-based research published between 2019 and 2026. Sources were identified through targeted searches of academic databases and search engines, including journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, religious studies and communication journals such as the *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* and *Social Media and Society*, and relevant security and policy research addressing online religious extremism. Search terms combined keywords such as "social media religion," "digital religion," "religious engagement online," "religious misinformation," "religious extremism social media," and "online faith communities," using Boolean operators to refine and broaden the search scope across these interconnected fields.

Inclusion criteria required that sources directly address the relationship between social media or digital platforms and religious practice, participation, or discourse, be published in English, and fall within the specified 2019 to 2026 timeframe to ensure the currency of the evidence base, given the rapid evolution of both social media platforms and their governance frameworks. Sources addressing religious media consumption exclusively through traditional broadcast channels, without a specific social media or digital platform dimension, were excluded from detailed analysis, as were sources focused on religious institutions' internal administrative technology use without a public-facing engagement dimension.

The analytical process followed a thematic synthesis approach. Selected sources were read closely and coded according to recurring themes, including religious content creation and authority, community formation and transnational connection, interreligious dynamics and polarization, misinformation and radicalization, and platform governance and digital literacy. These themes were then organized to construct a coherent narrative of how the literature conceptualizes and evaluates the relationship between social media and religious engagement. This method enables identification of convergences and divergences across studies conducted in markedly different religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, and across geographic contexts spanning South Asia, East Asia, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and Western democracies.

In addition to the systematic literature review, the study incorporates illustrative case evidence drawn from documented religious social media phenomena discussed within the reviewed literature, including virtual congregations, interfaith digital peacebuilding campaigns, and documented instances of religious misinformation and online radicalization. These cases are used as secondary illustrative material to contextualize and substantiate the thematic findings derived from the broader literature synthesis, rather than as standalone primary data collection conducted specifically for this study.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this methodological approach. As a desk-based qualitative review, the study does not generate new primary data through platform data analysis, surveys, or interviews with religious social media users, and its conclusions are therefore contingent on the scope, quality, and geographic and religious distribution of existing published literature, which remains disproportionately concentrated on Christianity and Islam relative to other world religions (Ntlatywa, 2025). Furthermore, because social media platform algorithms, policies, and governance frameworks change frequently, some findings discussed in this paper may evolve as platforms adjust their content moderation and recommendation systems. Nonetheless, the breadth of sources reviewed, spanning multiple religious traditions, geographic regions, and disciplinary perspectives, provides a robust foundation for identifying broadly applicable patterns regarding social media and religious engagement.

Analysis and Discussion

The synthesis of literature reviewed in this study reveals a consistent and productive tension between social media's capacity to expand religious participation and its documented potential to undermine healthy religious community and interreligious relations. The first major pattern emerging from the analysis is that social media substantially lowers structural barriers to religious participation, particularly for geographically dispersed, minority, or otherwise marginalized believers. Evidence from Ntlatywa's (2025) systematic review and related pandemic-era research demonstrates that virtual worship, digital prayer communities, and livestreamed religious services enabled meaningful continuity of religious practice when physical gathering became impossible, and that these digital accommodations have persisted well beyond their initial crisis-driven adoption (Campbell, 2020; Parish, 2020). This finding suggests that social media functions not merely as a supplementary channel for existing religious communities but as a genuinely transformative infrastructure capable of reaching populations that traditional, geographically bounded religious institutions have historically struggled to serve.

A second theme concerns the emergence of new forms of religious authority and content creation that complicate traditional institutional structures. The literature on digital religious influencers documents a significant shift in how religious knowledge and authority circulate, with individual content creators increasingly able to build substantial followings independent of formal religious institutional endorsement (Zeiler, 2024). This dynamic carries genuinely double-edged implications: on one hand, it democratizes access to religious teaching and enables previously marginalized voices, including women and younger religious leaders, to gain visibility they might not achieve within traditional institutional hierarchies. On the other hand, the "authenticity labor" documented in this research suggests that religious content creators operate under commercial and platform-driven pressures that may incentivize performative or sensationalized

religiosity over theological depth, raising legitimate questions about the long-term implications for religious literacy and doctrinal integrity within communities increasingly formed around individual digital personalities rather than institutional structures (Zeiler, 2024; Cheong, 2022).

A third and particularly consequential theme concerns the mechanisms through which social media facilitates religious misinformation, polarization, and, in extreme cases, radicalization. The analysis confirms that algorithmic systems designed to maximize engagement interact in particularly volatile ways with religious content, given the deep emotional and identity-based significance of religious belief for many users (Al-Zaman, 2024; RSIS Centre of Excellence for National Security, 2025). Al-Zaman's (2024) findings regarding blasphemous misinformation in Bangladesh, alongside RSIS's (2025) analysis of religious content manipulation in radicalization pathways, illustrate how this dynamic can escalate from online discourse to real-world violence when religious misinformation intersects with existing social tensions and weak content moderation infrastructure. Ul Haq and Kwok's (2024) concept of "digital othering" further clarifies the mechanism through which even ostensibly neutral cross-cultural religious exposure on social media can, absent deliberate bridge-building efforts, reinforce rather than dissolve interreligious boundaries, as algorithmic curation and selective exposure patterns lead users toward content that confirms existing group identities and beliefs.

A fourth theme relates to the significant contextual variation in how these dynamics play out across different religious traditions, regions, and platform ecosystems. The literature indicates that vulnerability to religious misinformation and radicalization is not uniform but is shaped by factors including regional interreligious tension levels, platform content moderation capacity and investment in specific languages and markets, and the strength of local digital literacy infrastructure (Al-Zaman, 2024; RSIS Centre of Excellence for National Security, 2025). Contexts with weaker content moderation resources in non-Western languages, alongside pre-existing interreligious tensions, appear particularly susceptible to the more harmful manifestations of religious social media dynamics, suggesting that platform governance interventions cannot be applied uniformly but must account for these substantial contextual disparities in risk and resource availability.

Finally, the analysis identifies religious institutional and community-level strategy as an important, though underexplored, moderating factor shaping social media's net effect on religious engagement. Evidence from religious peacebuilding research suggests that when religious leaders and communities proactively and intentionally shape their digital presence, including through interfaith collaboration and explicit counter-narratives to polarizing content, social media's networked, participatory structure can be harnessed for constructive rather than divisive ends (Cheong, 2022). This finding suggests that the ultimate impact of social media on religious life is not solely determined by platform architecture or algorithmic design, but is substantially shaped by the deliberateness and digital literacy with which religious communities themselves engage with these tools.

The analysis also surfaces an important generational dimension that cuts across the themes discussed above. Evidence regarding younger believers, including Generation Z digital religious behavior research, indicates that younger cohorts increasingly form religious understanding and community primarily through digital channels rather than traditional institutional settings, a pattern with significant long-term implications for religious institutions that have historically relied on physical congregational structures to transmit religious knowledge and cultivate belonging (Gao et al., 2024; Malik et al., 2023). This generational shift places additional pressure on religious institutions to develop genuine digital competency rather than treating social media as a peripheral outreach tool, since for a growing share of believers, digital platforms may constitute the primary, rather than secondary, site of religious formation and community.

A related consideration concerns the interaction between immersive digital technologies and traditional religious practice. Emerging research on religious communities operating within social virtual reality platforms suggests that the boundary between online and offline religious experience is becoming

increasingly porous, with implications that extend beyond the opportunities and risks associated with conventional social media (Głębocka et al., 2025). As these more immersive technologies mature, the analytical frameworks currently used to evaluate social media's effects on religious engagement, largely developed around text- and image-based platforms, may require further adaptation to account for qualitatively different forms of embodied digital religious experience (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

Findings and Conclusion

This paper examined the relationship between social media and religious engagement, exploring both the opportunities and challenges these platforms present in the digital era. The review and analysis reveal that social media substantially expands religious participation, enabling transnational faith communities, new forms of religious content creation, and continuity of practice for geographically dispersed and minority believers (Ntlatywa, 2025; Campbell, 2020). At the same time, the same platform features that enable these benefits, particularly algorithmic amplification of emotionally charged content, create significant risks for religious misinformation, interreligious polarization, and, in severe cases, radicalization toward religiously framed extremist violence (Al-Zaman, 2024; RSIS Centre of Excellence for National Security, 2025). Contextual factors, including regional interreligious tension, platform content moderation capacity, and digital literacy infrastructure, substantially shape the severity of these risks across different religious and geographic contexts (Ul Haq & Kwok, 2024).

In conclusion, the net effect of social media on religious life is neither uniformly positive nor negative but is instead contingent on platform design choices, religious institutional strategy, and the digital literacy of religious communities themselves. Religious institutions should invest in intentional, values-aligned digital engagement strategies rather than treating social media presence as incidental or purely promotional, while platform companies bear responsibility for improving religious content moderation capacity, particularly in underserved languages and regions where harmful misinformation and radicalization risks are most acute (RSIS Centre of Excellence for National Security, 2025). Digital literacy initiatives targeted specifically at religious communities, and particularly at younger believers who increasingly form religious understanding primarily through digital channels, represent a promising and currently underutilized intervention for mitigating misinformation and polarization risks (Gao et al., 2024). Future research should pursue comparative studies across a broader range of religious traditions beyond Christianity and Islam, and should examine how evolving platform governance frameworks and emerging immersive technologies shape the future trajectory of religious social media dynamics (Głębocka et al., 2025; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

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