DOI: 10.71317/jgst.2.11.2026.969
Journal of Global Social Transformation
Journal homepage: https://rjsaonline.org/index.php/JGST

Performative Digital Religiosity: Negotiating Religious Identity among Punjabi Youth on Social Media

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ARTICLE INFO

Submission:
September 30, 2026
Revised:
October 12, 2026
Accepted:
October 24, 2026
Available Online:
November 04, 2026

Keywords:
Digital religion, performative religiosity, Punjabi youth, social media, religious identity, moral surveillance, algorithmic religiosity, Pakistan.

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ABSTRACT

Social media has rapidly changed the experience of young people and shaped their religious identity in the online world. Religion plays an important role in the public values and social behavior in Pakistan. Digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube play a major role in religious education and moral discussion among young people. This study uses a qualitative method to understand how young people in Punjab experience religious identity through social media in the social and cultural environment of Punjab.This study uses the ideas of Erving Goffman and Michael Foucault and digital religion theory to understand how online visibility and reactions of audiences affect the religious lives of young people. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews of 15 young undergraduate students from universities and adults from major urban areas of Punjab. The data was analyzed by using the thematic analysis method given by Braun and Clarke. These findings show that social media plays a very important role in the religious lives of young people. It acts as a place for learning about religion and observing the moral behavior that presents identity and manages emotions. Many participants shared their feelings that they feel stressed to maintain their socially acceptable online identities when they have to balance conflicts, interpretations of religion, and public judgment. This research introduces the ideas of performative digital religiosity and algorithmic religiosity to explain how people shape their religious identity on social media. It shows that online religious expressions are influenced by public interaction and digitally shaped moral expectations. This study makes an important contribution to research on digital religion and youth identity by showing the qualitative insights from a Muslim-majority South Asian society that has received limited attention in previous studies. It shows how social media is changing religious authority and online self-presentation in young people of Pakistan, especially in Punjab.

Introduction

The rapid growth of digital media has changed the way people create and express their identities in modern society. Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook no longer function only as tools of communication. They have also become cultural spaces where social values and personal identities are constantly shaping and judging one another. Young people mostly used these platforms to shape their presentation, connecting with others and gaining social approval. (boyd, 2014; Campbell, 2013)

Religion has become an important part of digital identity in modern online culture. Many young people use social media not only for entertainment and communication but also to connect with religious beliefs and share religious content. The scholars of digital religion explain that the internet has greatly changed the way of understanding and practicing the religion. People can easily search for any guidance about religion through social media and online platforms. This has created new ways of learning about religion and interacting with religious ideas. So, religious learning is no more limited to traditional institutions and physical interactions. (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

Religious engagement is no longer limited to traditional places such as madrasas and mosques. Social media has created new platforms to connect the users with religious influencers and Islamic motivational content. Digital sermons and online moral conversations are also helpful. Religion is increasing through online interactions that are strongly influenced by the reaction of the audience and the culture of social media platforms. (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008)

The relationship between religion and social media is important in Pakistan because religion has a strong influence on morality, gender expectations, and relationships of families. Social media platforms have become important for balancing religious expectations and online self-presentation of young people in Punjab. Many young people experience different religious teachings with the social media trends that promote image building and entertainment. This creates tension between following religious values and maintaining the social expectations of online platforms. (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

This interaction created complex tension among young social media users. It provides opportunities for religious learning connections with online communities, but on the other hand, it exposes social pressure and identity-related anxiety for users. (Goffman, 1959; Marwick & boyd, 2011)

This study uses the theory of self-presentation given by Erving Goffman, which says that social media can be seen as a space where people perform for others. Social media users think carefully about their appearance and think about how the audience will react. (Goffman, 1959)

Michael Foucault explains that digital platforms work through the forms of social surveillance. People control themselves because they are aware of the criticism and judgment of people. This pressure becomes stronger when people try to follow socially acceptable standards. (Foucault, 1977)

Research on online religiosity and digital identity has increased worldwide, but there are still some important gaps that remain undiscussed related to South Asia and Pakistan. In Pakistan many studies have focused on political discussions and patterns of social media usage. Experiences of young people related to online and digital religious patterns have been given very little attention. (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

This study discusses these gaps by exploring how young people in Punjab express religious identity through social media within the social and cultural context of Punjab. By using the theories that are related to self-presentation and digital religion, the research examines different experiences of youth and identity management in digital environments.

Objectives:

This study was undertaken with the following objectives in view:

- How do young people in Punjab express and present their religious identity on social media?
- How do online culture and audience reactions affect the religious image of young people?
- What forms of identity conflict and emotional stress appear in digital religious experiences?
- How do young people in Punjab manage their conflicts about religious opinions and social expectations?

Literature Review

Digital Religion and the Transformation of Religious Practice

The connection of religion and digital media has become an important area of study in modern social sciences. Researchers believe that social media has changed the way of understanding people and sharing the experiences of people about religion in their daily lives. Social media and other online platforms are not only used for communication. They also play a major role in shaping the religious identity and maintaining the way people are engaged with religion. (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008)

Heidi Campbell explains this change through the idea of digital religion and shows how the online and offline religious experiences are closely related now. Campbell says that digital platforms do not take the place of traditional religion. It changes the way people engage with religious ideas and their communities. (Campbell, 2013)

Recent studies explain that social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram have become important places where young people engage with the religion. It includes short Islamic videos and motivational religious videos that affect the learning of youth about religion strongly. Scholars believe that these changes have reduced the control of religious authorities because these Islamic influencers also influence religious understandings. (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

Research also shows that digital religion allows the engaging of religion in a more personal way for young people. They select religious content that matches with the feelings and personal emotions of the audience. This change is common in young people who spend a lot of their time scrolling through social media places. (Campbell, 2013)

Some scholars believe that digital religion is turning spirituality into a form of online activity performance. Religious content that is shared on social media mainly focuses on public responses and views or comments, and it is closely related to social acceptance. (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008)

Social Media, Identity Performance, and Self-Presentation

Digital platforms have become an important part of people who develop and express their identities on social media. Social media encourages people to create the data continuously for showing it to others. Erving Goffman's idea about self-presentation shows that social media is increasing the behavior about performance because users are always available to be seen and judged by their friends and family members in their social network. (Goffman, 1959; Marwick & boyd, 2011)

Online identity is not stable in digital environments because people continuously express and adjust their identities through their photos and comments in their daily interaction on social media. Religious identity is becoming something that is publicly displayed and judged by others on social media. (Goffman, 1959; boyd, 2014)

Researchers show that young people often feel the pressure to maintain the socially and morally acceptable identity to avoid rejection on social media. Religious online identity is expressed through Quranic verses and Islamic reminders, which involve public moral opinions. These activities help the people feel connected with religious practices, but they also have a fear about being judged by others and appearing authentic. (Marwick & boyd, 2011)

Different studies show that culture plays an important role in shaping the behavior of religion in different ways. Instagram presents visually aesthetic and attractive forms of religious expressions that are connected to personal branding, and TikTok supports emotional and short videos of religious content. These platforms feature the ways youth experience and perform religion in online spaces. (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

Digital Surveillance and Moral Policing

Modern digital environments are shaped through different forms of social surveillance. Michel Foucault gives the idea of disciplinary surveillance and explains that social media allows people to constantly judge and observe behavior through likes and comments. (Foucault, 1977)

This online visibility has increased moral policing, especially in gender roles, modesty, and religious expression in different societies. Young people take these social expectations seriously and adjust their behaviors to fit in with them and to be acceptable to society. (Foucault, 1977; Marwick & boyd, 2011)

Research of Muslim societies shows that social media has become the place where religion and morality are openly discussed. Most of the women give more attention to their looks and dress. Young men also feel pressure to make themselves acceptable to society.

These findings highlight that digital platforms are not neutral environments because they are influenced by social control and moral expectations. (Foucault, 1977)

Youth, Religion, and Digital Culture in Pakistan

Religion plays a very vital role in public morality, the relationships of families, and social acceptance in Pakistan. Young people are engaged with religious content through social media and digital platforms in addition to traditional places like mosques and madrasas. (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

Recent research in Pakistan focuses on the use of social media for political communication and activities of entertainment among youth. But there is limited research on how young people manage and express their religious identities on online platforms.

Existing research shows that young people in Pakistan face tension between globalization and religious values. It also needs a balance between modern ways of life and the influence of digital media. Young users are introduced to a wide range of ideological perspectives, which include conservative religious ideas and liberal global points as well. These experiences can create emotional stress and conflicts among young people. (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

The results of research show that social media in Pakistan involves moral judgment more for women and young people who are seen as going against cultural and religious expectations. Most of the Pakistani studies on this topic are quantitative and do not focus on the personal experiences of young people through qualitative study.

Research Gap

The research on digital religion and online identity has grown and is discussed everywhere, but many important areas still need attention. (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

The first one is that most of the studies focused on Western culture, and it limits the understanding of the role of religious identity in Muslim-majority and South Asian cultures. (Campbell, 2013)

The second one is that studies of Pakistan have focused on political communication and extremism. They explore only the use of social media, not religious identity on social media.

The third one is that there is very limited qualitative research on Punjabi youth and their experiences in digital environments. Very few studies have examined how young people deal with moral expectations, reactions of the audience, and local social norms that interact to shape religious behavior in Punjab. (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

This research is meaningful to fill these gaps using a qualitative study and explain how Punjabi youth express religious identity through social media in the social and cultural context of present Punjab, Pakistan.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design to show how youth of Punjab express their experience with religious identity through social media platforms. This qualitative research was chosen because the aim of this research is to understand personal experiences and emotional struggles for religious identity, and it cannot be done through quantitative methods. (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015)

This study was based on the interpretivist paradigm, and it focuses on how people create and understand social reality through their personal experiences and interactions. Religious identity is based on social and cultural processes; that is why qualitative research allows the participants to share their experiences deeply on social media within this context of Punjab, Pakistan. (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

Research Setting

This study focuses on urban and semi-urban areas of Punjab, which include the cities of Lahore, Sargodha, Faisalabad, and Rawalpindi. These cities were selected because they provide different social, cultural, and educational environments and also show diverse levels of digital media and religious values.

Punjab was selected because it has a large youth population and increasing digital technologies. It also has strong social and religious values that play an important role in shaping public morality and identity.

Participant Selection

This study contains 15 participants who are aged 18 to 30 years. Participants were university students and young professionals because young people use social media on a regular basis. They used platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram.

Researchers used purposive sampling to select the participants who were able to share meaningful experiences and detailed thoughts for the research. Initial participants were contacted through networks of universities, and additional participants were selected through snowball sampling. (Patton, 2015)

There is a criterion for the selection of the participants.

- Live in Punjab, Pakistan
- Age group of 18 to 30 years
- Active user of social media
- Engage with moral as well as religious content online
- Willing to share their personal experience and thoughts

This sample has male and female participants from different social and educational backgrounds in order to check different viewpoints and experiences.

Data Saturation

Data was collected until thematic saturation was identified. Saturation was considered as done when new participants stopped providing new themes or meaningful ideas about online religiosity and identity presentation. After the fifteenth interview, the same results were shown related to identity anxiety and digital religious learning. (Saunders et al., 2018)

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews that were conducted between January and March 2026. Interviews were about 40 to 60 minutes and were conducted in both English and Urdu, according to the preference of the participants.

The method of semi-structured interviews was selected because it allows the participants to feel free and express their detailed thoughts and experiences that are related to morality, religion, and social media behavior related to the research objectives and aims. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015)

Interview questions focused on,

- Patterns for the use of social media
- Interaction with religious content online
- Viewpoint of a participant about online religious content
- Experience of judgement and criticism
- Emotional pressure and identity-related anxiety
- Influence of social media in shaping religious self-presentation.

All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of participants and then transcribed for the support of analysis.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved sensitive topics that are related to religion and online identity. So, it is important to consider ethical issues as well. All participants were informed about the aims of this study and gave voluntary informed consent. (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

Participants were aware of

- Confidentiality and privacy
- Anonymity in research
- The right to leave the study at any time

Pseudonyms were used for the participants during transcription to maintain the privacy of participants. All collected data were stored and accessed only by the researcher.

The researcher was responsible for maintaining the emotional comfort of participants in the discussion topics like online harassment, criticism, and identity-related anxiety.

Data Analysis

The data of interviews were analyzed by using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach of six steps. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022)

These six stages are

1. Reading and understanding the interview transcripts
2. Creating initial codes from the data
3. Identifying possible themes
4. Review and organize thematic patterns
5. Name and define the themes
6. Write and present the final report

This study uses an inductive coding approach so that themes could develop directly from the responses of participants instead of applying pre-existing categories. The researcher examined transcripts many times to identify important patterns and themes like online religiosity, identity performance, and emotional anxiety. Codes that have similar meanings were merged into a broader thematic category that represents the common experience of Punjabi youth. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022)

Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher remained conscious of the impact of personal beliefs and sociocultural background during the study. Morality and religion are considered sensitive issues in Pakistan, so attention was given to the background, language, and interpretation of the researcher to know their effect on the responses and analysis of data. (Berger, 2015)

The researcher encouraged the participants to speak freely through open-ended questions and avoid asking judgmental questions to minimize the bias in the study. The interview transcripts were also revised completely to make sure that the interpretations accurately reflected the perspective of participants during the analysis. (Berger, 2015)

Findings and Discussion

This analysis showed that Punjabi youth construct religious identity online through different processes that are related to self-presentation and moral control. It also includes emotional experiences and social expectations. Social media platforms are seen not only for communication purposes; they function as the spaces where religious identity is observed and judged constantly. (Goffman, 1959; Foucault, 1977; Campbell, 2013)

The data analysis identified five closely connected themes.

1. Social media as a source of religious learning
2. Moral surveillance in digital spaces
3. Performative religiosity and management of audience
4. Interaction with diverse religious authorities
5. Anxiety of identity and emotional negotiation

Social Media as a Site of Religious Learning

The findings showed that participants viewed social media as an important and engaging source of religious knowledge. Many participants said that they regularly watched Islamic videos, Quranic motivational reminders, and short religious content through TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.

A participant who was 22 years old from Lahore explained that,

“Sometimes traditional lectures feel distant, but the online Islamic videos feel connected to our daily life problems. A short reel can affect me more than a long Islamic sermon.”

Many participants explained that they prefer religious content because it is brief and easy to understand. Many participants also said that social media had become a major source of Islamic motivation and moral guidance.

This easy access to religious content also created confusion for many people. Many participants explained that social media shows different and conflicting religious opinions in which influencers share this content without having proper religious knowledge and education.

One participant from Rawalpindi said that,

“Every scholar says something different on online platforms. It becomes difficult to know what is actually right.”

This finding shows that religious authority is changing in digital spaces. As the concept of Heidi Campbell about digital religion participants explained, they do not rely on mosques and traditional religious institutions for religious knowledge. Instead of it, social media increases the understanding of religious content that spreads religious messages online constantly. (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

The study also suggests that social media platforms promote the religious content that is emotional and attractive, like attention-grabbing rather than detailed theology. Relogicity is increasingly influenced by platform trends and competition for audience attention. (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

Digital Moral Surveillance and Online Judgment

A major theme that appeared in the interview was a feeling of moral observation on social media. Participants explained that online platforms are spaces where opinions and lifestyles are regularly judged according to religious and moral expectations.

Female participants especially discussed facing criticism and judgment that is concerned with modern clothing and the visibility of the public on social media.

One participant who was 24 years old from Faisalabad shared that,

“If a girl uploads her picture without a dupatta, people immediately start questioning her character and religion in the comment section.”

Male participants also explained that they face pressure to maintain a morally respectable image online. However, this pressure was more connected to appearing religious and acceptable than presenting socially acceptable opinions.

One male participant explained that social media makes him feel like there are silent judgements about the level of religiosity his posts have shown. Many participants describe how they carefully check their social media content, which includes photographs and captions, to avoid negative reactions from family members and friends.

These findings reflect the experience of Michael Foucalt’s ideas of internalized surveillance. Participants explained that they rarely face pressure directly from the others, but they have awareness of being judged, and they adjust their behavior according to it. Social media has become a space of moral surveillance where users shape themselves according to what they believe are the expectations of others. Many participants described their experience of social media as emotionally draining. Users have the fear of being perceived as too liberal or attention-seeking. Such concerns contribute to identity anxiety and careful management of their social image. (Foucault, 1977)

Performative Religiosity and Audience Management

Many participants observed that religious expressions were not always motivated by personal faith. They noted that sharing Quranic verses and Islamic quotations serves as a way of gaining social recognition and taking positive responses from others. That is why religious content becomes linked with faith and social recognition as well.

A participant from Sargodha explained that sharing religious knowledge on social media helps individuals to make a respectable and positive image. He noticed that many people may have sincere intentions, but the desire for social approval is also important for them.

Many participants mentioned that they are conscious about the reactions of the audience to their posts. That's why some of them used to make entertainment-related content with religious videos to maintain an image of positivity, among others.

One participant noticed that maintaining a balanced online image is important because people criticize those who show themselves as too modern or too religious.

This shows that users carefully manage their profile on social media and present themselves. These results support the idea of Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation, in which he shows how people manage their impressions on social media. Participants suggest that online identity is shaped according to expectations of the audience and to avoid negative judgments. (Goffman, 1959; Marwick & boyd, 2011)

These findings show that online religiosity in online environments is connected to visibility and public expressions. Participants described religious identity as something that is not personal and is for public display and interpretation by others. Religious expression has become a negotiation between personal beliefs and social expectations.

This study uses the concept of performative digital religiosity. It refers to the ways that a person strategically uses to manage and present their religious activities. It highlights that social media turns religiosity into public practice, where expression of faith is a subject of social judgement.

Fragmented Religious Authority and Platform Culture

Many participants show confusion about investigating religious content on social media due to a large number of competing voices that are available online. Social media provides access to different motivational messages and viewpoints or discussions. Many participants observed that YouTube and TikTok show more emotional and religious videos in their feeds and increased their exposure to similar content.

One participant explained that watching a religious video fills their feed with religious content. Many participants noted that each religious platform shows a different style of religious engagement.

TikTok is related to emotionally short forms of videos, and Instagram provides a more aesthetic form of faith. YouTube presents educational and deep religious content, and Facebook is linked to moral and political debates. The purpose is to become influential and socially valued. (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

These findings show the idea of algorithmic religiosity. It means how religious exposure and identity formation are shaped by algorithmic systems that influence religious understanding and emotional engagement by giving importance to the specific forms of religious content. It does not act as a neutral tool and shapes the religious environment by controlling visibility and engagement. Digital platforms have become an important mediator of religious experience in society. (Gillespie, 2014)

Identity Anxiety and Emotional Negotiation

Participants express their experiences of emotional tension and personal beliefs and social expectations. Many of them feel pressure to present morally acceptable identities on social media and participate in everyday youth culture.

One participant explained that,

"Sometimes you may feel guilty for enjoying normal entertainment because religious content makes you feel like questioning yourself constantly."

Many participants described the repetitive emotional cycle, which involves guilt, religious motivation, and emotional exhaustion related to social media. This kind of identity anxiety is seen in those who are managing multiple pressures at the same time, like religious expectations, modern lifestyles, and peer influence for maintaining a digital presence.

The results indicate that social media contributes to increasing self-reflexivity among youth of Punjab. Participants evaluate their actions and expressions that are related to idealized standards of religiosity. Online platforms stabilize identities, but they provide emotional tension and continuous reworking of personal and religious identity. (Goffman, 1959; Foucault, 1977)

The findings suggest that social media intensifies reflexive self-monitoring among Punjabi youth. Participants continuously evaluated whether their behavior aligned with idealized standards of religiosity promoted online. (Foucault, 1977)

Rather than producing stable religious identities, digital environments often generated uncertainty, emotional pressure, and ongoing identity negotiation.

Conclusion

The study examined how Punjabi youth express religious identity through social media within the social and culture context of present Punjab. These findings suggest that digital platforms play a significant role in shaping religious experiences. They function as powerful social spaces for presenting religious knowledge, and religiosity is performed and emotionally experienced in everyday life. (Campbell, 2013; Goffman, 1959; Foucault, 1977)

These findings revealed that social media has served as an important source of learning for Punjabi youth. Many participants described that they use social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube for gaining Islamic knowledge. This easy access to information has introduced many challenges, like uncertainty about religious authority and identity-related confusions among people.

One of the key contributions of this study is that it shows how online religiosity is connected to the processes of visibility and the management of perspectives of the audience. Participants described that they remain highly conscious about their actions and content because of the interpretation of others to carefully manage their online self-presentation. They have fear of judgment from friends and family members and encourage careful self-presentation. Social media has become an environment of moral monitoring where users disciplined themselves to meet social expectations. (Goffman, 1959; Marwick & boyd, 2011)

This study further suggests that religious content on social media is done through different forms of public performance. The concept of performative digital religiosity shows the strategies of young users that they use for managing the presentation of their online religious identities. They seek social acceptance for making religiosity a meaningful practice, and that is also visible publicly.

This study also contributes to the concept of algorithmic reliogisity to explain how social media algorithms shape the religious exposure and emotional engagement by noticing different types of religious content. These findings show that digital platforms are growingly influential on religious experiences. It shows the concept of religiosity is not increasing only through social interactions but also from technological systems that are used by social media users and influencers. (Gillespie, 2014)

This study makes an important contribution to existing literature. It broadens the field of digital religion by giving attention to experiences of youth in Muslim society. It also contributes to the study of youth and identity by showing that social media encourage self-reflection and identity-related anxiety among people. This study demonstrates the importance of understanding religion within the framework of culture and moral practices. (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Tsuria, 2022)

This study also has contributions in social and cultural implications. Participants described emotional pressure and anxiety that influence self-confidence and feelings of social connections. There is a need for educational institutions, policymakers, and mental health professionals to recognize the role of social media in the moral and personal experiences of young people in society.

This study also has some limitations. The research only focused on urban and semi-urban youth of Punjab. It does not notice the experience of rural communities and used a small qualitative sample, so the results cannot be generalized to all youth of Pakistan. Future researchers on this topic will provide gendered dimensions of digital religiosity.

Overall, these findings suggest that religious identity is closely connected to digital media among Punjabi youth. Online environments play an important role in shaping how young people understand and express their faith. Social media has made a strong connection with religion by making it visible and interactive for the public.

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