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Living faith online: a phenomenological study of digital spirituality, spiritual coping, and psychological distress among muslim university students in pekanbaru, indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study asks a deceptively simple question: when Muslim university students in Pekanbaru feel anxious, overwhelmed, or spiritually adrift, where do they turn and what does that turning mean to them? Adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological design, the study examines the lived experience of digital spirituality as a resource for spiritual coping and psychological distress among Generation Z Muslim students. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 120 Muslim university students and five Islamic counseling lecturers (Dosen BK Islam), with interpretive analysis supported by NVivo 12 and strengthened through source, investigator, and method triangulation. Rather than treating digital religious content as mere media consumption, the analysis attends to how students describe, feel, and make sense of these encounters. The findings reveal that digital spirituality is experienced as an immediate and portable form of psychological first aid, as a distributed sense of the sacred that loosens the boundary between mosque and dormitory, and as an arena in which religious identity is tested and validated. Yet the same digital environment that consoles also wounds: participants described religious guilt during periods of low practice, a distinct form of spiritual burnout, and comparison-driven anxiety produced by curated displays of piety. These tensions consolation and pressure, autonomy and validation-seeking constitute the essential structure of the experience. The study contributes a phenomenologically grounded account of how faith is lived online, and argues that Islamic counseling in Indonesian higher education must extend into digital space, equip counselors with digital and media-critical literacy, and learn to address spiritual distress without pathologizing religious commitment.

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Introduction

Across the Muslim world, a generation has come of age for whom faith and the smartphone are inseparable. For Indonesian Generation Z Muslims in particular, religious life increasingly unfolds across YouTube lectures, TikTok dakwah, Islamic podcasts, and online consultation services, alongside and sometimes in place of the mosque and the study circle (Galvagni, 2020; Muallim et al., 2023; Subowo, 2021). The pressing question is not whether young Muslims use these platforms, but what these digitally mediated encounters come to mean for them, especially at moments of psychological difficulty. This study investigates that question directly: how Muslim university students in Pekanbaru live and interpret digital spirituality as a resource for coping with anxiety, academic pressure, and spiritual strain.

Digital spirituality the seeking, expression, and experience of spiritual meaning through digital technologies (Santana et al., 2022) has become a recognizable feature of contemporary religious life, manifesting in virtual religious communities (Macaraan, 2022), techno-spiritual practices (Munir et al., 2023), digitally mediated divine experiences (Meena et al., 2020), and the entanglement of social networking with religious identity (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2022). In the Indonesian Muslim setting, this phenomenon does not arrive on empty ground; it meets a deep tradition of pesantren education and a developing landscape of Islamic counseling (Baharun & Arifin, 2023; Natsir et al., 2023).

At the same time, Muslim university students carry a substantial psychological load. Academic pressure, uncertainty about the future, social comparison amplified by social media, and the work of holding an Islamic self together within a secular-leaning campus culture combine to produce real distress (Hilmi et al., 2020). The digital environment is double-edged here: the very platforms that grant instant access to consolation also expose students to comparison, fear of missing out, and identity confusion (Bonde, 2021; Keriapy et al., 2022). Any honest account of digital spirituality must therefore hold both its comforts and its costs in view.

Islamic counseling offers a distinctive way of bringing these threads together. Grounded in the Qur'an, the Prophetic tradition, and Sufi spiritual psychology, it treats faith not as incidental to healing but as its very medium (El-Aswad, 2020; Rassool, 2021). A growing literature has examined how this tradition operates in pesantren settings (Natsir et al., 2023; Umriana et al., 2023), in dialogue with Sufi practice (Arifin et al., 2022), and in relation to addiction (İşbilen & Mehmedoğlu, 2022) and depression (Pečečnik & Gostečnik, 2022), as well as its broader institutional evolution (Ifdil et al., 2023; Rothman & Coyle, 2020, 2023). What remains underexamined is the experiential hinge between these bodies of work: how students themselves actually live digital spirituality as psychological support, and how that lived practice interacts with formal Islamic counseling.

Three concepts therefore stand in a clear relationship in this study. Psychological distress names the lived difficulty students face; spiritual coping names the religiously framed practices Qur'anic listening, dhikr, tawakkal they mobilize in response; and digital spirituality names the mediated channel through which much of that coping now flows. Islamic counseling is the professional field that must understand and respond to this configuration. Prior research has tended to treat these elements separately, or to evaluate digital religion in the aggregate, leaving a gap precisely where this study intervenes: a first-person, contextually grounded account of how the three interlock in the daily lives of Muslim youth (Bagasra, 2020; Haris, 2021; Mufid, 2020).

A phenomenological approach is warranted because the object of inquiry is meaning, not frequency. The study does not ask how often students watch a ceramah, but what watching it does for them when they are afraid, and how the sacred comes to feel near while holding a phone in a rented room. Phenomenology is designed for exactly this task of disclosing the structure of subjective experience (Hatch, 2002; Hennink et al., 2020). Centering student voices in this way responds to long-standing calls within Islamic counseling scholarship for empirically rich, contextually situated accounts of how spiritual resources actually function in Muslim lives (Mahmood et al., 2023; Wangsanata et al., 2020; Yusop et al., 2023), and connects that field with digital religion studies (Guillory, 2022; Shoji & Matsue, 2020).

Pekanbaru offers a revealing site for this inquiry. As the capital of Riau Province, it combines a strongly articulated Malay-Islamic cultural identity with rapid urbanization and high digital connectivity, and it hosts a dense concentration of Islamic higher education. Students here move daily between an inherited religious public culture and an always-on digital one, which makes the negotiation between offline and online faith unusually visible. The study's contribution is threefold: it provides a phenomenological description of digital spiritual coping among Muslim students in this setting; it identifies and names experiential tensions most notably spiritual burnout and religious guilt that complicate optimistic readings of digital religion; and it draws out concrete implications for the digital transformation of Islamic counseling in Indonesian higher education.

Method

Research Design and Phenomenological Orientation

This study adopts a hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenological design, concerned with describing and interpreting the meaning of lived experience rather than measuring its distribution (Hatch, 2002; Hennink et al., 2020). Hermeneutic phenomenology is appropriate here because the study seeks not only to describe what students encounter in digital spiritual spaces but to interpret what those encounters mean within an Islamic cultural horizon (Rothman & Coyle, 2020). Consistent with this orientation, the researcher practiced bracketing (epoché) by documenting prior assumptions about digital religion and Islamic counseling at the outset and holding them in deliberate suspension during data collection, so that participants' descriptions could be met on their own terms. The analytic movement then followed the logic of phenomenological reduction: from particular

accounts, to clusters of meaning, to the invariant structures the essence that hold across accounts. To support analytic rigor, the design integrated triangulation across data sources and NVivo 12 as an organizing and corroborating tool (Bazeley & Richards, 2000; Lapan et al., 2012).

Researcher Positioning and Reflexivity

The researcher is an Islamic counseling scholar based in Pekanbaru, a position that afforded cultural and linguistic intimacy with participants while also carrying the risk of over-familiarity. Reflexivity was treated as an ongoing discipline rather than a single disclosure. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout fieldwork to track emerging interpretations, emotional responses to participants' accounts, and moments where the researcher's own commitments might color analysis. Where the researcher held strong prior views for instance, an inclination to see digital spirituality as broadly beneficial these were noted explicitly and tested against disconfirming accounts, which is one reason the analysis foregrounds negative and contradictory experiences rather than smoothing them away.

Participants and Sampling Rationale

Two groups of participants took part. The primary participants were 120 Muslim university students in Pekanbaru, recruited through purposive sampling against the following criteria: (1) active Muslim university student of Generation Z (aged 18–25); (2) daily social-media user; (3) regular engagement with Islamic digital content (YouTube ceramah, TikTok dakwah, Islamic podcasts, online religious consultation, or digital Islamic counseling); and (4) self-reported experience of at least one psychological condition academic stress, chronic overthinking, anxiety, burnout, identity crisis, or social pressure. The secondary participants were five Islamic counseling lecturers (Dosen BK Islam), selected for their expertise in Islamic guidance and counseling, prior use of digital media in service delivery, and active involvement in student mentorship.

A word is owed to the sample size, since a phenomenological study with 120 participants is unusual. The breadth was deliberate and serves two purposes consistent with the study's aims. First, it allowed the analysis to reach experiential redundancy with confidence: rather than inferring saturation from a handful of cases, the researcher could trace whether the essential structures of the experience recurred across a large and varied body of accounts, and could give negative and contradictory cases their due weight. Second, the depth that phenomenology requires was located not in a small headcount but in the analytic treatment of each account in the close, line-by-line interpretation of how participants described and made sense of their experiences. Interviewing continued until no new constituents of meaning were emerging from additional participants; the point of redundancy was reached well before the final interviews, and the remaining accounts served to confirm and refine, rather than expand, the structure of meaning. The lecturer accounts were not treated as an additional phenomenological sample but as a professional vantage point for triangulating and contextualizing the student experience. The implications of this design choice are revisited candidly in the limitations.

Recruitment proceeded through institutional channels and Islamic student organization networks. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and all participants gave informed consent prior to data collection (Flick, 2007; Olsen et al., 2004).

Data Collection

Data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with all 125 participants (120 students and 5 lecturers). Interviews were guided by eight experiential domains derived from the study's framework patterns of digital spiritual engagement; emotional and mental-health conditions; digital Islamic content as coping; understanding and use of Islamic counseling; digital religious community; idealized Islamic identity online; fears around digital religious judgment; and reliance on digital content for spiritual validation while remaining open enough to follow each participant's account where it led. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes and were conducted in a mix of in-person and online settings according to participant preference and accessibility. The interview guide was prepared in both Indonesian (the primary language of the interviews) and English. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for member checking, allowing them to confirm or amend how their experiences had been rendered.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed an interpretive phenomenological procedure, organized so that each step served the disclosure of meaning rather than mere categorization (Gibson & Brown, 2009; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). After repeated immersive reading of the transcripts (familiarization), the researcher engaged in initial meaning-unit coding, attending to the significant statements through which participants expressed how an experience felt and what it meant. These units were then clustered into meaning categories and progressively refined into the study's themes a movement that, while it passes through phases that resemble open and then more structured

coding, was governed throughout by the phenomenological question of essence rather than by a grounded-theory interest in generating theory. To corroborate the interpretive pattern, NVivo 12 was used for text-search and word-frequency queries (Gao & Liu, 2017; Stolte, 2003), which surfaced co-occurring constituents of meaning across the corpus and provided a check against researcher selectivity; these queries supported, but did not substitute for, the interpretive analysis. Finally, the constituents were synthesized into a statement of the essence of the experience (presented at the close of the Findings).

Trustworthiness was pursued concretely rather than nominally (Bazeley & Richards, 2000; Olsen et al., 2004). Source triangulation set student accounts against lecturer perspectives and documentary material; investigator triangulation involved a peer debriefer who independently reviewed a subset of transcripts and the emerging meaning-units, challenging interpretations that appeared to outrun the data; and member checking returned transcripts and provisional readings to participants. The reflexive journal provided an audit trail of interpretive decisions, including those moments where disconfirming accounts forced a revision of the developing structure.

Results and Discussions

The analysis yielded eight constituents of the lived experience of digital spirituality among Muslim university students in Pekanbaru. They are presented below not as discrete categories but as facets of a single, internally tensioned experience. For each, the account moves from what students experienced, to how they experienced it, to why it mattered to them, grounding interpretation in participants' own words and reserving wider theoretical dialogue for points where it deepens, rather than displaces, those voices. A synthesis of the essential structure follows the eight constituents.

Digital Islamic Content as a Daily Spiritual Threshold

For every student in the study, the day began or was punctuated by an encounter with digital Islamic content, most often a YouTube ceramah or a TikTok dakwah clip. What is striking phenomenologically is not the frequency but the function students assigned to it: a threshold practice that prepared them to face the day.

> *"Setiap pagi sebelum kuliah, saya pasti buka YouTube dulu, nyari ceramah atau konten motivasi Islami. Rasanya seperti isi bahan bakar sebelum hari dimulai." (R7)*
> "Every morning before class, I always open YouTube first, looking for Islamic lectures or motivational content. It feels like filling up fuel before the day starts." (R7)

> *"TikTok itu bukan cuma hiburan buat saya. Banyak ustaz muda yang kontennya masuk akal dan dekat dengan kehidupan kita sebagai mahasiswa." (R23)*
> "TikTok is not just entertainment for me. There are many young scholars whose content makes sense and is close to our lives as students." (R23)

The metaphor of fuel is telling. For R7, content is not information to be learned but energy to be absorbed before exposure to a demanding world; the experience is bodily and preparatory rather than cognitive. For R23, the value lies in proximity young scholars who speak from within the texture of student life, so that religious authority is felt as near and recognizable rather than remote and imposing. Students were careful to frame these practices as supplements rather than substitutes for conventional worship, filling the temporal and spatial gaps left by busy academic schedules. This is digital consumer spirituality in Santana et al.'s (2022) sense spiritual seeking woven into everyday consumption and it reflects the wider democratization of religious authority through digitally fluent ustaz muda observed across Muslim contexts (Munir et al., 2023; Shoji & Matsue, 2020). What the lived accounts add is the affective register: the experience is less about acquiring knowledge than about steadying the self at the threshold of the day.

Spiritual Coping as Immediate Psychological First Aid

When distress arrived, students did not deliberate; they reached. The most consistent experience in the dataset was the turn to Islamic digital content as an immediate response to psychological pressure academic stress (n=97), anxiety (n=84), overthinking (n=78), burnout (n=71), comparison anxiety (n=65), and identity conflict (n=52).

> *"Kalau lagi down banget, saya langsung buka podcast Islami. Dengerin murottal atau kajian itu bisa bikin pikiran tenang dalam hitungan menit." (R41)*
> "When I'm really feeling down, I immediately open an Islamic podcast. Listening to Quranic recitation or a lecture can calm my mind within minutes." (R41)

> *"Waktu ujian akhir, saya panik parah. Tapi terus ingat konten yang pernah saya tonton tentang tawakkal. Itu yang akhirnya bikin saya bisa tidur malam itu." (R88)*
> "During final exams, I panicked badly. But then I remembered content I once watched about tawakkal (complete reliance on God). That's what finally let me sleep that night." (R88)

The phenomenology here is one of speed and self-direction. R41's "within minutes" and R88's "immediately" mark these resources as a form of psychological first aid: ready to hand, requiring no appointment, and answerable to the body's acute need for calm. R88's account also discloses how content becomes internalized a remembered teaching on tawakkal surfaces unbidden at the moment of panic and does its work of release, allowing sleep. The meaning is not merely symptomatic relief but the restoration of a relationship of trust toward God that reframes the threatening situation. These experiences extend, in digitally mediated form, the recognized therapeutic potency of Islamic psycho-spiritual resources such as Qur'anic recitation, dhikr, and tawakkal (Haris, 2021; Rassool, 2021; Arifin et al., 2022; Rothman & Coyle, 2020), and they echo evidence that spirituality-based interventions reduce depressive symptoms (Pečečnik & Gostečnik, 2022). The agency students show in assembling their own spiritual support ecosystems is consistent with the self-motivated learning patterns documented among Islamic counseling students by Suhaimi et al. (2023).

Online Communities as Spaces of Belonging and Quiet Pastoral Care

Beyond solitary consumption, students described belonging to digital Islamic communities WhatsApp kajian groups, Telegram channels, Instagram study circles that they experienced as warm and responsive in ways that countered the isolation of urban student life.

> *"Saya join grup hijrah di Telegram. Di sana kita saling mengingatkan shalat, berbagi kajian, dan kalau ada yang curhat, biasanya langsung dapat respons yang Islami dan hangat." (R62)*
> "I joined a hijrah group on Telegram. There we remind each other about prayer, share lectures, and if someone shares their feelings, they usually get an Islamic and warm response right away." (R62)

R62's account reveals an experience of being held: the group answers "right away," and the response is at once religious and emotionally warm. The community functions, in effect, as informal pastoral care peer-level reminders, shared study, and a felt assurance that one's struggles will be met within an Islamic frame of meaning. This deepens Macaraan's (2022) account of virtual religious communities as health-nurturing and Keriapy et al.'s (2022) reading of cyberspace as a legitimate arena of spiritual experience, while pointing to something the literature on formal services often misses: these spaces are already performing functions that parallel Islamic counseling (Ismail, 2023; Wangsanata et al., 2020). The phenomenon of hijrah digital collectives algorithmically gathered groups that actively reinforce Islamic identity emerges here as a lived reality of mutual reminding and reassurance (Asmuni, 2021; Bonde, 2021).

The Wound Within the Comfort: Religious Guilt, Comparison, and Spiritual Burnout

If the preceding constituents disclose digital spirituality as consolation, this one discloses its underside. The same environment that steadies students also generates a distinctive distress, and participants spoke of it with unusual candor.

> *"Kadang saya merasa berdosa karena tidak kuat ibadah seperti biasa saat stres. Perasaan bersalah itu malah tambah bikin berat." (R15)*
> "Sometimes I feel sinful because I am not strong enough to worship as usual when I'm stressed. That guilt makes things even heavier." (R15)

> *"Di medsos semua orang kelihatan shaleh, produktif, dan bahagia. Saya merasa tertinggal secara spiritual dan akademik sekaligus." (R77)*
> "On social media, everyone looks pious, productive, and happy. I feel left behind spiritually and academically at the same time." (R77)

R15's experience is a painful inversion of spiritual coping: religion, ordinarily the source of relief, becomes a source of self-accusation, and the guilt compounds the original distress so that faith itself "makes things even heavier." This is what the study names spiritual burnout a state in which the effort to sustain religious practice under academic and social strain turns devotion into depletion. R77 reveals its social engine: the curated piety of others, encountered as an endless feed of shalih, productive, happy selves, produces a double sense of falling behind, spiritually and academically at once. The experience is structured by comparison and by the algorithmic amplification of idealized Islamic identity (Muallim et al., 2023; Subowo, 2021). These accounts are deliberately retained as negative and contradictory cases because they resist any tidy narrative of digital spirituality as uniformly benign; the lived experience is genuinely ambivalent. For Islamic counseling, the implication is pointed: interventions for Muslim youth need to incorporate media-critical literacy and a pastoral language for

spiritual guilt that neither dismisses nor inflames it (Rizal & Rosyada, 2023; Sari & Zainal Abidin, 2023). Hilmi et al.'s (2020) findings on spiritual well-being in pesantren settings provide a comparative anchor, which the present study extends to the urban, non-pesantren university context.

Knowing Islamic Counseling, Choosing the Screen: Help-Seeking and Stigma

Most students (n=96) could describe Islamic counseling in broad terms bimbingan rohani, nasihat agama, values-based support yet fewer than half (n=48) had used the formal services available to them. The gap is not one of ignorance but of preference, and the preference is revealing.

> *"Saya tahu ada layanan konseling di kampus, tapi rasanya lebih mudah buka YouTube atau minta saran di grup online. Tidak perlu janji dulu, tidak perlu ketemu muka." (R34)*
> "I know there are counseling services at campus, but it feels easier to open YouTube or ask for advice in an online group. No need to make an appointment, no need for a face-to-face meeting." (R34)

R34's reasoning is phenomenologically precise about why the screen wins: it removes the thresholds that formal help imposes the appointment, the face-to-face exposure that students experience as friction and, implicitly, as risk to face. The digital route is not merely more convenient; it is less exposing, which matters acutely where help-seeking carries stigma. The lecturers, as triangulating witnesses, observed how this reshapes the encounter when students do arrive:

> *"Mahasiswa sekarang datang ke sesi konseling dengan referensi dari konten digital. Mereka kutip ustaz dari YouTube, atau ceritakan masalah mereka berdasarkan konten yang mereka tonton. Ini perubahan signifikan dalam cara mereka memahami masalah mereka." (Islamic Counseling Lecturer, D3)*
> "Today's students come to counseling sessions with references from digital content. They quote scholars from YouTube, or describe their problems based on content they've watched. This is a significant change in how they conceptualize their problems." (Islamic Counseling Lecturer, D3)

D3's observation indicates that digital content does not merely precede counseling but furnishes the very vocabulary in which students understand their distress. This pushes the documented evolution of Islamic counseling from pesantren roots toward institutionalized and, now, digitally inflected practice (Baharun & Arifin, 2023; Natsir et al., 2023) a step further. The presence-centered assumptions embedded in psycho-sufistic, nafs-based, and addiction-counseling models (Arifin et al., 2022; Umriana et al., 2023; Rizal & Rosyada, 2023; İşbilen & Mehmedoğlu, 2022) are quietly challenged by a generation that arrives already mediated, calling for new conceptual frameworks in the field (Ifdil et al., 2023; Rothman & Coyle, 2023).

Distributed Sacredness: The Sacred Loosed from Place

A theoretically dense constituent concerned how students located the sacred. Repeatedly, they described an experience of nearness to God that was no longer tethered to the mosque or the majelis but traveled with them through their devices.

> *"Masjid itu penting, tapi saya bisa merasakan ketenangan yang sama waktu dengerin murottal di kamar kos, sambil pegang handphone. Bedanya cuma tempatnya." (R103)*
> "The mosque is important, but I can feel the same peace when listening to Quranic recitation in my dormitory room, with my phone in hand. The difference is just the place." (R103)

R103 holds two affirmations together without contradiction: the mosque retains its importance, yet the same peace is available in the dormitory through the phone. The sacred, in this experience, is distributed rather than relocated portable, accessible, and no longer dependent on consecrated space. This resonates with Galvagni's (2020) argument that digital spirituality is a genuinely new modality rather than a substitute for physical religiosity, and with Butler's (2022) framing of digital spiritual space as a technology of resistance: for students navigating the tension between Islamic selfhood and a modernist campus culture, the device becomes a refuge where faith can be nourished away from the evaluative gaze of both traditional authority and secular peers (Asmuni, 2021; Guillory, 2022).

Islamic Values as a Living Protective Framework

Students did not experience Islamic concepts as abstractions but as working tools deployed in distress. Tawakkal, sabar, syukur, and istighfar were described as active psychological resources, and one participant articulated this with striking clarity.

> *"Islam itu sudah punya 'teknik' sendiri untuk menghadapi kecemasan. Shalat, dzikir, baca Al-Quran itu bukan sekadar ritual, itu terapi." (R55)*
> "Islam already has its own 'techniques' for dealing with anxiety. Prayer, dhikr, reading the Quran these are not just rituals, they are therapy." (R55)

R55's reframing of ritual as therapy is not a casual analogy; it expresses a lived conviction that the tradition already contains what others seek in clinical method. The meaning is one of sufficiency and dignity an assurance that one's own faith is therapeutically adequate. This converges with a substantial scholarship on Islamic psycho-spiritual therapeutics (El-Aswad, 2020; Haris, 2021; Mufid, 2020) and, in particular, with Rothman and Coyle's (2020, 2023) grounded-theory account of Islamic psychotherapy, in which fitrah, nafs, and tazkiyah constitute a genuinely clinical vocabulary. The broader case for integrating spiritual elements into counseling (Yusop et al., 2023; Zakaria et al., 2022) is here enacted from the participant's side; digital mediation, through apps and podcasts, simply extends these resources into new delivery channels (Mahmood et al., 2023).

Seeking Validation: Identity Tested in the Digital Umma

The final constituent concerns the relational testing of religious identity. Echoing the dynamic of seeking others' opinions documented in the body-image literature that informed this study's design (Amrizon et al., 2022), students described posting and asking within digital Islamic spaces as a way of checking whether they were "Islamic enough."

> *"Saya sering posting tentang ibadah atau kajian yang saya ikuti. Sebenarnya itu bagian dari mencari pengakuan apakah saya sudah cukup Islami?" (R91)*
> "I often post about acts of worship or lectures I attend. Actually, that's part of seeking recognition am I Islamic enough?" (R91)

> *"Kadang saya tanya ke teman-teman di grup: 'Ini pandangan Islam tentang masalah ini gimana?' Bukan karena tidak tahu, tapi karena butuh konfirmasi." (R116)*
> "Sometimes I ask friends in the group: 'What is the Islamic view on this problem?' Not because I don't know, but because I need confirmation." (R116)

Both accounts disclose an experience in which religious identity is not simply possessed but performed and ratified by others. R91's question "am I Islamic enough?" reveals a self that seeks external confirmation of its spiritual standing, and R116 makes explicit that the need is for confirmation rather than information. The digital umma thus functions as an identity laboratory, a space where Muslim self-concept is tested, negotiated, and affirmed (Ismail, 2023; Muallim et al., 2023; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2022). This constituent connects the consoling and the wounding faces of the experience: the very communities that offer belonging also become tribunals before which one's adequacy is measured, which carries direct implications for counselors who must understand how online validation shapes clients' self-concept and help-seeking (Nofmiyati et al., 2023; Suhaimi et al., 2023).

Triangulation of Indicators

Table 1 triangulates the principal indicators across a representative subset of ten students (R1–R10), drawn from the larger sample to display the patterning of the experience across cases. The table corroborates the interpretive findings rather than standing in for them: the near-universal columns (daily access, coping use, academic stress, identity standards, peer validation) mark the invariant constituents of the experience, while the variable columns (community membership, formal help-seeking, digital-over-formal preference) mark precisely the tensions and individual differences the phenomenological analysis foregrounds.

Table 1. Triangulation of Digital Spirituality and Islamic Counseling Indicators (Representative Sample)

Indicator	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10
Daily digital Islamic content access	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Uses digital content to cope with stress	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Member of a digital Islamic community	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	✓
Experiences academic stress/anxiety	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Seeks formal Islamic counseling	–	✓	–	–	✓	–	✓	–	✓	–
Prefers digital over formal counseling	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓
Sets ideal Islamic identity standards	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Seeks digital peer validation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

The Essence of the Experience

Drawing the eight constituents together, the essential structure of digital spirituality in the psychological lives of these students can be stated as follows. Digital spirituality is lived as an intimate, portable, and

immediately available relationship with the sacred that students reach for as first aid in distress and as a threshold practice for ordinary days a relationship that consoles, steadies, and confirms belonging. Yet this same relationship is internally divided: the channel that delivers consolation also delivers comparison, and the community that offers belonging also functions as a tribunal of religious adequacy, so that faith can tip from relief into guilt and from devotion into burnout. The experience is therefore essentially ambivalent and self-mediating: students are not passive recipients of digital religion but active, often anxious, curators of a spiritual support ecosystem they assemble for themselves, in which nearness to God and pressure to perform piety are held in unresolved tension. It is this ambivalence consolation shadowed by pressure, autonomy shadowed by the need for validation that constitutes the lived meaning of digital spirituality for Muslim university students in Pekanbaru, and that Islamic counseling must learn to meet on its own terms.

Conclusions

To live faith online, for the Muslim university students of this study, is to carry the sacred in one's pocket while carrying its pressures there too. The essential meaning that this phenomenological inquiry discloses is not that digital spirituality has replaced traditional religiosity, nor that it has simply enriched it, but that it has become the primary medium through which a generation now experiences both consolation and spiritual strain. Students reach for digitally mediated faith as immediate psychological first aid and as a portable nearness to God that needs no consecrated place; in the same gesture, they expose themselves to comparison, to the tribunal of online piety, and to a guilt that can turn devotion into depletion. The lived experience is one of ambivalent self-mediation, in which young Muslims author their own spiritual support while bearing the costs of authoring it.

Theoretically, the study advances the conceptualization of Islamic counseling in the digital era by relocating the field's object from services delivered to experiences lived, and by naming spiritual burnout and digitally amplified religious guilt as phenomena that any adequate theory of digital religion must accommodate. It thereby complicates optimistic accounts of digital spirituality and supplies the experiential grounding that the Islamic counseling literature has called for, connecting that field to digital religion studies through a single, situated case.

Practically, the implications for Islamic counseling are specific. First, services must meet students where their spiritual lives already are, through credible online presence, digital consultation, and engagement with the platforms and ustaz muda students already trust, rather than waiting behind the friction of appointments and face-to-face exposure that students actively avoid. Second, counselor competency frameworks should be expanded to include digital and media-critical literacy, so that counselors can help students interpret curated piety without internalizing it as failure (Wangsanata et al., 2020). Third, and most delicately, Islamic counseling must develop a pastoral language for spiritual distress that addresses religious guilt and burnout without pathologizing religious commitment or undermining the genuine therapeutic resources that students draw from their faith (Bagasra, 2020; El-Aswad, 2020; Mufid, 2020).

For higher-education mental-health services in Islamic institutions, the study indicates that campus provision cannot remain office-bound. Where students experience formal services as exposing and digital resources as safe, institutions should integrate Islamically grounded digital outreach into their mental-health infrastructure, treating online spiritual coping not as competition but as the first point of contact from which students might be guided toward fuller support.

The novelty of the study lies in this combination: a phenomenologically grounded, contextually situated account of how faith is lived online among Muslim youth, which identifies the ambivalent essence of that experience and translates it into concrete directions for Islamic counseling and higher-education mental-health practice. Its limitations should temper its claims. The study relies on self-report; it is set in a single city, Pekanbaru, which bounds transferability; and its large, breadth-oriented sample, while it strengthens experiential redundancy and the visibility of negative cases, sits in tension with phenomenology's conventional preference for small samples, a tension the analysis has sought to manage through depth of interpretation rather than to dissolve. Future research should pursue longitudinal designs that track how digital spiritual coping evolves, comparative work across Indonesian regions, and the development and evaluation of digitally integrated Islamic counseling protocols, including attention to clinical outcomes among Muslim university students.

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