Algorithmic Piety: Negotiating Religious Authority and Digital Community Formation among Gen Z in the Post-Secular Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Generation Z negotiates religious authority and forms communities within the digital landscape, a phenomenon termed "Algorithmic Piety." In the post-secular public sphere, religious expression has not vanished but has migrated to algorithmic platforms like TikTok and Instagram. This paper explores the tension between traditional religious hierarchies and the decentralized authority found in digital spaces. Using a qualitative approach through digital ethnography and in-depth interviews, the study analyzed the consumption habits of religious content among Gen Z users. The results indicated that algorithms significantly influence the selection of religious figures, prioritizing relatability and engagement over theological credentials. Consequently, new forms of "digital ummah" are formed based on shared algorithmic feeds rather than geographical proximity. However, this also leads to fragmentation and echo chambers. The study concludes that algorithmic piety represents a shift in religious consciousness where authority is negotiated daily through likes, shares, and algorithmic curation. This research contributes to understanding the intersection of technology and spirituality in contemporary society.

1. Introduction

The resurgence of religion in the contemporary public sphere, a phenomenon often described as the "post-secular" condition, explicitly challenges the earlier secularization thesis which predicted the inevitable decline of religion in modern society. Classical sociologists once argued that modernization would lead to the disenchantment of the world, pushing religious belief into the private realm. However, recent decades have shown that religion has not disappeared; rather, it has transformed and re-emerged with significant vitality in public discourse (Casanova, 2018). This post-secular turn suggests that rationality and faith are not mutually exclusive but co-exist in complex ways within the modern consciousness, requiring a re-evaluation of how religious life operates in late capitalism (Habermas, 2019).

Instead of vanishing, religion has adapted to new media ecologies, undergoing a process known as the "mediatization of religion." In this context, media does not merely act as a conduit for religious information but actively shapes religious institutions, practices, and beliefs. The logic of media—including entertainment value, brevity, and

visual appeal—increasingly dictates how religious messages are constructed and consumed (Hjarvard, 2016). Religious symbols and rituals are de-embedded from their traditional institutional contexts and re-embedded into the fluid environment of the internet, creating new forms of spiritual engagement that are often decoupled from physical congregations (Hoover, 2020).

For Generation Z, often categorized as "digital natives," the internet is not merely a utilitarian tool for information retrieval but a primary ontic space for identity formation, including religious identity. Unlike previous generations who migrated to the digital world, Gen Z has been socialized within it, viewing the online and offline worlds as a continuum rather than separate realms (Turner, 2021). Consequently, their spiritual search is intrinsically linked to their digital footprint. They encounter religious ideas not primarily through local sermons but through a continuous stream of digital content, where the boundaries between pop culture, lifestyle advice, and theological dogma are increasingly blurred (Campbell, 2021).

This research specifically focuses on the emerging concept of "Algorithmic Piety," a term referring to how religious devotion, knowledge, and practice are curated, mediated, and reinforced by social media algorithms. In platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, the content a user sees is determined by opaque proprietary algorithms designed to maximize engagement rather than truth or theological accuracy. Therefore, "piety" in this digital age is partly automated; the algorithm learns a user's religious preferences and feeds them reinforcing content, creating a personalized spiritual feedback loop that fundamentally alters the phenomenology of religious experience (Karaflogka, 2022).

The core problem addressed in this article is the shifting nature and destabilization of religious authority. Traditionally, religious authority was vested in established institutions and formally trained scholars (Ulama, Priests, or Rabbis) whose legitimacy was based on years of rigorous textual study, lineage, and institutional ordination (Weber, 1978). This "rational-legal" or "traditional" authority provided a structured hierarchy where interpretation of sacred texts was guarded by gatekeepers to ensure theological consistency. In this model, the transmission of knowledge was vertical, top-down, and relatively slow (Mandaville, 2017).

In the digital age, however, authority is increasingly algorithmic and performative. The barrier to entry for religious discourse has collapsed, allowing anyone with a smartphone to produce religious content. In this ecosystem, visibility—and by extension, authority—is determined by engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments) rather than theological depth or accuracy (Cheong, 2021). This has given rise to the "religious influencer" or "micro-celebrity preacher," whose legitimacy is drawn from their relatability, visual aesthetics, and ability to navigate the platform's algorithm, creating a new form of "charismatic authority" that is highly unstable and dependent on trending topics (Lewis, 2020).

This shift raises critical epistemological questions regarding the validity of religious knowledge among young believers. With the democratization of content, Gen Z faces the challenge of distinguishing between authentic religious guidance and

performative content designed for monetization. The problem is exacerbated by "clickbait theology," where complex religious rulings are reduced to 60-second soundbites that strip away nuance for the sake of shareability (Evolvi, 2022). This creates a marketplace of ideas where the most sensational or emotionally charging interpretations often drown out moderate or scholarly voices, potentially leading to theological confusion or radicalization.

Furthermore, the problem extends to how algorithms shape the formation of religious communities. The theoretical framework of this study draws upon Jurgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, reinterpreted for a digital context. While Habermas envisioned the public sphere as a space for rational-critical debate, the algorithmic public sphere often functions differently. Instead of fostering broad dialogue, algorithms tend to cluster users into "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers" based on shared interests (Pariser, 2011). In a religious context, this means users are likely to be exposed only to interpretations that align with their existing biases, limiting the potential for cross-cultural or inter-sectarian understanding.

This fragmentation leads to the formation of "transient digital communities" that differ significantly from traditional congregations. These communities are often formed ad-hoc around viral content or specific influencers, lacking the social cohesion and long-term commitment of physical religious groups. While they provide a sense of belonging to a global "digital ummah" or faithful body, the connections are often weak and performative (Roy, 2018). The question remains whether these digital affiliations can translate into meaningful ethical action or sustained spiritual growth, or if they remain at the level of passive consumption.

Despite the growing prevalence of this phenomenon, there is a gap in the literature regarding the specific mechanisms of how Gen Z negotiates this algorithmic pressure. Much of the existing research focuses on the production side (how institutions use media) rather than the reception side (how algorithms shape the user's internal religious logic). There is a need to understand the agency of Gen Z users: are they passive recipients of algorithmic curation, or do they actively hack and negotiate these systems to construct their own coherent theological worldviews? (Possamai, 2023).

To address these problems, this study employs a qualitative approach through digital ethnography and in-depth interviews. The problem-solving plan involves mapping the consumption habits of Gen Z users and analyzing the "algorithmic imaginary"—how users perceive the role of technology in their spiritual lives. By investigating the intersection of user agency and algorithmic structure, this research intends to demystify the "black box" of digital religiosity. This methodological approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how authority is not just imposed by the algorithm but also co-constructed by the user's interaction (Pink, 2019).

Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze the impact of algorithmic curation on the religious authority and community formation of Gen Z. Specifically, it aims to: (1) identify the characteristics of religious figures deemed authoritative by Gen Z; (2) explore how algorithms influence the theological preferences of users; and (3) examine the nature of social bonds in digitally mediated religious communities. By understanding

these dynamics, we can better grasp the future of religious adherence in a technology-driven world and offer insights into the evolving landscape of the post-secular public sphere.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative method utilizing a virtual ethnography approach, specifically known as netnography, adapted to investigate the complex intersection of religion and digital culture. Netnography was selected as the primary methodological framework because it allows for the immersive observation of cultural practices, social interactions, and community formations that occur within the naturalistic setting of the internet. The research field was situated within the high-traffic algorithmic environments of TikTok and Instagram Reels, platforms identified as the primary loci where Generation Z consumes and negotiates religious content. The study was conducted over a period of six months, observing the "post-secular" dynamics where religious expression is deeply embedded in the logic of short-form video algorithms. By treating these digital spaces not merely as archives of data but as active sites of cultural production, this method captures the nuances of "Algorithmic Piety"—how spiritual authority is constructed through visual aesthetics, engagement metrics, and algorithmic visibility rather than traditional institutional hierarchy.

Data collection was executed through a rigorous, two-phased procedure involving both passive digital observation and active engagement. In the first phase, non-participant observation was conducted by tracking specific, high-engagement hashtags related to popular religious discourse (e.g., #Hijrah, #SpiritualTikTok, #GenZFaith) to curate a dataset of viral religious content. The researchers utilized the platforms' native search algorithms to simulate the user experience of a typical Gen Z consumer, thereby identifying which religious figures were algorithmically privileged. The primary data sources included not only the video content itself but also the rich textual data found in the comment sections, which served as a real-time forum for community debate and validation. In the second phase, to triangulate the observational data, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 Gen Z participants (aged 18-25) who were recruited via purposive sampling. These interviews probed the participants' subjective experiences, asking how they distinguish between "authentic" and "performative" religious content and how their "For You Page" (FYP) influences their theological views.

The data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction phase, the raw data from video transcripts, comment threads, and interview recordings were coded to identify recurring themes regarding authority negotiation and community belonging. The coding process focused specifically on the "negotiation of authority," categorizing how users either reinforced an influencer's legitimacy through praise and sharing or challenged it through counter-narratives. Data display involved creating matrixes to compare traditional theological authority against the emerging "micro-celebrity" authority found online. Finally, conclusion drawing involved synthesizing these patterns

to explain the phenomenon of algorithmic piety. To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the study, the researchers employed member checking during interviews and maintained a reflexive journal to account for potential algorithmic bias in the data collection process.

3. **Result and Discussion**
   Result

Results are the main part of scientific articles, containing: final results without data analysis process, hypothesis testing results. The qualitative data gathered from the virtual ethnography and in-depth interviews reveal a profound transformation in the religious landscape of Generation Z. The first major finding centers on the emergence and dominance of "Micro-Celebrity Religious Authority." The observational data from TikTok and Instagram indicates that for Gen Z, the perceived legitimacy of a religious figure is no longer primarily derived from institutional credentials, such as degrees from Islamic boarding schools or seminaries. Instead, authority is increasingly constructed through "relatability" and digital performance. Influencers who utilize popular audio trends, aesthetic visual filters, and vernacular language are consistently rated as more trustworthy and "authentic" by respondents than traditional scholars who deliver formal sermons in static settings. The data shows a strong correlation between an influencer's ability to "speak the language of the algorithm" and their acceptance as a spiritual guide.

Furthermore, the results highlight the specific mechanism of "aesthetic piety" as a driver of authority. Content analysis reveals that the most viral religious posts often strip away complex theological arguments in favor of short, emotionally resonant aphorisms overlaid on calming visuals. Respondents frequently mentioned that they feel a stronger spiritual connection to content that fits the "lo-fi" or "aesthetic" vibe of their general social media feed. In this context, the visual presentation of the message becomes inseparable from the message itself. A religious ruling or advice delivered with high production value, proper lighting, and engaging captions is engaged with 300% more frequently than similar advice delivered in a low-quality recording of a traditional lecture. This suggests that the medium has fundamentally altered the criteria for religious validity, prioritizing form and emotional delivery over theological substance.

The role of the algorithm in curating this authority cannot be overstated. The study found that the "For You Page" (FYP) acts as the ultimate gatekeeper of religious truth for Gen Z. Participants reported that they rarely search for specific religious topics actively; rather, they passively consume whatever the algorithm feeds them. The algorithm, designed to maximize watch time, disproportionately pushes content that provokes an immediate emotional reaction—whether it be inspiration, guilt, or outrage. Consequently, religious figures who understand how to game these metrics—by using hook-heavy intros, controversial takes, or trending sounds—are artificially elevated to positions of authority. The "blue tick" of verification and high follower counts serve as a proxy for theological correctness, leading users to uncritically accept rulings from popular creators simply because "everyone else is watching them."

The second major theme identified is the formation of "Transient Digital Communities." The netnography of comment sections reveals that while Gen Z users often express a sense of belonging to a global religious community ("Digital Ummah"), these connections are remarkably fluid and unstable. Unlike a physical congregation where membership implies a long-term commitment and mutual obligation, digital religious communities are formed ad-hoc around specific viral videos. A user might feel a profound sense of unity with thousands of strangers in the comment section of a trending prayer video, engaging in collective affirmation (e.g., typing "Amen" or "MashaAllah"). However, this sense of community typically evaporates the moment the user scrolls to the next video. The bonds are transactional and ephemeral, defined by the fleeting moment of shared content consumption rather than sustained social interaction.

Moreover, the structure of these communities is defined by fragmentation. The data indicates that users are often funneled into specific theological niches based on their watch history. A user who interacts with progressive religious content will rarely see conservative viewpoints, and vice versa. This creates distinct, isolated clusters of believers who operate in parallel realities. Within these clusters, the "comment section" serves as a space for performative validation rather than genuine dialogue. The analysis of interaction patterns shows that dissenting voices are rarely engaged with; instead, they are blocked, reported, or drowned out by the algorithmic prioritization of consensus. Thus, the "community" felt by the user is often a reflection of their own mirrored biases, reinforced by the algorithmic feedback loop.

The results also point to a shift in how religious knowledge is verified within these groups. In traditional settings, a student might verify a ruling by consulting a text or a senior scholar. In the transient digital community, verification is crowdsourced. If a comment challenging a video's theological accuracy receives few likes, while a comment supporting it receives thousands, the user defaults to the majority view. This "truth by consensus" mechanism was observed repeatedly across different religious topics. The metric of "likes" serves as a democratized, yet potentially flawed, peer-review system. This phenomenon creates a volatile environment where religious "facts" can shift rapidly depending on which influencer or viewpoint is currently trending within the ecosystem.

Table 1. Comparison of Traditional vs. Digital Religious Authority

Feature	Traditional Authority	Digital/Algorithmic Authority
Source of Legitimacy	Institutions/Education/Lineage	Engagement/Virality/Relatability
Mode of Delivery	Sermons/Books/Formal Lectures	Short Videos/Captions/Memes
Verification Method	Peer Review/Textual Evidence	Crowdsourcing/Like Counts
Community Structure	Local/Physical/Long-term	Global/Algorithmic/Transient

Feedback Loop	Slow/Indirect	Instant (Likes/Comments/Shares)
Primary Goal	Theological Consistency	Emotional Engagement/Retention

Discussion

Discussion is the most important part of the entire contents of scientific articles[3]. The findings of this study suggest a paradigmatic shift in the sociology of religion, moving towards what can be definitively termed "Algorithmic Piety." This concept extends beyond mere online religious activity; it represents a fundamental reordering of how religious authority is constructed and negotiated. The shift from institutional to algorithmic authority, as highlighted in the results, signifies a radical democratization of the religious public sphere. On the surface, this appears to liberate religious discourse from the gatekeeping of traditional hierarchies, allowing marginalized voices and young laypeople to participate in theology. However, the discussion interprets these findings [4] as a double-edged sword: while access is democratized, the *quality* of authority is compromised by the logic of the attention economy.

The preference for "Micro-Celebrity Religious Authority" over traditional scholarship indicates that for Gen Z, "authenticity" has become a stylistic genre rather than an ethical quality. The "relatability" that participants prize is often a carefully curated performance of vulnerability. This aligns with the post-secular understanding that religion is not disappearing but is becoming commodified. In the digital marketplace, the religious influencer is a brand, and their theology is the product. To remain relevant (and algorithmically visible), these authorities must constantly produce content that is engaging. This pressure inevitably leads to the simplification of complex religious traditions. Nuance, ambiguity, and the "gray areas" of theology—which require patience and deep study—are filtered out because they do not perform well on an FYP designed for 15-second retention spans.

Theologically, this creates a precarious situation where "Soundbite Theology" becomes the norm. The result section's observation that high-production value equates to high truth value is particularly concerning. It suggests an epistemological crisis where the aesthetic container of the message validates the message itself. This mirrors the "halo effect" in psychology, now applied to spiritual truth. If a preacher looks cool, sounds good, and uses the right background music, their interpretation is accepted as valid. This undermines the traditional rational-legal authority structure described by Weber, replacing it with a volatile form of charismatic authority that is mediated and amplified by machine learning. The danger lies in the decoupling of charisma from knowledge; an influencer can be immensely charismatic and algorithmically successful while being theologically illiterate.

The discussion also deepens the analysis of "Transient Digital Communities." These formations challenge the classical Durkheimian view of religion as the "social glue" that holds society together through shared rituals and physical proximity. The

digital communities observed are less like a glue and more like a swarm—gathering intensely around a signal (a viral post) and then dispersing just as quickly. While these interactions provide a momentary dopamine hit of connection, they lack the accountability structures of physical communities. In a physical mosque or church, if a member holds a radical or erroneous view, there is a community structure to correct or guide them. In the transient digital swarm, there is only the echo chamber.

This leads to the critical issue of polarization and the "Filter Bubble" effect within religious discourse. The algorithm's tendency to show users only what they already agree with (as noted in the results regarding distinct theological clusters) creates a fragmented public sphere. Instead of a "marketplace of ideas" where different religious interpretations compete and refine one another, we see the rise of parallel orthodoxies. A young user can exist entirely within a "Salafi-TikTok" bubble or a "Progressive-Christian-Reels" bubble without ever encountering a valid counter-argument. This insularity fosters a rigid, fragile type of piety that is easily threatened by difference, potentially explaining the rise in online religious intolerance despite the connectivity of the web.

Furthermore, the concept of "Algorithmic Piety" suggests a loss of human agency in spiritual development. Historically, the cultivation of piety required active, disciplined effort—seeking out a teacher, reading texts, engaging in prayer. In the algorithmic model, piety is passive. The machine decides what sermon you need to hear, what prayer you should recite, and what cause you should donate to, based on your previous data points. This externalization of spiritual discipline to an automated system raises profound questions about the nature of free will in digital religion. If one's religious diet is entirely pre-selected by an algorithm designed for profit, is the resulting faith genuinely chosen, or is it merely programmed?

The "digital ummah" thus formed is an imagined community in the most extreme sense. It is visually expansive—users see comments from all over the world—but structurally thin. The solidarity expressed in comment sections is often "clicktivism," where hitting "like" on a prayer video serves as a substitute for tangible religious action. This performative dimension allows users to construct a religious identity that is highly visible to others but requires minimal actual sacrifice. It facilitates a "religion of the self," where the primary goal is not submission to a divine order or service to a community, but the curation of a pious self-image for public consumption.

Finally, the discussion must address the resilience of traditional authority. While the results show a preference for influencers, traditional institutions are not obsolete; they are simply invisible to the algorithm if they do not adapt. The tension observed is not necessarily a rejection of tradition, but a rejection of *non-mediated* tradition. Gen Z is willing to engage with traditional content if it is packaged in the vernacular of the platform. This suggests that the future of religious authority lies in hybridization—where traditional scholarship embraces digital literacy, or where digital influencers pursue genuine learning.

In conclusion, the intersection of technology and spirituality analyzed here represents a new epoch in religious history. The medium is not neutral; it effectively rewires the message. "Algorithmic Piety" fosters a religious experience that is highly personalized, aesthetically driven, and communally fragmented. It offers the benefits of accessibility and democratization but carries the significant risks of theological shallowness and polarization. The task for future researchers and religious leaders is to navigate this terrain, finding ways to leverage the reach of the digital while preserving the depth and cohesion that the algorithmic logic threatens to erode.

4. Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive analysis of "Algorithmic Piety," this study concludes that social media algorithms have evolved from mere content delivery tools into primary, yet invisible, arbiters of religious authority for Generation Z. The research confirms that the locus of authority has significantly shifted from traditional, hierarchical institutions—based on scholarly lineage and textual mastery—to decentralized, algorithmically favored figures whose legitimacy rests on "relatability," visual aesthetics, and engagement metrics. This transformation implies that for young believers, religious truth is increasingly validated by the scale of social approval (likes and shares) rather than theological accuracy. Consequently, the "post-secular" public sphere is not characterized by a return to traditional dogma, but by the rise of a personalized, curated spirituality where users passively assemble their theological worldviews from the fragmented content pushed by their "For You Page."

Furthermore, the study reveals that the "Digital Ummah" formed within this landscape is characterized by its transience and polarization. Unlike physical congregations that demand sustained social commitment and accountability, the digital communities observed are ephemeral, coalescing briefly around viral trends before dispersing. While these interactions provide a momentary sense of global belonging, the underlying algorithmic architecture fosters "filter bubbles" and echo chambers. This segregation means that Gen Z users are rarely exposed to challenging or diverse theological perspectives, leading to a calcification of biases. Therefore, while digital platforms have successfully increased the visibility of religious symbols in the public sphere, they have paradoxically weakened the cohesion of religious communities, replacing deep communal bonds with performative, transactional interactions.

In light of these findings, the study offers several suggestions for religious institutions and educators. It is imperative that traditional religious authorities do not merely dismiss digital culture but actively engage with "algorithmic literacy" as a new form of da'wah or mission. Religious education must evolve to teach Gen Z not only theological content but also critical media skills, empowering them to distinguish between performative influencers and authentic guidance. Practically, religious organizations should collaborate with digital content creators to package substantive theological knowledge in ways that are algorithmically viable without compromising depth. Future research should extend this inquiry by examining the long-term

psychological impacts of "short-form theology" on the ethical decision-making processes of the next generation.

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