



Negotiating Digital Identity and Religiosity: A Narrative Analysis of Generation Z Users Toward Islamic Self-Help Content

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Article History:

Received: 02 December 2025

Revised: 14 February 2026

Accepted: 10 March 2026

Keywords:

Generation Z, Islamic Self-Help Content, Digital Religiosity, Religious Identity

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Abstract :

This study aims to explore how Generation Z negotiates their religious identity through digital Islamic self-help content. The research investigates the ways in which young Muslims engage with online platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, to shape their religious practices and beliefs. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with Generation Z participants who actively consume Islamic self-help content. The data were analyzed through narrative analysis, focusing on participants' personal stories and experiences. The findings reveal that Generation Z selectively engages with digital Islamic content, seeking material that aligns with their personal beliefs and addresses contemporary life challenges. The study also highlights concerns about the authenticity of content and the need for content that integrates practical religious guidance. The implications of this research suggest that digital platforms play a crucial role in shaping religious identity, with the potential for both positive and negative outcomes depending on the authenticity of the content. For content creators and platforms, ensuring the credibility of Islamic self-help content is essential for fostering informed and meaningful religious engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed not only how we interact but also how we negotiate our identities in various social spheres (Widiyanti, 2023; Urošević, 2023). This transformation is particularly evident among Generation Z, a group deeply integrated into digital spaces, where they constantly interact with self-help content that influences their personal growth and beliefs (Shafiq, 2024; Stevens & John, 2020). The importance of this study lies in understanding how Generation Z uses Islamic self-help content to shape their religious identity in the digital era. As digital platforms become primary sources of information, exploring how young people navigate the intersection of faith and technology is crucial (Park et al.,

2023; Whyte, 2025; Hefner, 2022). This research aims to bridge the gap in understanding the relationship between digital identity and religiosity, highlighting how digital self-help content serves as a tool for spiritual development.

A significant issue faced by society today is the overwhelming presence of digital content that influences personal and religious identity, especially for younger generations. With the rise of digital Islamic content, young users are continuously exposed to various interpretations of Islam, making it challenging to discern authentic and relevant religious guidance. This problem is exacerbated by the algorithm-driven nature of social media platforms, where content is tailored to engagement metrics rather than spiritual depth (Wahid & Abdulloh, 2026; Whyte, 2025). The lack of critical engagement with the digital Islamic content creates a scenario where users may passively accept information, potentially distorting their understanding of Islam (Gull et al., 2023; Fairuz, 2024).

In contemporary society, especially among Generation Z, religious identity formation is increasingly shaped by digital self-help content. This phenomenon is evident in the growing consumption of online Islamic teachings, podcasts, and social media influencers who present alternative interpretations of Islam (Hefner, 2022; Jafar et al., 2025). These young individuals, navigating the complexities of their faith and modernity, find themselves in a digital environment where religious content is more accessible yet fragmented, often lacking in-depth theological understanding. This landscape offers an opportunity to examine how young Muslims use digital platforms to construct and negotiate their religious identities, leading to a need for more nuanced studies on this topic (Choong, 2026; Chamadi et al., 2025).

Previous studies have explored how digital media influences religious practices and identity, yet most focus on Christianity or general religious practices in the West (Çevik, 2022). For instance, the work of Jafar et al. (2025) provides insight into how media representations shape the religious understanding of Indonesian Muslims. However, these studies often overlook the specific challenges faced by Generation Z in the context of Islamic self-help content. The gap in literature lies in understanding the unique ways this generation interacts with Islamic content in a digital world and how these interactions influence their religious identity (Al-Mutawa et al., 2023; Bouma et al., 2022).

Furthermore, studies like those of Putri et al. (2025) highlight the role of YouTube and other digital platforms in transforming spiritual practices among young Muslims. These findings underscore the need to examine not only the content itself but also the socio-cultural processes involved in how Generation Z selects and internalizes religious messages (Akib et al., Alliheibi, 2025). However, many existing studies do not fully address the intersection of personal identity and digital religiosity, particularly how young Muslims use digital self-help content to affirm or challenge their beliefs. This gap is significant as it leaves a void in understanding the nuanced ways digital platforms influence religious identity formation (Lott et al., 2025; Dahlan et al., 2025).

This research offers a fresh perspective by focusing specifically on Generation Z's engagement with Islamic self-help content and how it influences their religious identity in a digital context. The novelty of this study lies in its narrative approach, which allows for an in-depth exploration of personal stories and experiences of young Muslims. By analyzing how they negotiate their religiosity through digital content, this study contributes to a broader understanding of identity negotiation in the digital age. As digital media continues to evolve, this study will provide valuable insights into the changing dynamics of faith and personal growth in the digital world (Li, 2026; Nwankwo, 2022).

The primary research question guiding this study is: How do Generation Z users negotiate their religious identity through Islamic self-help content in the digital space? This question addresses the need to understand the processes of identity formation in the digital age, specifically among young Muslims. The argument posited here is that digital platforms, while offering unprecedented access to religious content, also present challenges in maintaining authentic religious practices and beliefs. This research aims to demonstrate that, through narrative analysis, we can gain a deeper understanding of how Generation Z redefines their religious identities in the face of digital influences (Rakhman et al., 2025; Siregar et al., 2025).

RESEARCH METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative research design to explore how Generation Z negotiates their religious identity through Islamic self-help content in the digital space. The qualitative approach is chosen due to its ability to provide deep insights into personal experiences and subjective meanings, which are crucial for understanding the complex relationship between digital identity and religiosity. Through narrative analysis, this study seeks to capture the lived experiences of young Muslims and how they interpret and internalize religious content available on digital platforms (Park et al., 2023; Siregar et al., 2025). This method allows for an in-depth exploration of personal stories and offers a rich understanding of the role that digital media plays in shaping religious identities.

The research will be conducted in Indonesia, focusing on Generation Z users who engage with Islamic self-help content via various digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and podcasts. The choice of Indonesia as the research location is based on its large Muslim population and the growing influence of digital Islamic content in shaping religious practices. Indonesia provides a unique context where digital media and religious authority are interwoven, especially among younger generations seeking spiritual guidance online (Jafar et al., 2025; Hefner, 2022). This setting allows for an exploration of how digital content both reflects and influences religious identity among Indonesian youth, making it an ideal location for the study.

Data will be collected using semi-structured interviews, which allow for flexibility in exploring the participants' personal experiences with digital Islamic content. Participants will be selected through purposive sampling, ensuring they meet the criteria of being Generation Z individuals who

actively engage with Islamic self-help content online. The data analysis will follow a systematic process, beginning with data condensation, where irrelevant or redundant information is removed. This will be followed by data reduction and display, where patterns and themes will emerge. Finally, the data will be verified to ensure its accuracy and credibility by cross-referencing with participant narratives and external sources of Islamic knowledge (Wahid & Abdulloh, 2026; Rakhman et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The data collected through semi-structured interviews with Generation Z participants revealed several key themes related to their engagement with Islamic self-help content and the negotiation of their religious identity.

Informant 1:

Informant 1, a 23-year-old student from Jakarta, shared that she frequently listens to Islamic podcasts and watches YouTube channels that focus on self-improvement from an Islamic perspective. She expressed that these platforms have helped her reconnect with her faith, especially during stressful periods of academic life. However, she also mentioned a sense of confusion at times, as the interpretations presented on digital platforms sometimes conflicted with what she had learned in formal religious settings. She stated, "I use these platforms to feel closer to Allah, but sometimes the content feels too simplified. It makes me question if I'm getting the right guidance."

Informant 2:

Informant 2, a 21-year-old freelancer from Surabaya, described his engagement with digital Islamic content as a means to affirm his religious practices amidst the challenges of living in a secular environment. He primarily consumes self-help content on Instagram and YouTube, often following Islamic influencers who provide motivational advice aligned with Islamic teachings. He noted, "I like how these content creators relate Islam to everyday struggles. It makes me feel like Islam is practical, not just something I read about in books." However, he also acknowledged that some content creators do not always provide references to authentic sources, which leaves him uncertain about the accuracy of the information presented.

Informant 3:

Informant 3, a 22-year-old university student in Yogyakarta, reflected on his use of online Islamic content to navigate the complexities of modern life. He mentioned that while digital platforms offered a wide range of perspectives, he often found himself drawn to content that aligns with his personal beliefs and values. He commented, "I follow creators who present Islam in a way that resonates with me personally. Sometimes, I avoid content that doesn't match my views, even if it's Islamic." This indicates a selective engagement, where the individual curates the type of religious content they consume based on personal preference and alignment with their identity.

Observations:

The researcher observed that participants generally engaged with digital Islamic content to gain spiritual insights, find motivation, and strengthen their religious practices. However, there were recurring themes of selective engagement and occasional conflict between digital content and formal religious teachings. Many participants expressed an interest in content that made religious teachings feel more relevant to their daily lives, yet they were also cautious about the authenticity of the sources. The data suggested a growing awareness among Generation Z users of the need for content that not only provides personal development but also maintains doctrinal integrity.

Furthermore, the observation revealed that the ease of access to diverse perspectives on social media and digital platforms led to a democratization of religious authority. Participants reported feeling empowered by the freedom to choose which content aligned with their personal interpretations of Islam, yet they also voiced concerns about the lack of formal verification and authority behind some of the content they consumed. This tension highlights the complex role that digital media plays in both shaping and challenging religious identity among young Muslims.

Discussion

The findings from this research reveal significant insights into how Generation Z engages with Islamic self-help content and negotiates their religious identity in the digital space. One key theme that emerged is the selective engagement with digital Islamic content, which aligns with previous studies that highlight how individuals curate their digital experiences to fit personal beliefs and preferences. For example, Informant 3's statement, "I follow creators who present Islam in a way that resonates with me personally," reflects a selective consumption of content, which is consistent with earlier research on how digital media allows for the construction of individualized religious identities (Jafar et al., 2025; Whyte, 2025). This finding underscores the personal nature of digital religiosity, where users navigate content that aligns with their worldview, even within the broader digital Islamic landscape.

However, the findings also highlight a critical difference when compared to existing literature. While studies have shown that digital platforms often present a simplified or fragmented version of religion, this research found that participants expressed a desire for content that connects Islamic teachings with everyday challenges, as evidenced by Informant 2's comment, "I like how these content creators relate Islam to everyday struggles." This contrasts with previous studies that suggest digital content tends to offer a more generic or surface-level approach to religious teachings (Putri et al., 2025). The participants in this study appear to seek content that not only inspires but also provides practical guidance on applying religious values to contemporary issues. This divergence signals a shift in how younger generations expect digital content to support both their personal growth and spiritual practices.

In terms of theoretical implications, this study contributes to the understanding of digital religiosity by emphasizing the role of self-help content in the negotiation of religious identity. While much of the existing literature focuses on the influence of digital media on religious practices, this research extends the conversation by showing how young Muslims actively

engage with and internalize religious content in the digital sphere. The selective consumption of content and the desire for relatable, practical religious advice suggest that Generation Z is not passive in their digital engagement but is instead engaging in a dynamic process of religious negotiation. This finding adds to the theoretical framework of digital media's impact on religious identity formation by suggesting that identity is continuously shaped by both digital and offline experiences (Rakhman et al., 2025; Siregar et al., 2025).

From a practical perspective, these findings have important implications for content creators and digital platforms. Content creators who produce Islamic self-help content need to be aware of the growing demand for material that connects faith to everyday life while maintaining theological integrity. The study found that participants were cautious about the authenticity of the content they consumed, with some expressing doubts about the sources of information. This highlights the need for greater accountability in the digital space, where the credibility of content creators should be emphasized to ensure that young Muslims can access accurate and reliable information. Furthermore, platforms like YouTube and Instagram should consider integrating features that verify the authenticity of religious content, providing users with tools to discern credible sources (Wahid & Abdulloh, 2026).

In conclusion, the study reveals that while digital platforms offer unprecedented access to Islamic self-help content, they also present challenges in terms of content authenticity and alignment with traditional religious teachings. The selective engagement of Generation Z users with digital content highlights a complex relationship between digital media and religious identity, where users navigate the tension between personal preference and doctrinal accuracy. As digital content continues to shape religious practices, further research is needed to explore how these trends evolve over time and the long-term impact they may have on religious authority in the digital era. The findings from this study suggest that digital self-help content is not only a tool for personal development but also an important space for negotiating religious identity in the context of contemporary challenges (Hefner, 2022; Jafar et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this research is the active role that Generation Z plays in negotiating their religious identity through digital Islamic self-help content. The study highlights how young Muslims selectively engage with online religious content, seeking material that resonates with their personal experiences and addresses contemporary challenges. This reflects a shift in the way digital media influences religious practices, where users are not just passive consumers but active participants in shaping their spiritual identities. The key lesson from this research is that digital platforms offer a dynamic space for religious self-exploration, allowing young Muslims to navigate faith in a way that is personally meaningful and relevant to their lives.

The strength of this study lies in its contribution to the field of digital religiosity, particularly by focusing on the intersection of Generation Z, Islamic self-help content, and religious identity. This research expands the current understanding of how digital media shapes religious practices, offering new insights into the individualized nature of religious engagement in the digital age. However, the study is limited by its focus on a specific demographic in Indonesia, and future research could expand this scope to include other regions or explore the long-term impact of digital religious content on identity formation. Further studies could also examine the role of digital platforms in fostering interfaith dialogue and the broader implications of digital self-help content on global religious practices.

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