

SPRITUAL ANOMIE IN GEN Z: AI AS A MEDIUM FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION FOR ISLAMIC STUDENTS



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Article History :

Submission : 29 January 2026
Revised : 22 July 2026
Accepted : 23 July 2026
Published : 10 August 2026

Keywords:

Artificial Intelligence,
Generation Z, Muslim
Student, Spirituality, Anomie

Abstract

The development of artificial intelligence presents a new space for Muslim students to engage in spiritual reflection. This phenomenon marks a shift in religious practices from communal spaces to digital ones, following a decline in trust in socio-religious relationships perceived as potentially judgmental. This study specifically analyzes the use of AI as a medium for spiritual outpouring, its role in self-reflection, the formation of Muslim students' spiritual identity, and its implications for social and religious relations in the digital era. Employing a qualitative-phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with three UIN Jakarta students utilizing AI for religious discussions. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with three UIN Jakarta students utilizing AI for religious discussions. Findings were analyzed using Émile Durkheim's concept of anomie, Anthony Giddens's reflexive identity, and Heidi Campbell's networked religion. The results suggest that AI is used as a temporary safe space for spiritual outpouring while simultaneously aiding self-reflection and individual identity formation. These findings also reveal a shift in religious reflection toward more limited spheres. Furthermore, the research emphasises the importance of students' critical thinking in verifying sources when engaging with AI.

INTRODUCTION

The era of digitalization has accelerated access to information worldwide, transforming daily work. Artificial intelligence (AI), as a simulation of human intelligence, now assists with tasks ranging from mobile applications to robotics. AI enables machines to solve problems like humans, such as recognizing images and generating creative content. In this context, the growing integration of AI in modern life raises essential questions about its effect on spirituality and identity among young generation (Hemraj, 2025)

In academics, AI aids Gen Z in completing assignments. In Indonesia, Gen Z (born 1997–2012) includes working adults, college students, and secondary schoolers (Philipp, 2025). Middle Gen Z, or college students, use AI most frequently. About 75% use generative AI for work; most non-users are Gen X or Boomers (Report, n.d.)



Among Muslim Gen Z students, they are in a transition phase marked by the search for self—identity and spiritual orientation. At the same time, their high digital literacy and AI usage uniquely position them to experience shifts in spiritual reflection. This makes students a crucial group for studying how AI is not only an academic tool, but also impacts their spiritual lives—highlighting the need to examine AI as both a source of empowerment and a potential disruptor of traditional spiritual frameworks (Hasibun & Salsabila, 2025).

This research examines part of Muslim students at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, a university where academic knowledges and islamic values meet in a digital environment. According to the (Malik et al., 2025) students face both academic and religious dynamics amid digital modernity.

Most of them use AI to complete assignments; one—third use it for entertainment; and the rest use it to study topics they find interesting. However, in addition to providing convenience, AI can also give rise to complex sociological problems, particularly in aspects of spirituality, self—identity, and social solidarity (Noprianto & Nurdin, 2025) In this context, AI has changed the way Muslim students interact with religion and spiritual values. The study conducted by (Miftahul Jannah, 2020) explains that the formation of religiosity in the digital era cannot be separated from the epistemological, sociological, and psychological contexts that accompany it.

A study reviewed by (Park et al., 2024) examining Gen Z spirituality proves that digital media influences Gen Z's religious behavior using AI—based spiritual applications for meditation and mental counseling. This can lead to a shift from traditional spiritual practices toward virtual ones. In this context, the phenomenon is interesting from a sociological perspective, as many studies have already examined AI and Gen Z interactions from psychological, health, and social perspectives. However, research on the spiritual realm of artificial intelligence and youth within a religious context in Jakarta remains very limited (Oviedo, 2022). This is crucial in Indonesia, as the country with the largest Muslim population, where the influence of social media on religious identity is becoming increasingly dominant.

The increasing use of AI as a means of spiritual reflection raises important sociological questions about how technology changes the way individuals understand religious meaning, guidance, and support. Rather than assuming that AI replaces religious positions or authority, this study examines how Muslim students negotiate the role of AI in their spiritual practices. Therefore, this study uses Durkheim's concept of anomie as a starting framework for understanding the transformation of the function of religious institutions. Then, it uses Giddens' concept of reflective self—identity and Campbell's perspective on digital religion to explain how individuals construct spiritual meaning and negotiate the spiritual meaning of religion in the digital age.

From Durkheim's perspective, religion functions as an important source of social integration by strengthening collective values and social solidarity (Youvan, 2024) . However, contemporary social transformations, including the expansion of digital technologies, have diversified the ways individuals access religious knowledge and engage in spiritual reflection. This study consider it part of a broader transformation in how individuals navigate religious guidance in modern society, rather than interpreting this development as a direct of religious authority.

Complementing this perspective, Giddens argues that self—identity is continuously constructed through reflexive processes in which individuals actively

evaluate experiences, information, and personal narratives (Horowitz, 2012) Within contemporary digital environments, AI can therefore be understood as one of the resources that facilitates reflexive engagement with personal and spiritual concerns. Campbell's concept of digital religion further explains that digital technologies do not simply replace offline religious life but instead reshape the interaction between technology, individuals, and religious practice by creating new spaces through which spirituality can be expressed, negotiated, and experienced (Liu et al., 2025)

Based on these point of views, this study argues that AI should not be understood merely as a technological innovation or as a substitute for religious authority. Instead, AI functions as an alternative medium through which Muslim university students negotiate spiritual reflection, construct personal meaning and complement. Rather than replace the roles of human relationships and religious communities in their spiritual lives.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach, namely descriptive research and tends to use in – depth analysis (Nurrisa & Hermina, 2025). This aims to describe how the transformation of spirituality, digital religion and the weakening of human authority make AI an alternative for searching for meaning in answering religious questions. Through a phenomenological model, researchers try to understand how the process of negotiating spiritual meaning between humans and AI helps form identity and reflection in individuals (Nasir et al., 2023)

The data for this study were collected through semi – structured interviews. According to (Nasir et al., 2023), this type of interview is considered to have greater potential than other types of interviews because it allows researchers to obtain in – depth information and evidence from informants while maintaining focus on the research. Interviewee selection focused on specific criteria relevant to the research needs, ensuring that each participant received rich information relevant to the study's focus (Andriani et al., 2025).

In this context, three participants, namely Muslim students of UIN Jakarta with an age range of 18 – 24 years who have used AI to discuss religious questions, negotiate meaning and feel helped by AI as an alternative for identity formation and self – reflexivity. Interviews were conducted online so that flexibility can be achieved, and the informants are able to answer research questions according to their abilities.

The average Q&A session between the three participants lasted 15 – 20 minutes. The researcher had previously obtained permission from the participants to record the entire process. This was done so that the researcher could listen back to the recording and verify the validity of the data through a triangulation process, rechecking the interpretation results. In addition, the researcher's role as the main instrument was an important factor in maintaining honesty, reflexivity, and transparency in the research process (Hidayati et al., 2020)

Data analysis was carried out through several stages such as transcribing the interview results, reading the notes repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding. After that, the coding process was carried out with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) or grouping important questions and statements into several main themes, then the data was interpreted based on the concepts and theoretical lenses that had been determined by the researcher (Miles et al., n.d.). To maintain the confidentiality of the participants' identities, the researchers decided to use the initials of the three informants, namely RY and SK, which were interviewed on January 8, 2026, while FT followed two days later, is on January 10, 2026.

The phenomenon of Muslim students who have other alternatives, in this case the AI – Quran which is considered a safe space that is easily accessible, personal, and inclusive, can be understood as one of the events that has just occurred with the development of digital technology. These practices have shifted from physical space to virtual space, which creates new forms of expression of faith (Liu et al., 2025).

On this basis, the researcher wants to analyze the use of the concept of intelligence (AI) to pour out one's heart regarding spiritual aspects among Muslim students at UIN Jakarta. This study highlights the pattern of spiritual interaction and the shift in religious practices from physical to virtual spaces. In addition, this research will enrich the understanding of the sociological implications of the use of AI on individual socio – religious blessings. This research also examines the tendency of individualization of religious experiences and the emergence of critical attitudes among students in verifying information in the digital era.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

AI as a Medium for Spiritual Sharing

Based on the interviews, informants demonstrated a pattern of using artificial intelligence (AI) as a safe space to vent spiritual concerns when social spaces were no longer deemed adequate. RY revealed that sharing personal problems with a religious teacher or religious teacher in a religious study forum could never be detailed and specific, unlike sharing with friends or family. *"Telling a story to an Islamic teacher or teacher who understands more in a community or study session is never detailed or specific, unlike with friends or family."*

This limitation was further emphasized by SK, who expressed his reluctance to share problems in public or in religious study groups for fear that it would potentially disgrace him. *"If I tell my problems in front of many people, like in a religious study session, it will only become a disgrace."* In this regard, FT also admitted to sharing his problems during mentoring activities for religious organizations. However, he never conveyed his personal problems to the ustad because he was afraid of being judged morally. *"I once told a story during a mentoring session of a religious organization, but for an ustad, it seems never, because I am afraid of being judged."*

Through Campbell's perspective on digital religion, this phenomenon shows how digital technology has facilitated changes in religious practice, becoming a link between individuals who want to maintain ties to tradition and impersonal spaces of reflection. Furthermore, the primary issue faced by informants in this case was not the loss of the need for spiritual guidance, but rather a sense of security when expressing religious matters in the presence of others (Campbell & Evolvi, 2019).

Concerns about moral judgment, the potential for spreading shame, and social stigma have resulted in social interaction spaces that previously functioned as safe spaces being perceived as places of social vulnerability. In response to this situation, informants chose an alternative strategy by utilizing AI as a space for reflection, perceived as safer and free from interpersonal judgment.

Relatedly, one study defines digital religion as a spiritual practice that utilizes digital space as a medium for individuals to actualize rituals, values, and expand community networks through the internet (Ningrum & Kholis, 2024). The emergence of this phenomenon is influenced by the weakening of religious authority, where religion serves to maintain social cohesion and collective consciousness through shared rituals in sacred spaces. However, digital religion is shifting this by creating global virtual communities with values that are more flexible and open to personal interpretation (Campbell & Evolvi, 2019).

Spiritual Identity Formation Through Digital Self-Reflection

Using AI as a platform for exchanging ideas has had a direct impact on how informants define themselves and deal with life's challenges. RY stated that the input and advice provided by AI helped him become a better person. *"AI gives many suggestions and can help me become better."*

This was also clarified by SK, who felt that interacting with AI helped him better understand himself and recognize mistakes that needed to be corrected, thus preventing him from overstepping his boundaries. *"Recognizing myself more and being aware of fixing mistakes prevents me from doing things beyond my limits."*

Meanwhile, FT added that his frequent discussions with AI have opened up many new perspectives in understanding various issues through clear and comprehensive explanations. *"I discuss often, so there are many perspectives that can be taken through explanations from AI."*

These findings indicate that AI is not merely a platform for venting spiritual concerns, but rather has developed into an interactive practice for describing life experiences. Through the dialogue that develops, AI acts as a reflective medium that helps informants review emotions, question beliefs, and examine the rationale for decisions they face. In this context, AI does not play an active role in shaping individual identity, but it does provide a different perspective that allows one to evaluate themselves independently.

Sociologically, the dynamics of this interaction reflect the concept of the reflexive project of the self introduced by Anthony Giddens. He argues that in modern society, exposure to new ideas, behaviors, and cultures due to globalization and technological advances means that old ideas or traditions are no longer absolutely accepted (Rongcai et al., n.d.). Digitalization tends to shift the position of "self–identity" to something dynamic, continuous, and reproducible (S, 2023). This identity can be built through a process of reviewing one's life journey, accepting new information, and restructuring oneself.

Reflexivity, in Giddens's framework, is a structured process in which individuals routinely re–edit their life histories based on new information and experiences (Rongcai et al., n.d.). Direct conversations between Muslim students and AI indirectly act as an interactive (reflexive mirror). A place where the informants articulate their thoughts, respond to views, and reprocess their life paths (Fuady et al., 2025). This identity remains actively shaped by the main actor, namely the individual, through repeated actions regarding the question *"who am I"* with AI present as a facilitator. This aligns with research reviewed by (Ardiyanti & Siregar, 2026), which states that AI can help provide informants with new perspectives and consider long–term consequences before making decisions.

Shifting Patterns of Religious Relations from Physical to Virtual Spaces

The informants' tendency to avoid using local religious authority figures such as ustad, kyai, or religious communities as their primary source of consultation stemmed from personal concerns about social judgment and the spread of bad news. RY acknowledged a fear of judgment when trying to share his declining faith or personal anxieties with others. *"I am afraid when telling others about personal problems (e.g., anxiety when faith is declining), instead of being heard, I will be judged."*

SK added that although AI is capable of logical thinking, the technology lacks empathy like humans. Therefore, direct interaction with others is still necessary to discuss inner anxieties or when requiring in-depth religious understanding. *"AI can indeed think logically, but not with empathy. Only humans understand; that is why I feel it is necessary to discuss religion or inner anxiety with others further."*

This argument was also supported by FT, who believes that AI cannot always provide satisfactory answers, thus necessitating absolute religious discussions. *"There must still be further discussion regarding religion with others, whomever they may be, because I am sure that AI cannot always provide satisfying answers."*

Findings from all three respondents revealed concerns about social judgment when sharing personal issues (such as anxiety and declining faith) and a preference for discussing religious issues and inner anxieties with other humans. This suggests that AI does not completely replace interpersonal relationships in religious practice. Instead, it serves as a safe, anonymous, and accessible initial consultation space, allowing individuals to reflect on personal issues before engaging in face-to-face discussions. AI transforms the way individuals seek spiritual guidance.

This situation can be analyzed using the networked religion framework developed by Heidi Campbell. Through digital networks, individuals can build loose and flexible bonds, with AI providing a neutral starting point in the personal realm before connecting to a deeper community (Campbell & Evolvi, 2019). Meanwhile, traditional authority shifts and becomes the final validation that is empathetic and remains contextual. In this context, individuals can live in two realities, the digital and the physical, while constructing a spiritual identity through personal reflection with AI, which is then shared in a social context.

This is further reinforced by the assertion that the shift in traditional religious authority has made AI an alternative spiritual reflection, considered more factual and supportive (Pacific & Forum, 2025). Digital spaces allow individuals to explore abstract identities without the constraints of traditional, often rigid institutions. Furthermore, it helps individuals process moral and spiritual values through philosophical inquiry, ultimately resulting in subjective religious interpretations (Philips, 2025).

Critical Awareness of AI Authority

Despite concerns that algorithmic authority may erode critical capacity, this study views AI as a medium whose influence remains mediated by social context and user knowledge. Therefore, it is important to explore how students negotiate and verify religious information from AI. This focus aims to understand whether AI really reduces critical awareness or reshapes the way students construct spiritual meaning. In this way, technology is seen not as a determinant of beliefs, but as a tool to which its users respond actively (Maharani, et.al, 2022).

The interviewees stated that although they utilize AI for spiritual reflection, the three do not accept the religious information at face value; they conduct

independent verification to test the validity of the data and facts provided by the AI. RY explained that if he encounters an answer whose accuracy is questionable, he will immediately question its accuracy until the AI provides valid sources. *"If I feel the answer given is inaccurate, I will question its truth; Alhamdulillah, after that, it gives valid sources."*

SK, on the other hand, carries out a structured verification step by asking the AI to provide initial reading material in the form of website links or PDF files. Then, he will re-examine the accuracy of the data and the origins of the case examples presented. *"First, I provide reading material such as website links or PDF files, then their accuracy is questioned again. If there are case examples, I ask where they were obtained from, and so on."*

Similarly, FT emphasized that he always questions the credibility of the source, evidence, and relevant Quranic verses in every answer provided by the AI before trusting it. *"I definitely question everything provided by AI. Whether the source is credible or not, what the related verse or evidence (dalil) is."*

In the context of critical thinking about AI, the three respondents unanimously agreed to review information provided by AI. They do not accept raw answers but verify them through various means. Among these are requesting credible references, clear sources for case examples, and adjusting those responses with Quranic verses or dalils (evidence) that have tested validity.

Not to be forgotten, they also discuss it with people who are considered to understand more about religious issues. Not always an ustad or kyai, but also friends, family, or lecturers. Such narratives reinforce the argument that the presence of artificial intelligence does not dull a person's critical thinking power. Instead, AI should be seen as a tool that accelerates the process of thinking and searching for meaning. When used as intended, this technology can help individuals explore the digital world in depth without losing personal control.

The assumption that AI ruins collective religious knowledge in the public sphere is not entirely justified. Field results indicate the opposite: students still maintain complete control over their thinking (Hidayatullah, 2024). Through the complex process of identity search, digital reflection, and repeated fact-checking (Azizi et al., 2025). Their independence of thought has been proven. Using logical reasoning, basic knowledge, and existing evaluation tools, students can remain empowered individuals by determining for themselves the truth of information before interpreting it as an individual spiritual belief.

Limitations of AI as an Alternative to Spiritual Sharing

Still within the same area as the previous theme, this section will discuss the affirmation that AI is positioned as a temporary safe space and self-reflection, not as a substitute for social relations or spiritual authority. As in previous analyses, the three respondents agreed that individuals may use AI for temporary safe spaces. However, one should not limit oneself to discussing with humans as real beings who can feel and have real experiences, rather than machines designed with specific systems (Youvan, 2024).

Source RY expressed the need for a balance between AI and human interaction. According to that, AI cannot always understand human stories. *"It comes back to each individual; AI is enough as a safe space, keep it balanced between AI and human interaction."* Informant SK clarifies statement the difference between venting to AI and to humans. He stated that AI is seen as superior at logical reasoning, processing large amounts of data, and providing consistent responses

based on the rules and patterns it has learned. AI can provide objective analysis based on available information. *"If you want to hear about logic, ask AI, but if you want the real thing, naturally go to humans because they are the ones who see and understand."*

Highlighting the shortcomings of artificial intelligence, SK suggested telling stories to humans who have real – world experience, genuine emotions, and deep consciousness that AI does not possess. This statement reveals that AI is a powerful tool for logic – based tasks, while human response is essential for knowledge grounded in real – life experience, deep understanding, and emotional authenticity. This aligns with FT's thought that artificial intelligence is enough to be used as an alternative that can provide motivation when a Muslim's faith is declining. *"Spiritual venting is only to refresh faith that is wilting or when the motivation is needed. However, to question Islamic law, of course, look for those who understand more like teachers, friends, family and so on."*

Furthermore, discussions on related questions must be conducted with those who are more competent, such as teachers, lecturers, friends, parents, and others. This phenomenon leads to a slight modification of Campbell's and Giddens' theories (Baycan & Lıner, 2023). In the era of digitalization, identity formation no longer takes place entirely in shared spaces but also through more personal, specialized relations facilitated by technology. The spiritual identity of Muslim students is formed through digital negotiation, literacy, critical thinking, and self – control to sustain faith and spirituality (Sukesi et al., 2023).

Spiritual Outpouring with AI and Limits of Student Piety

The use of artificial intelligence as a medium for spiritual venting among Muslim students does not directly correlate with increased individual piety. This argument needs to be emphasized to prevent research from being trapped in the fatalistic assumption that the intensity of digital spiritual practice automatically produces an intimate religious transformation. From the perspectives of the sociology of religion and digital psychology, AI is understood more as an instrumental, reflective tool rather than as the primary agent shaping piety.

Furthermore, research reviewed by Sood and Gupta emphasizes that the use of AI in the emotional and spiritual realms risks creating digital dependence (*overreliance*) and eroding original human – to – human relationships (Sood & Gupta, 2025). In an Islamic context, piety is not just about inner peace but also demands a process of soul purification (*cleansing oneself from evil deeds with good ones*) and struggle (*jihad: hard effort to restrain desires*) that takes place through social relations, teacher guidance, and community involvement. When all these things are entirely shifted to AI, students indeed easily obtain temporary emotional comfort, but cannot always experience a significant deepening of faith.

This is reinforced by (Alkhouri, 2024) who questions the credibility of AI – based religious practices. Artificial intelligence works with algorithms based on data and language processing, not with faith, intention, or spiritual consciousness. Therefore, spiritual reflection facilitated by AI tends to be affective and descriptive rather than empirical or fundamental. Students may have engaged in religious reflection, but the process will likely lose the metaphysical dimension that comes from real inner struggle.

One study emphasizes that AI is unable to capture internal spiritual dimensions such as intention (*niat*), moral consciousness, sincerity (*ikhlas*), and others because its entire mechanism is based on objective indicators and external behavior. In that

regard, AI can only mediate the articulation of problems, not the transformation of an individual's moral orientation.

Previous research explains that religious authority in the digital space shifts from depth of knowledge and personal piety toward algorithmic and content popularity (Hidayatullah, 2024). This condition allows students to feel religious without being accompanied by moral commitment in their daily lives, because they too often engage in digital spiritual practices through technology. This phenomenon can be understood as the sacred–profane distinction advanced by Émile Durkheim, in which religious practices ideally occur in a symbolic space separate from non–religious daily activities. When digital tools bridge spiritual reflection and instrumental use, the boundary between the two becomes increasingly blurred (Noprianto & Nurdin, 2025) so that the religious experience may lose its meaning.

Thus, the use of AI as a medium for spiritual venting cannot be understood as an indicator of increased individual piety. Artificial intelligence does not serve as a replacement for social–religious relations or spiritual authority, but only as a temporary personal reflection space. Piety still requires human involvement, the internalization of values, and the strengthening of collective norms, so that it is not degraded into a mere comfortable but shallow digital experience (Park et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings presented, this study concludes that the spiritual practices of Muslim students at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta do not completely replace traditional religious authority or eliminate the role of social communities. AI negotiates its role as a temporary safe space and a medium for anonymous self–reflection, free from moral judgment and protected from the potential spread of shame.

Despite the shift in spiritual interaction patterns from physical to virtual spaces, students retain critical control through verification of arguments and references to credible sources. AI is recognized as superior in logical analysis and providing initial motivation when faith is fading, but it lacks the empathy, spiritual awareness, or real–life experiences of humans. Therefore, the use of AI for spiritual sharing does not automatically translate to an increase in essential piety.

Theoretically and empirically, this research enriches the study of digital sociology by expanding the thinking of Anthony Giddens (*reflexive project of the self*) and Heidi Campbell (*networked religion*). The results demonstrate that the formation of Muslim students' religious identities is dynamic, occurring through negotiations between the private space of AI and the religious community. Consequently, this phenomenon highlights the shifting nature of religious authority, while blurring the boundaries between sacred and profane spaces.

For the public and students, these findings emphasize the importance of critical literacy to avoid digital dependency. Meanwhile, for religious institutions and local authority figures such as religious teachers (ustad) or religious leaders (kyai), this phenomenon can serve as motivation to reconstruct their da'wah approaches to be more inclusive, empathetic, and free from moral stigma.

However, this study lacks the limited number of informants on a single campus, making it impossible to generalize broadly or measure the long–term impact of worship. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the scope of the study using mixed methods, conduct comparative studies across religious

educational backgrounds, and analyze how religious leaders respond to and formulate ethical principles regarding the use of AI in matters of worship.

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