

Rituals, Sacred Spaces and Technology: The Transformation of Religious Practices in Indonesia's Digital Culture

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Abstract : This study examines the transformation of religious practices within Indonesia's digital culture, focusing on the relationship between rituals, sacred spaces, and technology. Research on religious digitalisation in Indonesia has largely focused on online sermons, religious influencers, and religious representations on social media, while changes in the meaning of sacred spaces, ritual efficacy, and the reconfiguration of religious authority within local contexts remain limited. This study employs a qualitative narrative literature review through thematic synthesis of 50 peer-reviewed sources from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and nationally accredited SINTA journals, most of which were published between 2006 and 2026. The analysis identifies three main themes: (1) the redefinition of sacred spaces from physical places into domestic spaces mediated by digital technology; (2) the transformation of rituals from physical to virtual presence, giving rise to hybrid religious practices; and (3) the shift of authority from traditional institutions towards digital network-based authority. Based on these findings, this study proposes the concept of "Sacred Digital Fluidity" as a heuristic lens for understanding how sacredness is produced, negotiated, and maintained across physical and digital spaces within the Indonesian context.

Keywords : Digitalisation of Religion; Sacred Space; Religious Rituals; Hybrid Religious Practices; Digital Culture.

Abstrak : Penelitian ini mengkaji transformasi praktik keagamaan dalam budaya digital Indonesia dengan fokus pada hubungan antara ritual, ruang suci, dan teknologi. Kajian digitalisasi agama di Indonesia masih didominasi pembahasan mengenai khotbah daring, influencer agama, dan representasi agama di media sosial, sementara perubahan makna ruang suci, efektivitas ritual, dan rekonfigurasi otoritas keagamaan dalam konteks lokal masih terbatas. Penelitian ini menggunakan tinjauan pustaka naratif kualitatif melalui sintesis tematik terhadap 50 sumber *peer-reviewed* dari Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, dan jurnal nasional terakreditasi SINTA yang sebagian besar terbit pada 2006–2026. Hasil analisis mengidentifikasi tiga tema utama: (1) redefinisi ruang suci dari tempat fisik menuju ruang domestik yang dimediasi teknologi digital; (2) transformasi ritual dari kehadiran fisik menjadi virtual yang melahirkan praktik keagamaan hibrida; dan (3) pergeseran otoritas dari lembaga tradisional menuju otoritas berbasis jaringan digital. Berdasarkan temuan

tersebut, penelitian ini mengusulkan konsep “Kekekalan Suci Digital” (*Sacred Digital Fluidity*) sebagai lensa heuristik untuk memahami bagaimana kesakralan diproduksi, dinegosiasikan, dan dipertahankan lintas ruang fisik dan digital dalam konteks Indonesia.

Kata Kunci : Digitalisasi Agama; Ruang Suci; Ritual Keagamaan; Praktik Keagamaan Hibrida; Budaya Digital.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of digital technology has brought fundamental changes to almost all aspects of social life, including the way humans understand, experience, and practise religion (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). In contemporary society, religion is no longer present solely through formal institutions or physical places of worship, but also through digital networks that enable religious practices to take place across space and time (Hoover, 2016; Dillon, 2009). This phenomenon is particularly significant in Indonesia, a country characterised by high levels of religiosity, diverse religious and cultural traditions, and massive digital technology penetration. Two macro indicators reinforce the significance of the Indonesian context. APJII, (2024) reports that Indonesian internet users in 2024 reached 221.56 million, a penetration rate of 79.5%. BPS, (2024) recorded that 72.78% of Indonesians accessed the internet in 2024, up from 69.21% in 2023, while DataReportal (2025) describes the intensification of platform-based social spaces, with approximately 212 million internet users (74.6% penetration) and 143 million social media user identities (around 50.2% of the population) by early 2025. These figures establish digital space as an everyday environment for communication, identity formation, and knowledge consumption, including religious knowledge, thereby making Indonesia a highly relevant empirical context for studying digital religion.

In Indonesia specifically, phenomena such as live-streaming Friday prayers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of the Digital Santri movement among pesantren students, and the proliferation of online pengajian (religious study circles) via WhatsApp and YouTube illustrate how deeply digital mediation has penetrated everyday religious life (Nisa, 2018; Nurmansyah et al., 2022). These developments raise fundamental questions about how sacred spaces are created, maintained, and recognised in the digital context, and how religious authority is exercised when physical co-presence is no longer a precondition for participation. To address these questions, this study draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks rather than the wider array of theoretical resources available in the literature. The first is the mediatisation of religion, in which Hjarvard (2008, 2011) argues that media has become an autonomous social institution whose internal logic visualisation, personalisation, speed, commodification reshapes religious practice and authority (Hutchings, 2017; Hjarvard, 2016). The second is digital religion, in which (Campbell, 2012) emphasises that online religious practice emerges from a dynamic interaction between technology, culture, and community, producing hybrid experiences that interconnect online and offline life (Krüger, 2018). The third is the sociology and anthropology of sacred space and ritual performativity, which understands sacred space as socially produced and contextual (Durkheim, 2016; Knott, 2008) and ritual as a performative act that creates, rather than merely represents, social reality (Bell, 2009). Other theoretical resources including Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Lefebvre's production of space, and Turner's communitas are introduced later in the Results and Discussion section where they are directly applied to specific findings, rather than elaborated at length here.

Existing research on digital religion in Indonesia remains fragmented. Much of it focuses on da'wah strategies and the representation of religious identity on social media (Lyansari, 2022; Febrian, 2024), while comparatively little work connects these communicative practices to the conceptual vocabulary of sacred space, ritual performativity, and religious authority within a single integrative framework. This gap matters because it leaves unanswered how the transformation of religious communication in Indonesia's digital culture actually reconfigures where, how, and by whom sacredness is produced and legitimated. This study departs from the assumption that digital technology not only facilitates religious practice but actively participates in

reconstructing the meaning of sacred space and the way rituals are performed and authority is exercised. By integrating mediatisation theory, digital religion, and the sociology of sacred space and ritual performativity, this study aims to understand digital religiosity in Indonesia as a dynamic, contextual social process. The main research question is: how does digital technology reconstruct the meaning of sacred space, ritual performativity, and religious authority in Indonesian society?

METHODE

This study employs a qualitative narrative literature review structured by thematic synthesis, rather than a systematic literature review (SLR) following a PRISMA-type protocol. This choice reflects the aim of the study: to build an integrative conceptual argument across a heterogeneous and theoretically diverse body of literature on ritual, sacred space, and digital technology, rather than to exhaustively catalogue and quantitatively screen a delimited evidence base, which is the purpose for which SLR protocols are designed (Snyder, 2019). A narrative review with thematic synthesis is well suited to this aim because it allows iterative, interpretive engagement with sources spanning multiple disciplines (sociology of religion, media studies, anthropology) and multiple national contexts, while still requiring a transparent and reproducible search and analysis procedure (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Sources were retrieved through searches of four academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and accredited national Indonesian journal portals indexed in SINTA. Search terms were used individually and in Boolean combination, including “digital religion”, “mediatisation of religion”, “sacred space”, “ritual performativity”, “online ritual”, “hybrid religious practices”, “religious authority digital”, “Indonesia religion digital”, and “Islamic social media Indonesia”. Searches were conducted in English and Indonesian, covering publications from 2006 to 2026, with exceptions made for foundational classical works (Durkheim, 2016; Lefebvre, 1991; Bourdieu, 2020) cited for theoretical grounding.

Sources were included if they were: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, or reputable research institute reports; (2) thematically relevant to digital religion, mediatisation, sacred space, ritual transformation, or religious authority in digital contexts; (3) specifically relevant to Indonesia or the Global South where applicable; and (4) indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ, or SINTA. Sources were excluded if they were non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces, news articles, or grey literature without institutional affiliation, or if they were unrelated to religion, digital media, or Indonesian societal context. Following this process, 50 sources were retained and form the evidentiary basis for the thematic synthesis presented below. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis procedure outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006): familiarisation with the corpus, iterative conceptual coding, and the grouping of codes into candidate themes, which were then reviewed against the full corpus and refined into the four core themes presented in the Results and Discussion section: (1) ritual transformation and tele-presence; (2) reconstruction of sacred space; (3) hybridity of religious practices; and (4) reconfiguration of religious authority. Coding and theme development were carried out by the lead author through repeated close reading and cross-referencing of sources; as the review was conducted by a single coder rather than multiple independent coders, inter-coder reliability statistics are not reported, and this is noted as a limitation in the Conclusion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Across the 58 sources reviewed, three themes recurred most consistently and form the backbone of the discussion below: the redefinition of sacred space, the transformation of ritual presence, and the reconfiguration of religious authority. These themes are substantiated both by international digital religion scholarship (Campbell, 2012, 2021; Hjarvard, 2008, 2011, 2016; Knott, 2008, 2015) and by Indonesia-specific empirical accounts (Nisa, 2018; Slama, 2017; Nurmansyah et al., 2022; Safitri et al., 2025; Putra, 2026; Taqwa & Lubis, 2025), allowing the discussion to move between general theoretical claims and grounded Indonesian illustrations.

Redefining Sacred Space: From Worship Architecture to Screen-Mediated Domestic Space. One of the main findings that consistently emerges in the literature on religion and digital

technology is the redefinition of sacred space in contemporary religious practice (Hjarvard, 2011; Lövheim & Hjarvard, 2019). Classically, sacred space is understood as a space socially and symbolically separated from profane space, marked by physical boundaries, architecture, rites of passage, and specific rules of behaviour (Durkheim, 2016). However, findings in digital religion studies show that the digitisation of religious practice has shifted this understanding towards a more fluid and decentralised direction (Campbell, 2021).

In the context of digital society, domestic spaces such as bedrooms, living rooms, or even private vehicles have begun to function as temporary places of worship when individuals access religious rituals through their device screens. Campbell (2012) shows that online religious practices often take place in private spaces not previously associated with sacredness, but which acquire sacred meaning through religious intention, affective involvement, and symbolic connection with the wider religious community.

In the Indonesian context, this phenomenon manifests in particularly concrete ways. During the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) issued fatwas permitting Friday prayers and congregational worship to be conducted online, acknowledging that living rooms and bedrooms had effectively become temporary masjid for millions of Indonesian Muslims (Nurmansyah *et al.*, 2022; Safitri *et al.*, 2025). Similarly, Balinese Hindu communities began using social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram Live to broadcast piodalan (temple anniversary) ceremonies to community members abroad, demonstrating that digital platforms were being actively incorporated into traditionally place-bound sacred practices (Putra, 2026). According to (Knott, 2015), the domestic space, through digital screens, becomes a kind of ‘sacred portal’ connecting individuals with institutional worship spaces that are geographically distant but symbolically close.

Lefebvre’s (1991) study on the production of space helps explain this phenomenon. Lefebvre emphasises that space is not a neutral entity, but the result of social practices and power relations. Digital sacred space can thus be understood as a space that is ‘produced’ through online ritual practice, religious discourse, and collective experience mediated by technology (Evolvi, 2021). A living room that is materially profane can acquire a sacred dimension when used for virtual congregational prayer or online massnot because of the physical transformation of the space, but because of the change in meaning attached to it through religious practice and intention. These findings show that the digitisation of religion encourages a shift from location-based sacredness to relationship- and experience-based sacredness (Tussa’banniya, 2025). Table 1 below presents a comparative overview of the key dimensions along which traditional and digital/hybrid religious practices differ, based on the synthesis of the literature reviewed.

Table 1: Comparative Characteristics of Traditional and Digital/Hybrid Religious

Dimension	Traditional Religious Practice	Digital / Hybrid Religious Practice
Sacred Space	Fixed physical location (mosque, church, temple)	Domestic space + digital platform (screen-mediated)
Ritual Presence	Mandatory bodily co-presence	Tele-presence; hybrid spectrum of physical + virtual
Religious Authority	Institutional figures (ulama, priests, clergy)	Networked authority; religious influencers
Community Formation	Geographically bounded communal gathering	Fluid digital affiliations; online ummah/congregation
Legitimacy of Ritual	Determined by tradition and institutional decree	Negotiated; context-dependent and debated
Habitus Reproduction	Physical co-presence; face-to-face socialisation	Fragmented; reflexive; cross-institutional access

Practices Source: Synthesised from Literature Review, 2026

Ritual Transformation: From Bodily Presence to Tele-Presenc

An important finding relates to the transformation of religious ritual from practices presupposing physical presence to forms of virtual or tele-presence (Capponi & Araújo, 2020; Mpofu, 2021). In classical ritual theory, physical presence is seen as fundamental to solidarity, emotional synchronisation, and deep collective experience (Durkheim, 2016; Turner et al., 2017), producing what Turner calls *communitas*. Online religious practice challenges this assumption by introducing a form of technologically mediated presence. The literature on online rituals shows that tele-presence allows individuals to feel ‘present’ in rituals without physical co-presence (Dein & Watts, 2023). Lombard and Ditton (1997) define tele-presence as the subjective experience of being in another place through media. In a religious context, this experience is realised when worshippers follow rituals via streaming and feel emotionally and spiritually connected despite being in different locations (Cheong, 2010). Empirical studies show that for some worshippers, virtual presence can provide a significant sense of closeness and participation, especially when rituals are accompanied by symbolic interaction such as communal prayer, verbal responses, or participation through comment columns (Heidbrink, 2017).

This transformation has also sparked debate about the effectiveness and legitimacy of online rituals. In Indonesia, the phenomenon of live-streaming Friday prayers became a flashpoint of public debate during 2020–2021; figures such as Ustadz Abdul Somad and institutional bodies such as MUI issued conditional permissions for online worship while emphasising its temporary and non-ideal nature (Safitri et al., 2025). The Digital Santri movement, emerging from *pesantren* networks, further illustrates this negotiation: young students used WhatsApp groups and Telegram channels to maintain the rhythms of congregational learning and collective *dhikr* while physically dispersed, creating what (Taqwa & Lubis, 2025) describe as ‘mediated *communitas*’. According to (Krüger, 2018), the mediatisation of religion often triggers a renegotiation of the boundaries between practices considered ‘authentic’ and ‘mere representations’. These findings indicate that the transformation of religious ritual does not occur linearly, but through a process of negotiation involving theological norms, practical needs, and the subjective experience of the faithful (Meyer, 2011). Tele-presence does not completely replace bodily presence, but forms a spectrum of hybrid ritual practices.

New Religious Authorities: From Institutions to Religious Influencers

A notable finding in the digital religious landscape is the emergence of new forms of religious authority operating in the digital space. Traditionally, religious authority has been attached to formal institutions and figures who gained legitimacy through education, scholarly lineage, and community recognition (El Naggar, 2014). However, the digital space opens opportunities for new actors to build religious authority through visibility, popularity, and performative credibility (Evolvi, 2022). Hjarvard (2016) argues that the mediatisation of religion contributes to the weakening of institutional control over religious representation, enabling the emergence of non-traditional authority. Campbell (2021) refers to this shift as a move from institutional authority to networked authority, where legitimacy is built through interaction and recognition from online audiences.

In Indonesia, literature on digital *da’wah* and religious influencers shows that religious figures on social media play an important role in shaping public religious discourse (Lyansari, 2022). Figures such as Gus Baha, Felix Siau, and Habib Husein Ja’far Al Hadareach commanding millions of followers across YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok illustrate how authority in the Indonesian digital religious space is built through a combination of scholarly credentials, communicative accessibility, and algorithmic visibility. These figures negotiate between institutional Islam, represented by bodies such as NU and Muhammadiyah, and the informal expectations of digital audiences who value personal relevance, emotional resonance, and direct interaction (Lyansari, 2022; Febrian, 2024). These findings confirm that religious authority in the digital age has not disappeared but has been reconfigured into a more pluralistic and competitive form.



Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Religious transformations in Digital Culture
Source: Research Findings Based on Theory, 2026

Technology, Sacredness, and the Ambivalence of Mediation: Desacralisation or Resacralisation?

One of the most central theoretical debates in the study of religion and technology concerns whether digital technology functions as a force of desacralisation or facilitates new forms of resacralisation. Hjarvard (2011, 2008) argues that modern media tends to take over the symbolic functions of religion, desacralising it through subordination to the logic of media, entertainment, and the attention market. However, the relationship between technology and sacredness is far more ambivalent. While digital mediation can erode certain dimensions of rituals spatial attachment, bodily discipline, collective intensity it also opens possibilities for new forms of sacredness that are more personal, reflective, and flexible (Campbell, 2012).

In the Indonesian context, screen-mediated rituals are often perceived as less ‘complete’ because they occur in domestic spaces mixed with profane activities; yet many believers report an intensification of personal religiosity through digital religious practice, as private spaces allow for individual reflection and more intimate emotional connection with religious figures or online communities (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Cheong et al., 2012). Rather than understanding technology as a force of linear desacralisation, this discussion proposes that it is more productive to see it as an arena for the transformation of sacredness, which shifts from a collective-institutional form to a more personal, relational, and experience-based form (Turner, 2024; Achterberg et al., 2009). In the digital context, resacralisation occurs not through the strengthening of institutions but through micro-practices lived by individuals in relation to technology.

Religious Habitus in Indonesia: From Physical Communal to Digital Fragmentation

Bourdieu (1990, 2020) concept of habitus internalised dispositions of thinking, feeling, and acting shaped by social experience and objective structures offers a relevant lens here. In Indonesian society, religious habitus has historically been shaped by collective practices in communal physical spaces: congregational prayer, religious lectures, religious holidays, and traditional rituals involving direct social interaction (Kupari, 2011). This communal habitus positions religion not merely as individual belief but as a social practice binding individuals within a network of social and symbolic relations. However, the digitisation of religious practice significantly intervenes in this reproduction process: when religious ritual and learning move to the digital space, religious dispositions are formed not exclusively through physical co-presence but through more fragmented, mediated interaction (Campbell, 2012).

Individuals are no longer tied to a single community or local authority but can access diverse sources of teaching across institutions and traditions (Zhang, 2015). Particularly among the younger generation, who combine digital content, personal experience, and selective involvement in physical communities (Nisa, 2018; Slama, 2017). This fragmentation does not necessarily erase the communal dimension; rather, it reconfigures communality into digital networks, negotiating between communal values and digital individualisation.

Hybridity as the New Normal: Transcending the Online Offline Dichotomy

Religious practice in Indonesia today can no longer be understood through a simple dichotomy between ‘online’ and ‘offline’. The concept of hybridity or phygital religion describes the intertwining of physical and digital spaces in contemporary religious life (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021), forming an integrated ecology of practice that involves a negotiated interweaving of bodily presence, tele-presence, institutional authority, and digitally mediated community. Religious people rarely ‘move’ entirely to the digital space or return entirely to the physical space; instead, they combine the two according to context, need, and personal preference. In Indonesia, this hybridity is exemplified by Muslims who attend Friday prayers at their local mosque while following the post-prayer sermon of a preferred ustadz on YouTube; by Catholic communities in Java who attend Sunday mass in person while sharing the homily via Instagram Stories; and by Balinese Hindus who participate in piodalan ceremonies physically while enabling diaspora family members to witness the ritual via live stream (Putra, 2026; Taqwa & Lubis, 2025; Bognár, 2024).

This concept of hybridity also helps bridge the desacralisation–resacralisation debate. Sacredness is not entirely tied to one space or medium, but produced through cross-spatial relations (Putu, 2026): physical spaces provide symbolic legitimacy and depth of tradition, while digital spaces provide accessibility, continuity, and personalisation (De Souza e Silva, 2006). Digital technology does not replace conventional rituals but becomes part of a broader religious ecosystem, expanding the mediatisation of religion approach by incorporating the agency of religious actors within a still-strong communal habitus.

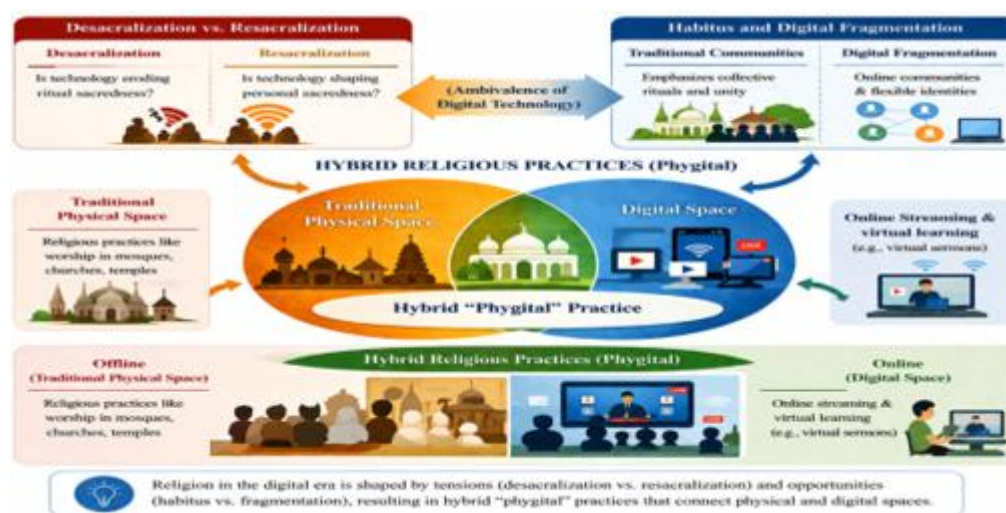


Figure 2: From Hybridity to Sacred Digital Fluidity
Source: Research Findings Based on Theory, 2026

Sacred Digital Fluidity: Towards a New Theoretical Concept

The three findings presented above the redefinition of sacred space, the transformation of ritual performativity, and the reconfiguration of religious authority converge in a pattern that existing theoretical frameworks only partially capture. Campbell (2012) digital religion approach explains the hybridity of online and offline practices but does not sufficiently account for the specific mechanisms through which sacredness is produced and sustained in non-Western communal contexts. Hjarvard's (2008; 2011) mediatisation framework explains the structural influence of media logic on religion but risks underestimating the agency of religious communities and the resilience of communal habitus, particularly in highly religious societies such as Indonesia. The hybridity concept, while descriptively useful, does not fully explain how sacredness itself is negotiated, contested, and reproduced across physical and digital boundaries.

This study therefore proposes the concept of Sacred Digital Fluidity as a contribution that goes beyond these existing frameworks. Sacred Digital Fluidity refers to a condition in which sacredness is no longer exclusively attached to physical space, formal rituals, or institutional

authority, but is fluid, mobile, and continuously negotiated through mediative relations in the phygital ecology. Unlike the hybridity concept, which primarily describes the coexistence of online and offline practices, Sacred Digital Fluidity specifically addresses the dynamics of sacredness itself how it is produced, contested, sustained, and transformed in contexts where digital and physical spaces are inextricably intertwined. Unlike mediatisation theory, which emphasises the structural dominance of media logic, Sacred Digital Fluidity foregrounds religious actors' agency in determining when, where, and how sacredness is experienced and legitimated. Unlike digital religion, which focuses primarily on community and practice formation, Sacred Digital Fluidity offers an analytically sharper lens for understanding the spatial and ritual dimensions of digital religiosity in non-Western societies.

In the Indonesian context, Sacred Digital Fluidity is particularly analytically productive because it captures the simultaneous multiplicity of religious reference points available to Indonesian believers: the local mosque, the YouTube channel of a national ustadz, the WhatsApp group of a neighbourhood pengajian, and the Instagram Live of a Sufi order. Sacredness in this context is not fixed but flows across these spaces, negotiated through intention, community recognition, and theological authority. This concept thus contributes to the enrichment of the sociology of religion in the Indonesian context and offers a framework applicable to other deeply religious, highly digital, non-Western societies.

CONCLUSION

This study examines changes in religious practice in Indonesia's digital culture by treating ritual, sacred space, and technology as intertwined analytical nodes. The findings show that the digitisation of religion is not a linear shift from physical to virtual space, but a complex process of transformation producing a new landscape of diversity. First, sacred spaces are being redefined from physically bound places of worship to screen-mediated domestic and digital spaces, where sacredness is produced through religious intention, symbolic connection, and affective experience. Second, religious ritual is undergoing a transformation from physical presence to a spectrum of virtual presence (tele-presence), giving rise to hybrid practices and ongoing debate about the effectiveness and legitimacy of online ritual. Third, religious authority is reconfigured from traditional institutional structures to digital network authority, where legitimacy is built through visibility, interaction, and audience trust. Based on these findings, this study proposes Sacred Digital Fluidity as a heuristic concept describing a condition in which sacredness is no longer exclusively attached to physical space, formal ritual, or institutional authority, but is fluid, mobile, and negotiated through mediative relations in the phygital ecology. The concept is offered as a complementary lens to existing frameworks of hybridity, mediatisation, and digital religion foregrounding the specific mechanisms through which sacredness is produced and sustained across physical and digital boundaries, and the agency of religious actors in non-Western communal contexts rather than as a claim that it advances or supersedes these frameworks outright. Whether it offers analytical value beyond the Indonesian case examined here is a question for future empirical research.

This study has several limitations. As a literature-based narrative review rather than an empirical study, it does not capture the direct experiences of diverse social groups, and thematic coding was conducted by a single researcher rather than multiple independent coders, so inter-coder reliability could not be assessed. The issue of digital inclusivity particularly for the elderly, communities with limited technology access, and communities in peripheral areas has not been adequately addressed, nor have the ethical and psychosocial implications of long-term digital religious practice been elaborated in depth. Further research is therefore recommended to combine conceptual approaches with empirical studies, through digital ethnography or cross-generational research employing multiple coders and inter-coder reliability checks, to understand more comprehensively how Sacred Digital Fluidity is experienced in daily practice and to test its applicability beyond the Indonesian context. Further research should also explore the policy and religious education dimensions of digital transformation, so that this transformation can be inclusive, reflective, and sustainable in Indonesian society.

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