



Digital Religion in Contemporary Society: A Qualitative Systematic Review of Online Worship, Community, and Religious Identity in Thailand

Nattapong Srisuwan¹, Somchai Wongsuwan²

^{1,2} Rajamangala University of Technology Thanyaburi, Pathum Thani, 12110, Thailand

* Corresponding Email: nattapong.s@rmutt.ac.th

Abstract

This review synthesized qualitative scholarship on digital religion to explain how virtual worship, online community, and religious identity are produced, stabilized, and contested in contemporary Thai digital spaces. A qualitative systematic review and thematic synthesis were conducted across recent literature on digital religion, mediatized worship, online fellowship, and identity formation, with special attention to Thailand and comparable Southeast Asian settings. The analysis organized the literature into recurring themes and compared them across traditions, platforms, and community types. Results: Three patterns dominated the corpus. First, online worship functions as an extension of religious practice, not merely a substitute for physical gathering. Second, digital communities create forms of intimacy, authority, and participation that differ from face-to-face congregations because platform design shapes visibility, interaction, and ritual pacing. Third, religious identity in digital settings becomes more performative, curated, and negotiated, especially among younger users who move fluidly between devotion, entertainment, and social networking. Digital religion in Thailand is best understood as an adaptive sociological formation in which worship, community, and identity are reconfigured by media logic. The literature suggests that religious institutions should treat digital practice as a durable domain of pastoral care, not as an auxiliary channel.

Keywords: *Digital Religion; Online Worship; Religious Identity; Mediatization; Virtual Community; Thailand.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Digital religion has shifted from a niche subfield into a core domain of contemporary sociology of religion because religious practice now unfolds across platforms that structure visibility, participation, and authority. The field's foundational literature showed early that religion online is not a simple transfer of offline ritual into digital space, since media environments reshape religious communication, community boundaries, and the performance of authority. Later scholarship consolidated this view by mapping central themes such as community, authority, ritual, embodiment, and identity, which remain the dominant analytical categories in current work. This framing is especially relevant in Southeast Asia, where high platform use, diverse religious publics, and hybrid media cultures produce dense interactions between digital communication and religious life.

The social significance of digital religion increased sharply during the pandemic period, when worship services, sermons, prayer groups, and religious teaching migrated online at scale. Recent systematic reviews show that digitalization changed not only how religion was disseminated but also how communities evaluated authenticity, doctrinal accuracy, and participation itself. Digital religion research after the pandemic has therefore emphasized continuity rather than exception: online worship persists because it solves practical problems of access, mobility, and schedule, while also generating new forms of ritual engagement and community formation. In Thailand, social media has already been shown to influence religious services in Bangkok by enabling personalized sacred spaces and expanding religious entrepreneurship, which indicates that the digitalization of religion is not a temporary disruption but part of a longer sociotechnical transition.

Existing studies have not sufficiently integrated online worship, virtual community, and religious identity into one qualitative synthesis for the Thai context. The literature often isolates one dimension, such as livestreamed ritual, digital belonging, or youth identity, while treating the others as secondary consequences. That fragmentation matters because online worship shapes the experience of community, and community shapes how identity is narrated, displayed, and defended. Thai cases are particularly useful because the country offers a plural religious environment and a strong digital media ecosystem, yet the scholarship remains scattered across Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and mixed online publics. Recent studies on Muslim digital identities in Thailand, digital religion in Bangkok, and worship orientation among Christians in the region show the presence of a rich but under-integrated evidence base.



This article addresses that gap through a qualitative systematic review of scholarship on digital religion, with emphasis on Thai online communities. The objective is to identify the main patterns through which online worship, online community, and religious identity interact in digital settings, and to clarify what sociological mechanisms explain those patterns. The contribution is twofold. First, it brings together dispersed literature into a single analytic frame. Second, it translates that synthesis into implications for religious institutions that now depend on digital platforms for communication, teaching, and belonging. Section 2 reviews the thematic literature on digital religion. Section 3 explains the qualitative review design, corpus selection, and thematic coding. Section 4 presents the synthesized findings. Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to prior scholarship and Thai digital culture. Section 6 concludes with practical implications for research and ministry.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on digital religion converges around four linked themes: authority, ritual, community, and identity. Campbell's foundational work argued that digital religion should be studied as a distinct field because online environments do not merely transmit religious content; they reorganize the social conditions of religious practice. Later mapping studies confirmed that the field now revolves around the same core questions, especially who has authority online, how ritual is adapted to platforms, how community is sustained digitally, and how identity becomes visible and negotiable through mediated interaction. This thematic stability is important because it shows that digital religion is no longer an exploratory edge case. It is a mature field with recurring conceptual problems that can be compared across settings.

A second literature stream focuses on online worship. Studies from Europe, North America, and Southeast Asia show that livestreamed services, short-form religious content, prayer apps, and hybrid gatherings do not simply replicate offline ritual. They alter temporal rhythm, participation cues, and the boundaries of sacred space. In Bangkok, social media has been described as enabling new sacred spaces and religious entrepreneurship, while more recent work on digitalization after COVID-19 reports that authenticity and spiritual depth become central concerns when worship is mediated by platforms. These studies suggest that digital worship is stable when communities interpret it as extension rather than replacement.

A third stream concerns community. Digital communities often appear more flexible and more porous than physical congregations, but the literature also shows that they can produce stronger micro-forms of belonging because interaction is continuous and emotionally immediate. Bibliometric studies of virtual communities report growing output in the field, with intensified publication in 2024 and a strong emphasis on media platforms as community infrastructures. Qualitative work likewise shows that online fellowship can reinforce pastoral proximity, peer support, and shared devotional routines, especially when offline access is constrained. Yet these same platforms can weaken accountability by privileging visibility over depth and speed over deliberation.

A fourth stream addresses religious identity. The literature consistently shows that identity is more performative online because users can curate devotion, select audiences, and move between sacred and secular self-presentation. Studies of Muslim digital identities in Indonesia and Thailand show that national and platform contexts mediate how identity is narrated and displayed. Research on Christian youth in the digital ecosystem similarly shows that identity formation now occurs through platformed engagement, not only through institutional instruction. This matters in Thailand because identity is negotiated in environments where religious difference, media entrepreneurship, and youth culture intersect. The gap in the literature is not a lack of data. It is a lack of synthesis across the three domains that matter most in digital religion: worship, community, and identity. Most studies isolate one domain or privilege one tradition, which makes it difficult to explain how digital practice becomes socially meaningful. A qualitative synthesis is therefore needed to connect platform-mediated worship to communal belonging and identity work, with Thailand as a context where these processes are especially visible.

C. METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative systematic review with thematic synthesis. The design was appropriate because the literature on digital religion is conceptually rich, methodologically mixed, and centered on meaning, practice, and social formation rather than on standardized numerical outcomes. The review followed a structured search, screening, and coding procedure so that the final synthesis could remain transparent and replicable. The analytic goal was not statistical aggregation. It was interpretive consolidation of recurring sociological patterns across studies of online worship, community, and religious



identity. PRISMA-informed review logic was used to organize the process, while the thematic synthesis approach was used to interpret the corpus.

Data / Dataset

The corpus was assembled from peer-reviewed articles, review papers, and selected book-length or institutional sources on digital religion, online worship, online community, and religious identity. Priority was given to work published from 2019 to 2025 because this period captured the acceleration of digital worship, platform migration, and post-pandemic normalization of online religious practice. Inclusion criteria were: explicit engagement with digital religion or mediatized worship, discussion of community or identity, and relevance to Thailand, Southeast Asia, or broader comparative digital religion research. Exclusion criteria were purely technical media studies without religious content, devotional writing without analytic framing, and duplicates across databases. The resulting corpus was coded for tradition, platform, type of digital practice, and identity mechanism.

Model or System Design

The review used a three-layer coding architecture. The first layer captured bibliographic features, including year, tradition, and geographic setting. The second layer captured practice features, including livestream worship, short-form video devotion, app-based religion, and digital fellowship. The third layer captured sociological outcomes, including participation, belonging, authority, and identity negotiation. Figure 1 would present this logic as a flowchart from corpus identification to thematic synthesis, with three analytic branches that converge on the final interpretation. This design was chosen because digital religion studies repeatedly show that the same platform can host worship, community, and identity work at once, making a multi-layer frame analytically necessary.

Experimental Setup

The review process used reference management for de-duplication, spreadsheet-based coding for metadata, and memo writing for interpretive comparison. Each source was read in full, then coded twice. The first coding pass identified explicit claims about online worship, digital community, and identity. The second pass examined the social logic of each claim, especially how platform affordances shaped access, visibility, and authority. Special attention was given to Thai examples in Bangkok and to Thai-relevant comparative studies on Muslim and Christian digital identity. This setup was suitable because the literature is not uniform in method or terminology, and qualitative comparison required interpretive rather than algorithmic consistency.

Evaluation Metrics

Three evaluation lenses were used. First, thematic recurrence measured how often a theme appeared across the literature. Second, sociological depth measured whether a source described identity, belonging, or authority as an active process rather than a descriptive label. Third, platform specificity measured whether a source showed how a particular medium, such as livestreaming, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, or Zoom, shaped practice. These lenses were chosen because digital religion is mediated by platform design and because platform logic affects how religious participation is enacted.

Validation Approach

The synthesis was validated through triangulation across traditions and source types. Similar claims were compared across Christian, Muslim, and comparative studies, and the thematic categories were revised when a source introduced a distinct pattern of practice or identity negotiation. Divergent findings were retained rather than erased, especially where some sources framed digital worship as authentic extension and others framed it as partial or fragile mediation. That approach fits the field because digital religion scholarship has always included tension between continuity and transformation.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The literature converged on three major findings. First, online worship is treated less as a technical substitute and more as a durable religious mode. Studies from Bangkok and Southeast Asia show that social media, livestreams, and messaging platforms expand access to sacred content and create new sacred spaces. Recent studies of digitalization after COVID-19 also report that worship continues online because digital channels preserve continuity for dispersed or time-constrained participants. The sociological implication is that digital worship is now embedded in the ordinary infrastructure of religious life.



Table 1 summarizes the dominant practice patterns identified in the reviewed literature. The most visible forms were livestream worship, short-form religious video, and app-mediated devotion, followed by hybrid fellowship and digitally supported pastoral care. The pattern suggests that digital religion is not centered on one platform. It is ecosystemic, with different media serving different devotional and communal functions. The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that contemporary digital religion operates through multiple interconnected practices rather than a single technological form. Livestream worship extends ritual accessibility, short-form religious videos reshape religious communication, and app-mediated devotion integrates spirituality into everyday digital routines. Meanwhile, hybrid fellowship and digitally supported pastoral care demonstrate how religious communities maintain relational continuity across online and offline spaces.

Table 1. Dominant Patterns of Digital Religious Practice Identified in Previous Studies

Digital Religious Practice Pattern	Main Characteristics	Religious and Social Function	Dominant Implication in the Literature
Livestream Worship	Real-time broadcasting of religious rituals, sermons, prayers, and collective worship activities through digital platforms	Extends ritual participation beyond physical religious spaces	Expands accessibility while transforming traditional concepts of religious presence and participation
Short-Form Religious Video	Dissemination of religious messages through brief, algorithm-driven video content on social media platforms	Facilitates religious learning, identity expression, and everyday engagement	Encourages personalized religious consumption and increases the role of platform visibility
App-Mediated Devotion	Use of mobile applications for prayer, scripture reading, meditation, religious reminders, and devotional routines	Supports individualized and continuous religious practice	Strengthens personal spirituality while shifting some practices from institutional spaces to private digital environments
Hybrid Fellowship	Combination of offline religious gatherings with online communities, discussion groups, and digital interaction	Maintains communal relationships across physical and virtual environments	Produces flexible religious belonging with more fluid community boundaries
Digitally Supported Pastoral Care	Religious guidance, counseling, mentoring, and emotional support delivered through online communication channels	Provides continuous access to religious leaders and support networks	Reconfigures religious authority through increased interaction between institutions, leaders, and digital communities

Community in digital religion appears more personalized and more networked than in physical congregations. Bibliometric work on virtual communities shows sustained growth in the field, with a strong spike in 2024, while qualitative studies show that digital environments intensify micro-forms of belonging through constant contact and visible participation. Yet the same platforms also loosen boundaries, because users can join and exit groups quickly, consume content without participating, and experience religious community as intermittent rather than fixed. The literature therefore describes digital community as stronger in reach and weaker in institutional closure.

Religious identity becomes more performative and negotiable online. Studies on Muslim digital identity in Thailand and Indonesia show that national setting shapes how identity is displayed and contested. Studies of Christian digital identity similarly show that young users form identity through platform participation, not only through institutional belonging. In digital settings, identity becomes visible through posting, commenting, sharing, and selective silence. This creates a layered identity structure in which devotion, social belonging, and self-branding overlap.



The literature also shows a recurring Thai pattern: digital media does not erase religious institutionality, but it redistributes it. Bangkok-based studies describe social media as a site of religious entrepreneurship and personalized sacred space, while Christian and Muslim studies in the wider region show that online authority remains important but must now compete with platform logic and peer visibility. The result is a hybrid order in which religious identity is neither purely institutional nor purely individual.

The synthesis suggests that digital religion in Thailand should be understood as a sociotechnical field where worship, community, and identity are produced together. This is consistent with Campbell's argument that digital religion is not simply religion online, but a reconfiguration of religious practice through media environments. It also matches later mapping work showing that authority, ritual, community, embodiment, and identity remain the field's central concepts. Thai examples add an important regional dimension because they show how platformed worship can coexist with strong local religious identities and with public forms of religious entrepreneurship.

The first implication concerns worship. The literature does not support the claim that online worship is inherently weaker than offline worship. It supports a more precise claim: digital worship changes the sensory, temporal, and communal grammar of religion. Livestreams compress ritual time, short-form videos fragment complex teaching, and app-based devotion increases portability. That transformation can lower barriers to participation, but it can also reduce doctrinal depth if communities rely too heavily on platform logic. This tension is visible in studies of digitalization after COVID-19 and in Thai cases where social media expands access while also altering the conditions of sacred encounter.

The second implication concerns community. Digital community is not weak community. It is differently organized community. The literature shows that online spaces enable continuous contact, rapid mobilization, and emotionally immediate belonging, which can strengthen participation for dispersed believers. At the same time, the same spaces can produce fragmented membership because joining is easy, attention is unstable, and platforms reward visibility over commitment. This explains why digital religion often generates broad reach but uneven depth. For Thai religious institutions, the practical task is not to choose between online and offline community. It is to design pathways that connect them.

The third implication concerns identity. Online religious identity becomes more reflexive because users perform affiliation in public settings while negotiating multiple audiences. That is visible in studies of Muslim identity in Thailand and Indonesia, where digital platforms mediate how faith is presented, and in work on Christian identity formation in digital ecosystems, where younger users negotiate authenticity through mediated participation. The mechanism is platformed visibility. Digital environments require users to decide what to display, what to hide, and how to frame devotion. This is why identity online is often more curated than offline identity, even when the underlying commitment is sincere.

A specific Thai insight emerges from Bangkok-based work. Social media in Thailand is not simply a communication tool for religion. It is a market, a stage, and a sacred interface. That matters because Thai digital religion includes both institutional worship and entrepreneurial religious expression. The result is a field in which belonging can be produced through a sermon stream, a devotional clip, a group chat, or a ritual livestream. The literature therefore suggests that Thai digital religion should be studied as an ecology of religious media rather than as one platform or one tradition. The review has limitations. The first is linguistic. The corpus of widely indexed scholarship is heavily English-language, so Thai-language or local community documentation may be underrepresented. The second is platform volatility. Digital religion changes quickly as platform features, moderation rules, and audience habits shift. The third is confessional unevenness. Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim cases do not appear in equal volume, which limits broad generalization. These limitations are substantial, but they are also characteristic of digital religion research because the field evolves alongside the platforms it studies.

E. CONCLUSION

This qualitative systematic review shows that digital religion in Thailand is a layered sociological formation in which online worship, community, and religious identity are mutually constitutive. The literature indicates that digital worship expands access and continuity, digital community strengthens reach while destabilizing boundaries, and digital identity becomes more performative and negotiated under platform conditions. The central conclusion is that online religion should not be treated as a temporary substitute for physical practice. It is now one of the main environments in which contemporary religious life is organized. For religious institutions, the practical recommendation is to treat digital spaces as sites of real pastoral work, with deliberate attention to ritual quality, community continuity, and identity formation. Future research should move closer to Thai-language communities and mixed-platform ethnography so that the interaction between digital media, religious authority, and local religious culture can be observed with greater precision.



Acknowledgment

No external funding was received for this review. The synthesis benefited from the availability of peer-reviewed studies, institutional reports, and publicly accessible scholarly archives on digital religion.

REFERENCES

- Agarwal, R., & Jones, W. J. (2022). Social Media's Role in the Changing Religious Landscape of Contemporary Bangkok. *Religions*, 13(5), Article 421. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050421>
- Aisyah, L. S., Hidayatullah, R., & Nisa, M. K. (2024). Religion studies in the digital age: Mapping theories, methodologies, and approaches in digital religion studies. *Ilmu Ushuluddin*, 11(2), 131–150. <https://doi.org/10.15408/iu.v11i2.44876>
- Alrissa, R. S., et al. (2025). Digital religion and virtual communities: A bibliometric analysis. *Al-Balagh*. <https://ejournal.uinsaid.ac.id/al-balagh/article/view/10436>
- Campbell, H. A. (2013). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. Routledge.
- Campbell, H. A., & Vitullo, A. (2016). Assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religion studies. *Church, Communication and Culture*, 1(1), 73–89.
- Choiri, M. M., et al. (2024). The impact of social media on the formation of religious practices among millennial students in Ponorogo. *Cendekia*, 22(1). <https://jurnal.iainponorogo.ac.id/index.php/cendekia/article/view/9870>
- Constantin, N., et al. (2024). Mediatization impact on religious practice. *Eduvest Journal*. <https://eduvest.greenvest.co.id/index.php/edv/article/download/1313/2859>
- Grieve, G., & Campbell, H. A. (2014). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in digital media*. Routledge.
- Grigore, C., et al. (2025). The impact of digitalization on religious practices and community dynamics following the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review. *Religions and Society Review*. <https://lumenpublishing.com/journals/index.php/rrem/article/download/7297/5190>
- Katili, F., et al. (2024). Faith in the digital age: Factors influencing social media adoption across Protestant churches. *Cultivation*. <https://e-journal.iakntarutung.ac.id/index.php/cultivation/article/view/2714>
- Kheryadi, K., et al. (2025). Muslim digital identities in Indonesia and Thailand. *Digital Muslim Review*. <https://digitalmuslimreview.or.id/index.php/dmr/article/view/41/25>
- Koritelu, P., et al. (2025). Changes in the worship orientation of Christians in Ambon. *Digital Theology and Christian Studies*. <https://journal.c-dics.com/index.php/dtcs/article/view/124>
- Meisyani, L., et al. (2026). Adolescents and Christian identity: Navigating faith in the digital ecosystem. *Digital Journal of Christian Education*. <https://journal.sttsimpson.ac.id/index.php/DICE/article/view/1124>
- Panpeng, W., et al. (2025). Religious tourism behavior of Thai millennials under social media influence. *ICOBUSS*. <https://ojsicobuss.stiesia.ac.id/index.php/icobuss1st/article/view/767>
- Turner, B. S., & Campbell, H. A. (2020). Religion in the digital age. In *Handbook of religion and digital culture*. Routledge.
- Widjanarko, P., et al. (2025). Agenda riset digital religion dari perspektif teori dan metodologi. *Inkulturasi*, Article 1161. <https://journal.paramadina.ac.id/index.php/IK/article/view/1161>