

THE GLASS CATHEDRAL: IS DIGITAL DECONSTRUCTION A SEARCH FOR GOD OR JUST SPIRITUAL OPIUM IN STREAMING COMFORT?

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Abstract

This article examines how digital spirituality and mental health intersect in today's religious landscape, focusing on the concept of the "networked self." It explores how Gen Z and Spiritual free agents use digital spaces to shape their personal spiritual experiences, seeking a balance between doing things their own way and staying connected to a larger community. While research on this is evolving, it seems clear that many people are drawn to online spiritual communities that let them customise their experiences and form real emotional connections, rather than just following traditional rules. This trend supports the "Affective Sovereignty" idea, suggesting a move away from strict traditions towards a more personal approach to faith. The "Digital Mediated Immanence" theory also suggests that digital platforms are becoming new kinds of sacred spaces, offering people a sense of the divine that was once found mainly in physical places. This shift brings up important questions about what spirituality really means in the digital age, especially when it comes to balancing personal satisfaction with genuine experiences of the divine. The article also discusses the new challenges facing spiritual leaders, who now must address both the appeal of self-made beliefs and the deeper call to engage with something greater, as seen in the metaphorical difference between the Golden Calf and the Burning Bush. Using a qualitative approach that employs thematic and conceptual synthesis of prior research, this study explores how digital spirituality is evolving among Generation Z and other spiritual explorers. By applying Cybertheology, the article looks at how people form and express their spiritual identities online, offering a broad picture and thematic analysis of how digital spaces are becoming both sacred and social. The findings highlight the need for more research into how digital media shapes spiritual identities and communities today.

Keywords: Digital Spirituality, Mental Health, Networked self, Autonomy, Religious Authority, Sacred Spaces, Gen Z/Spiritual free agents

Introduction

In an era marked by rapid digitalisation and shifting cultural paradigms, the concept of spirituality is undergoing a profound transformation, particularly among the emerging Generation Z, often referred to as "GenZennials" (Park et al., 2023) and other diverse demographics of "spiritual free agents" (Springtide Research Institute, 2024). As this cohort navigates a landscape rife with uncertainty marked by high anxiety, social disillusionment, and a quest for authenticity, they are redefining their spiritual identities through digital platforms (Lui et al., 2025). For a generation that navigates high levels of anxiety and a "faith-unbundled" approach, online spaces are becoming critical to fostering a sense of the sacred outside of traditional institutions (Springtide Research Institute, 2024). It is therefore pertinent to understand the driving force of this transition. In essence, for Gen Z and other spiritual free agents, the digital environment is not just a source of

information but also a key arena for exploring and defining their own spiritual identity (Springtide Research Institute, 2021).

The challenge for religious institutions is to meet them in this "hybrid" space with authenticity, rather than relying solely on traditional models. For diverse demographic groups, including young people and "spiritual free agents" (those who are spiritual but not affiliated with a specific institution), the digital sphere offers a "third space" (like TikTok or Instagram) that is both attractive and potentially dangerous. While it allows for flexible exploration of spirituality, it can lead to superficiality, reducing faith to a "dopamine hit" rather than a deep, transformative experience (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). The central dilemma for church leaders is, as one expert noted, "trying to embrace someone through a sheet of glass" (Jones, 2025). The future lies in creating "hybrid" models that balance the convenience of digital access with the indispensable, life-giving nature of in-person communion and community.

The juxtaposition of the physical and digital realms presents a unique opportunity to understand this transition. As Gen Z seeks spiritual fulfilment and connection, they gravitate toward flexible, personalised, and accessible digital avenues. However, this shift raises critical questions about the implications for traditional faith institutions and the potential risks associated with digital spirituality. This research explores how spiritual free agents (Packard & Hope, 2015) leverage digital spirituality not merely as a source of mental well-being but as a means to forge community and discover personal meaning outside traditional religious structures, underscoring the essence of ritual and embodied presence. It also raises the question of whether an authentic encounter is experienced in digital spirituality or whether they are seeking a self-serving emotive-religious connection. This is because one of the underlying questions about spiritual experience is whether religion is all about what pleases man or an invitation from God himself. The concept of the "Digital Cathedral" (Anderson, 2015) emerges as a lens for examining these phenomena, serving as an evolving sacred space tailored to the psychological and spiritual needs of today's youth.

This article, in a bid to contribute to the existing literature and the growing discourse, explores how spirited free agents who engage in digital religion have either encountered God or found their emotions related. It aims to explore, within Cybertheology, the driving force of this rapid shift. Employing thematic and conceptual synthesis and reflecting on two theories, first, the "Affective Sovereignty" (Nabulsi, 2025) framework which proposes that individuals turn to digital environments to regain control over their religious beliefs, favoring personal emotional connection Cathedral and customized experiences over strict institutional rules; secondly, the Digital Mediated Immanence which suggests that digital platforms become sacred spaces, providing a continuous sense of divine presence not found in traditional physical settings. It explores insights into the evolving landscape of faith in the digital age and the implications for religious institutions seeking to connect with a new generation of seekers, as the concept of the "Digital Cathedral" (Anderson, 2015) serves as the architectural and theological bridge between the physical church pew and the smartphone screen. It is not just a website or a live stream; it is a reimagined sacred ecosystem designed to meet Gen Z's specific psychological and spiritual needs (Campbell, 2013).

Literature Review

Research by the Springtide Research Institute (2021–2023) enhances our understanding of Generation Z's spiritual practices and their implications for mental health. With over 10,000

participants aged 13–25, the study found that 85% of Gen Z engage in "unbundled" spirituality, blending practices from various traditions, often in digital spaces that foster identity exploration and a sense of belonging. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, termed "Data with Heart," the research highlights a positive correlation between spiritual engagement and overall well-being. However, the authors note limitations such as self-selection and self-report biases, emphasising that while a correlation exists between spirituality and mental health, it does not indicate causation. This research calls for further exploration of spirituality's role in shaping identity and its effects on youth's mental health.

A longitudinal study by Upenieks et al. (2022) examined the effects of online versus in-person religious attendance on the well-being of about 1,500 adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicated that online participation helped reduce loneliness but provided slightly lower well-being benefits than in-person attendance. This difference may stem from the lack of "collective effervescence," which enhances emotional connections in physical rituals. While digital platforms supported mental health amid forced technological adaptation, they could not replicate the emotional intensity of traditional gatherings. Limitations of the study include the unique circumstances of the pandemic and potential technological barriers, raising questions about the long-term effects of technology on religious practices and community well-being.

Van Cappellen, Nelson, and McClear (2025) conducted a study examining the physical and mental responses of 120 participants across three generations to digital versus in-person worship, using wearable biometric sensors. Findings indicated that in-person participants experienced higher cardiovascular arousal, while digital participants reported comparable levels of calmness and stress reduction. This suggests that digital sacred spaces are effective for psychological regulation despite being less immersive. The study further highlighted differences between the "mind-body" and the "body" in worship experiences, affirming that digital platforms can provide psychological benefits similar to those of traditional worship. However, a limitation of this research is that biometric data reflects physiological responses without capturing the subjective quality of spiritual experiences, indicating a need for further exploration in this area.

A study by Murniasih, Cebba, and Sabinah (2024) examined the interplay between religious identity and well-being among Generation Z, involving 452 college students. It highlighted the mediating role of digital religious engagement. The findings suggest that digital tools can enhance individuals' religious identities, fostering personal meaning and social connection, elements that serve as protective factors for mental health. Specifically, the quantitative path analysis demonstrated that students who engaged with digital platforms in their spiritual lives reported a greater sense of purpose and stronger social ties, which, in turn, were positively correlated with their psychological well-being. However, the study's reliance on self-reported data poses a notable limitation, potentially introducing social desirability bias into the results. Overall, this research underscores the significance of digital engagement in contemporary religious practices and its implications for mental health, particularly within a generation increasingly reliant on technology for social interactions and identity formation.

Discussion

This article aimed to capture the essence of digital spirituality and mental health amid the synodal challenge, focusing on the networked self and the tension between individual autonomy and

communal accountability. This work addressed why Gen Z and other spiritual free agents gravitate towards digital space (autonomy) and whether they found the authentic connection they seek (accountability). This exploration becomes even more relevant when examined through the lens of cyber theology, which contends that digital environments can provide meaningful encounters with the divine, fostering community and personal meaning beyond the constraints of traditional religious frameworks. While our current article employed thematic and conceptual synthesis, our findings resonate with the “affective Sovereignty” (Nabulsi, 2025). This framework suggests that individuals pivot to digital environments to reclaim agency over their religious lives, prioritising personal emotional connection over institutional mandates. This perspective is further substantiated by Andok (2024), whose research demonstrates that digital spaces render religious authority 'customizable' and 'optional,' enabling users to navigate networks according to personal preferences rather than traditional hierarchies. Another study also argues that the internet encourages a "tinkering" mindset, in which users act as "free agents" who can blend and customise a variety of religious ideas, even conflicting ones, rather than remaining beholden to traditional institutions or dogma. The study concluded that increased internet use is associated with a decreased likelihood of being religiously affiliated or believing that only one religion is true (McClure, 2017).

This pattern suggests that seekers prioritise personal emotional resonance, using digital platforms to curate spiritual experiences and interpret profound emotional responses as authentic divine connection, thereby decentralising religious authority to the individual. However, here lies the ambiguity: the idea of religion as customizable from a plurality of religious dogmas and creeds raises the question of whether religion is a personal or communal matter. The idea that free-spirit agents blend from existing creeds only to settle into what they customise shows a disconnect. Moreover, it is imperative to note that one has not fully understood one's traditional creed. Instead, it blends together a plurality of creeds, raising the concern that digital spirituality seeks an encounter or merely hopes for spirituality.

At the core of its unspoken behaviour, affective Sovereignty offers a compelling framework for understanding the shift from traditional authority to personal spiritual identity. Just as adolescents assert their independence by challenging parental rules, individuals today are redefining their faith by bypassing institutional gatekeepers like priests and dogmas that historically dictated belief; this rebellion manifests in a “dance of deference and defiance” (Mahmood, 2005) where practitioners may embrace their religious labels while critically engaging with aspects of doctrine that do not resonate with them. As social media platforms facilitate the creation of "sovereign spaces" (Mankekar & Gupta, 2023), believers find communities that affirm their personal interpretations, thereby flattening hierarchies and democratising religious discourse. This transformation from "I believe because I was told to" to "I believe because it feels right" invites us to reconsider the foundations of faith in an age where personal experience increasingly informs spiritual belief, raising profound questions about the future of religious authority and identity.

Again, the Digital Mediated Immanence suggests that digital platforms become sacred spaces, providing a continuous sense of divine presence not found in traditional physical settings. This is supported by numerous studies that underscore this perspective. For instance, Evolvi (2022) highlights that during the pandemic, the absence of physical gatherings was mitigated by the emergence of hypermediated religious spaces. These digital platforms allowed individuals to engage in what can be termed "mediated immanence," fostering sacred experiences through

screens by evoking memories of past rituals. Additionally, Dunlow (2021) indicates that these digital environments facilitate private interactions, enabling individuals to bypass the often-stifling bystander effect and thus open the door to sharing personal struggles. Similarly, Tebo (2023) refers to these digital spaces as "digital places" where vulnerability and connection can flourish.

This shift in how spirituality is experienced implies a decentralisation of religious authority. Individuals are now empowered to curate their spiritual journeys based on personal emotional resonance, interpreting profound emotional responses as authentic connections with the divine. This raises a critical question: What does it mean for traditional spiritual leaders, such as Priests(pastors), Imams, and Rabbis, when their roles as exclusive gatekeepers of truth are diminished? As these spiritual free agents now decide what is spiritual and what counts as a message from God, they have to deal with digital pastors to build their personal belief systems. This blurring of authoritative boundaries presents a challenge that must be navigated. Furthermore, the notion of continuous immanence, in which the sense of divine presence is readily accessible at our fingertips, contrasts sharply with traditional transcendental experiences that appear to confine the divine. It is not a valid argument because it begs the question of sustainability and decline in attention span, as critics argue that this shift may contribute to a troubling dependency on screens. Research by Chang & Lee (2024) reveals that adolescent internet addiction disrupts brain signalling, impairing attention and working memory. In a similar vein, Mariappan, Palayan and Jeganathan (2025) found that 37.2% of children experiencing severe digital addiction demonstrate poor cognitive function and reduced attention spans. The exploration of digital spirituality is not merely an academic exercise; it prompts profound contemplation of how evolving technologies reshape our understanding of the divine, community, and personal belief systems, encouraging a more thoughtful approach to the interplay between faith and technology. As we navigate this complex landscape, one pivotal question emerges: What happens in this digital cathedral? The answer hinges on the nature of the experience it facilitates. This inquiry reveals a fundamental tension between two biblical archetypes.

The Golden Calf vs The Burning Bush: Entertainment vs Encounter

COVID-19 has inevitably necessitated a digital communication culture, creating a new type of spiritual subject, the networked self, among people who experience varying levels of vulnerability due to self-isolation and cognitive bias (Park, 2022). While this is true, it is also essential to explore whether digital spirituality is pushing humanity toward self-serving spirituality or a consumerist model of faith. Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) frequently addressed the distinction between self-fashioned "religion as it pleases" based on personal preferences or cultural trends and the Christian faith as a response to an invitation from God. Using his famous imagery from his work "The Spirit of Liturgy", he compares "pleasing" religion to the golden calf, a circle closed in on itself where people worship their own success, to the burning bush, which represents God's invitation. It is an encounter with the "Other," an invitation that is unexpected and requires us to take off our shoes. It is an encounter with the Living God, not a self-made idol. He argues that true faith is not a consumer product or a set of moral rules we choose, but an encounter with the living God who calls humanity into a relationship (Ratzinger, 2000). This becomes interesting, especially as the modern attempt to customise spirituality is analogous and finds a historical parallel in the people of Israel, who customised their "god" by moulding a calf. The irony is profound: In Genesis 2:7-8, God created man, but in Exodus 32, man created "god", one who is predictable, manageable, and answers only when and how they desire. This is the same irony that digital

cathedral portends when it customises spirituality through social media, allowing users to curate their digital feeds to reflect their unique beliefs and interests, enabling them to engage with faith on their own terms.

The shift from traditional Cathedrals to the "digital Cathedral" reflects a transformative approach to spirituality, particularly for Gen Z. It is important to consider whether worship is a "self-celebration" or a response to a Divine presence. Whereas physical cathedrals serve as fixed sacred destinations designed to transport individuals away from the hustle of daily life, the digital cathedral embodies a fluid space that integrates seamlessly into the rhythms of modern existence. It manifests as a "Pocket Sanctuary" (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022) accessible even during brief intervals, such as commutes or moments of solitude. This environment fosters inclusivity, allowing individuals to engage anonymously, free from the pressures of traditional settings. The digital cathedral thus democratises access to spiritual practices, offering global connections previously unattainable. However, this raises another critical concern regarding participation in rituals and community experiences, as religion always involves ritual and sacraments. One raises the concern about how the digital church accesses this aspect of spiritual encounter.

Moreover, the aesthetics of the Digital Cathedral engage a visually driven generation through high-quality digital artistry that evokes feelings of awe and reverence akin to those in traditional religious spaces. This digital environment replaces conventional liturgies with a sensory experience designed to resonate emotionally and mentally with participants. In this context, the "vibe," whether in lighting, soundscapes, or authenticity, becomes a vital form of modern ritualism that supports mental health, acting as a "sensory anchor." Furthermore, the synodal nature of these digital gatherings encourages active participation, enabling real-time dialogue and the co-creation of experiences. Unlike passive congregations in physical spaces, individuals within the Digital Cathedral break down hierarchical structures, with leaders engaging alongside their communities to foster a sense of belonging and shared exploration that resonates deeply with Gen Z's desire for authenticity and connection. Hence, the digital environment stirs curiosity about what happens here: an encounter with the divine or the activation of the temporal lobe and other parts of the nervous system (Newberg, 2018)? This leads to the question of how sacred the digital environment is.

The "Loneliness Paradox" of Digital Sacred Spaces.

The intersection of digital technology and spirituality presents a complex landscape, especially for Generation Z, who find themselves both deeply connected and profoundly lonely (Naidu, 2025). This phenomenon is encapsulated in the "Loneliness Paradox" of Digital Sacred Spaces, where virtual engagement can create a seemingly vibrant community yet lacks the substantive connections often found in traditional settings (GetWizer & JoyVentures, 2021). Researchers, theologians, and mental health professionals are compelled to explore this paradox further, focusing on how modern digital experiences can either mitigate or exacerbate feelings of isolation among young adults (Scotland, 2025). One compelling area of investigation centres on the nature of connections formed through digital spiritual leaders. The dynamics of parasocial versus authentic relationships raise significant questions about the emotional and psychological benefits of engaging with influencer-pastors online (Revilla, 2025; Kramon, 2025). This article also examined whether the fleeting awe experienced in virtual cathedrals translates effectively into meaningful social capital in real life (Oihab, 2022; Henao, 2022). Moreover, the rise of AI-

mediated spirituality introduces another layer of complexity, prompting inquiries into whether automated guidance can fulfil spiritual needs (Campbell, 2025). As Gen Z increasingly relies on AI for mental health support (Stacker, n.d.), it is essential to consider the implications of this technology for their spiritual journeys and the human struggles that are often integral to psychological resilience.

Digital deconstruction has become a massive movement among Gen Z and other free-spirited agents who seek to dismantle inherited faith structures, often finding solace in online spaces. However, these "safe spaces" can also trigger anxiety associated with the loss of traditional community ties. Research in this arena should focus on fostering healthy spiritual identity formation without the trauma often associated with deconstructing established beliefs (Christerson & Flory, 2017). Finally, the role of algorithmic bias in shaping users' spiritual content poses a significant challenge for religious institutions aiming to create inclusive and authentic digital environments. As algorithms prioritise engagement over well-being, understanding how to curate healthy spiritual spaces amid these constraints is essential for supporting Gen Z in their quest for meaningful connections (Clay, 2025).

This shift from institutional religion to a more personal, emotion-driven faith has led to the rise of a "self-serving emotive-religious connection," where individuals prioritise personal comfort and psychological needs over spiritual growth and service to others. Smith & Denton (2005) referred to it as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This phenomenon often manifests as a "Me-Centered" Gospel, reducing faith to a source of emotional fulfilment and self-actualisation, reminiscent of a "Sunday morning pep rally". Consequently, many believers focus on emotional experiences rather than doctrinal truths, leading to selective faith that ignores challenging aspects of spiritual practice. It is important to distinguish between religion and psychotherapy to avoid the idea of pausing god, skipping offerings, and rewinding prophecies (Campbell, 2012). Psychologically, this dynamic may serve as a coping mechanism for anxiety, allowing individuals to validate their self-worth through a distorted view of divinity that caters to their ego. As a result, religious practices can become superficial, with the quest for positive emotions overshadowing the deeper, sacrificial elements of genuine devotion. When this happens, digital cathedral makes religion, as Karl Marx said, a mere "opium of the masses" because digital spirituality normalises and offers passive consumption and overactive engagement; it functions as a palliative that dulls the pain of modern society and economic conditions, providing an illusory happiness that distracts users from addressing real-world structural issues (Marx, 1844/1970). In contrast to self-serving approaches, authentic faith cultivates a God-centered perspective, prompting individuals to ask how they can glorify God rather than how religion benefits them personally. Ultimately, this emotionally centric connection can dilute the essence of spirituality, reducing it to a tool for self-love rather than a pathway to divine truth and community service.

Limitation/Future Research/Conclusion

Recent studies suggest that young individuals frequently blend diverse spiritual practices, which may positively impact their mental well-being (Springtide Research Institute, 2022). However, further investigation is needed to understand these effects, particularly given the limitations of current methodologies. For instance, while online religious services during the pandemic alleviated loneliness, they often failed to replicate the "collective effervescence", the synchronised emotional energy found in physical gatherings (Durkheim, 1912/1995). As a parallel, watching a football

match on television provides the data of the game, but lacks the visceral, shared experience of being physically present in the stadium; the digital experience, while beneficial, remains a pale imitation of embodied interaction. This highlights a key limitation of the digital experience: despite its benefits, it does not fully replicate the richness of in-person interactions. Moreover, college students who used digital tools to explore their religious beliefs reported enhanced connectivity and improved mental health (Park et al., 2023). However, the self-report biases inherent in such studies may obscure the accuracy of these findings. Future research should delve deeper into the nuanced impacts of these blended spiritual practices, employing a broader range of methodologies to enhance reliability. In conclusion, while digital avenues for spiritual exploration show promise, they cannot substitute for the depth of in-person worship, indicating a critical need for a balanced approach in both future spiritual practices and scholarly investigations. As Ratzinger (2000) argued in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, true worship is not about creating ceremonies that cater to personal preferences but about responding to God's covenantal call, and liturgical spirituality should be regarded as a divine gift rather than a purely human endeavour. This perspective calls for a shift from self-centred approaches to a worship experience directed by genuine spiritual intent and encounter.

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