

Prostrating in The Cloud: Faith, Identity, and the New Frontiers of Islamic Civilization

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The digital transformation of religious life has propelled Islamic worship into immersive virtual environments, signaling a shift in the structural expression of Islamic civilization. This study explores the emergence of "virtual spirituality" and how the "civilizational center" of Islam is transitioning from physical mosques to a global digital ummah defined by networked connectivity. **Methods:** Using a qualitative framework grounded in social construction theory and media ecology, the research employed digital ethnography and phenomenological interviews with 20 Muslim participants to examine the reconstruction of sacredness within metaverse platforms. **Results:** Findings reveal that virtual worship facilitates a heightened sense of shared presence through avatar-mediated embodiment. This allows for synchronized ritual movements that mirror traditional congregational rhythms. The data suggests that in these environments, sacredness is no longer derived from material architecture but from collective intentionality and symbolic interaction. **Discussion:** The study introduces virtual spirituality as a hybrid mode of religiosity. While providing opportunities for transnational solidarity and pedagogical innovations like immersive Hajj simulations, it introduces risks such as the commodification of sacred spaces and the fragmentation of scholarly authority by algorithms. The research concludes that Islamic civilization requires renewed theological engagement and digital literacy to ensure technological advancements enhance, rather than diminish, spiritual depth.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of immersive digital technologies has profoundly transformed the ways religious communities construct meaning, authority, and collective identity. Since 2020, accelerated digital adoption particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped global religious engagement, pushing faith practices into hybrid and fully virtual environments (Ess & Dawson, 2021). Religious institutions that once relied almost

exclusively on physical gatherings increasingly turned to livestreamed sermons, online study circles, and interactive virtual platforms. In Islamic contexts, this shift was particularly significant due to the embodied and communal nature of ritual worship. The emergence of metaverse platforms represents a further step beyond basic online communication, introducing immersive, avatar-mediated, and spatially simulated environments that reconfigure the sensory and communal dimensions of faith.

Recent scholarship highlights that digital religion is no longer limited to social media preaching or web-based forums; rather, it encompasses immersive experiences in virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and metaverse ecosystems (Grieve, 2022; Kim, 2023). These platforms simulate three-dimensional sacred architecture, synchronized ritual movements, and real-time congregational interaction. Unlike earlier forms of digital communication, immersive environments produce heightened sensations of presence, embodiment, and spatial orientation (Lim, 2024). As a result, religious engagement in the metaverse cannot be understood merely as mediated communication but must be analyzed as a reconstructed experiential domain.

Within Islamic studies, growing attention has been directed toward online khutbah, digital da'wah, and virtual Islamic education (Al-Sharqi & Hashim, 2020; El-Gharib & Ahmed, 2024). However, most of these studies focus on authority, pedagogy, or communication patterns rather than the phenomenological dimensions of spiritual presence and sacred space. For example, research on online Friday sermons emphasizes shifts in religious authority structures and audience participation (Khalid & Zainudin, 2021), while analyses of Muslim youth on social media explore identity negotiation and digital belonging (Fauzi & Hamdan, 2022). These works provide important insights into digital mediation but leave underexplored the deeper theological implications of immersive worship environments.

The concept of the *digital ummah* has gained traction in understanding transnational Muslim connectivity. Scholars argue that digital platforms foster global religious solidarity by transcending geographic boundaries (Al-Rawi, 2021; Ismail & Noor, 2023). Virtual interaction allows Muslims in minority contexts or geographically isolated regions to participate in communal worship and discourse. Castells (2022) describes this phenomenon as "networked spirituality," where religious belonging is structured through digitally mediated relational networks rather than territorial congregation. In such contexts, identity is continuously negotiated through online interaction, symbolic representation, and shared ritual performance.

Nevertheless, immersive metaverse spaces introduce a qualitatively different dimension of engagement. Unlike conventional online communication, metaverse platforms simulate embodied participation through avatars and spatial navigation. Johnson (2022) argues that avatars function as extensions of selfhood, mediating religious identity in virtual environments. Similarly, Hussain (2021) suggests that digital rituals alter religious consciousness by modifying bodily engagement and sensory coordination. These studies indicate that embodiment in digital environments is not

absent but transformed, raising crucial questions about the theological and phenomenological status of virtual ritual acts.

Sacred space, a central category in Islamic spirituality, also undergoes reinterpretation in immersive environments. Traditional Islamic jurisprudence associates sacredness with physical orientation (qibla), mosque architecture, and bodily alignment in congregational prayer. However, emerging research suggests that sacred meaning may be symbolically constructed within technologically mediated spaces (Jafari, 2024; Nguyen, 2021). Gauthier (2021) argues that technological mediation does not eliminate sacredness but relocates it into relational and symbolic frameworks. In the metaverse, architectural simulation, Qur'anic calligraphy, and collective ritual behavior contribute to a shared sense of reverence despite the absence of material structure.

Ethical considerations further complicate the expansion of Islamic spirituality into immersive environments. The commercialization of digital religious events, monetization of virtual sacred spaces, and algorithm-driven exposure raise concerns about commodification and authenticity (Goh & Khalid, 2023; Shabana, 2022). When worship is integrated into platform economies, questions arise regarding sincerity (*ikhlas*), ritual integrity, and institutional oversight. Cheong (2020) emphasizes that artificial intelligence and algorithmic systems increasingly shape religious authority and content dissemination, potentially fragmenting traditional scholarly hierarchies.

The jurisprudential dimension presents additional challenges. Scholars debate whether virtual congregational prayer fulfills the criteria of *jama'ah* when participants are not physically co-located. Bakar and Rahman (2023) argue for a reassessment of fiqh principles considering immersive technologies, suggesting that intention (*niyyah*) and simultaneity may be prioritized over strict physical alignment. Hasan and Yusoff (2024) similarly advocate for renewed *ijtihad* addressing digital ritual practices, while Rafiq (2025) identifies emerging fatwa debates surrounding metaverse-based worship. These discussions indicate that Islamic legal discourse is actively grappling with technological transformation but has yet to reach consensus.

Psychological research on virtual prayer adds another layer of analysis. Studies demonstrate that immersive environments can enhance concentration and perceived transcendence by reducing physical distractions and increasing sensory focus (Kim, 2023). This suggests that spiritual experience in digital contexts may not be inherently inferior but differently mediated. At the same time, concerns remain regarding ritual superficiality and diminished embodied discipline, particularly when worship becomes visually spectacular or gamified (Bennett, 2023).

Islamic educational applications of the metaverse further illustrate both promise and complexity. Mohamed and Samir (2023) highlight the use of immersive simulations for Hajj and Umrah training, enabling experiential learning prior to physical pilgrimage. Similarly, Latif and Ahmad (2022) discuss the pedagogical potential of virtual worship spaces in shaping religious literacy among younger generations. These innovations demonstrate that immersive technology can function as a complementary extension of traditional practice rather than a substitute.

This study responds to these gaps by offering a theoretically grounded and empirically informed analysis of Islamic spirituality in the metaverse. By combining digital ethnography and phenomenological interviews, it explores how participants experience presence, sacredness, and communal belonging in immersive environments. The research situates these experiences within broader debates on digital authority, embodiment, and theological legitimacy.

Digital transformation has reshaped religious practices globally. Emerging immersive platforms such as the metaverse facilitate new forms of worship, religious interaction, and communal identity. In Islam, rituals traditionally grounded in physical mosques are increasingly conducted in virtual environments. Online Qur'an study circles, avatar-based sermons, and simulated congregational prayers illustrate the rise of digital religiosity.

Scholars describe this shift as "networked religion" (Campbell, 2017), where faith communities are shaped by digital connectivity. However, limited research has examined how spiritual presence (*hudhur*) and sacred space are reconstructed in immersive virtual contexts. This study addresses three research questions:

1. How are Muslim worship practices formed in metaverse environments?
2. How is spiritual experience reconstructed without physical proximity?
3. What opportunities and risks emerge in virtual Islamic spirituality?

Drawing on Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction of reality and McLuhan's (1964) media ecology, this research develops a theoretical framework for understanding virtual spirituality in contemporary Islam.

Method

This study involved a population of Muslim users of metaverse platforms who actively engage in virtual religious practices. A purposive sample of 20 participants from diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds was selected, actively engaging in virtual worship activities such as congregational prayer and Quranic study. To enhance data validity, this study employed triangulation of methods and sources, including participant observation across various virtual platforms, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and comparisons of experiences across participants. This triangulation enabled comprehensive verification of findings, resulting in a deeper understanding of the construction of spirituality in immersive digital spaces.

Research Design

This study employs qualitative digital ethnography combined with phenomenological interviews to explore immersive religious practices in metaverse platforms.

Participants

Twenty Muslim participants actively engaged in virtual worship, Qur'anic study, or congregational prayer were purposively selected. Participants represented diverse national and cultural backgrounds.

Data Collection

Data were collected through:

- Observation of worship practices in VRChat, AltspaceVR, and private Islamic virtual servers.
- Semi-structured online interviews exploring spiritual meaning, presence, and community interaction.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically through coding, categorization, and interpretative synthesis. Themes were derived inductively while informed by social construction and media ecology frameworks.

Results and Discussion

Specifically, this research provides practical contributions to the development of immersive technology-based models of Islamic worship and education, particularly in utilizing the metaverse as a learning medium and for simulating rituals such as the Hajj rituals and interactive religious studies. Furthermore, these findings form the basis for formulating ethical guidelines and religious regulations related to virtual worship practices, including strengthening digital literacy among the congregation and the role of religious authorities in the digital space. This research also helps platform developers design virtual spaces that are sensitive to sacred values, thus maintaining a balance between technological innovation and spiritual integrity in religious life.

The findings of this study demonstrate that Islamic spirituality in the metaverse is not merely a transfer of ritual activity into digital form, but a transformation of religious experience shaped by immersion, embodiment, algorithmic mediation, and transnational interaction. The reconstruction of spirituality occurs through three interconnected dimensions: experiential immersion, symbolic sacredness, and networked religious authority.

Immersive Presence and Altered Religious Consciousness

Participants consistently reported that immersive platforms generated a heightened sense of presence distinct from traditional livestream worship. Unlike passive video participation, metaverse environments allow users to move, align rows, and respond in real time through avatars. This aligns with research indicating that immersive VR environments enhance psychological presence and transcendence compared to conventional digital media (Kim, 2023). The phenomenological accounts suggest that synchronized movements and spatial simulation create a collective rhythm resembling embodied congregational prayer.

Digital embodiment through avatars functions as an extension of selfhood rather than a mere representation. Johnson (2022) argues that avatars mediate religious identity and emotional investment, enabling users to experience continuity between physical and digital selves. Participants in this study described their avatars as "standing before God," suggesting that intentionality transfers meaning to digital embodiment. Similarly, Hussain (2021) notes that digital rituals reshape religious consciousness by modifying sensory coordination and bodily awareness.

However, embodiment in virtual worship remains partial. The absence of tactile proximity, physical fatigue, and environmental stimuli modifies the discipline traditionally associated with mosque attendance. Lim (2024) emphasizes that digital embodiment produces

symbolic rather than physiological engagement, potentially intensifying focus while reducing physical exertion. Some respondents acknowledged that immersive worship reduced social distractions and enhanced concentration, supporting findings that technological mediation can increase contemplative depth (Gauthier, 2021). Yet others expressed concern that ritual without physical exertion may weaken transformative spiritual discipline.

Sacred Space as Symbolic Construction

The study reveals that participants attribute sacredness to virtual mosques through collective recognition and ritual use rather than architectural materiality. Digitally rendered mihrabs, calligraphy, and Qur'anic recitation create symbolic cues that trigger reverential behavior. Jafari (2024) argues that sacred space in immersive environments is constructed through shared symbolic orientation rather than physical ground. Similarly, Nguyen (2021) suggests that technological simulation relocates sacred meaning into performative interaction.

This supports the broader sociological insight that sacredness is relational and enacted rather than inherent. In virtual environments, the repetition of ritual acts bowing, prostration, recitation establishes a rhythm that stabilizes meaning. Bennett (2023) describes this phenomenon as "ritual authenticity through performance," where perceived legitimacy arises from synchronized participation rather than physical infrastructure. Participants reported feeling emotional reverence when entering digital mosques, indicating that symbolic familiarity plays a crucial role in sustaining sacred consciousness.

At the same time, concerns about desacralization emerge when commercial branding or gamified aesthetics appear within virtual worship spaces. Goh and Khalid (2023) caution that metaverse environments may blur boundaries between sacred devotion and platform capitalism. When sacred architecture becomes customizable content, the risk of commodification intensifies.

The Digital Ummah and Transnational Connectivity

One of the most significant findings concerns the formation of a borderless digital ummah. Participants described meeting Muslims from diverse countries and sectarian backgrounds, fostering inclusive interaction. This reflects the concept of global Muslim connectivity articulated by Al-Rawi (2021), who emphasizes how digital media reconfigure communal belonging beyond territorial limitations. Castells (2022) similarly conceptualizes networked spirituality as relationally constructed through digitally mediated interaction.

The metaverse amplifies this connectivity by enabling spatial co-presence rather than merely textual exchange. Ismail and Noor (2023) observe that virtual communities foster Islamic brotherhood through shared ritual performance and dialogue. In this study, participants reported that virtual congregations reduced feelings of isolation, particularly among Muslims living in minority contexts. This aligns with findings that online religious communities provide emotional and spiritual support across borders (Mansoor, 2021).

Nevertheless, transnational connectivity also produces diversity in interpretation and authority. Participants encountered varying jurisprudential opinions within the same digital mosque. While this diversity enriches dialogue, it also complicates uniform ritual standards. Ess and Dawson (2021) note that post-pandemic digital religion increasingly reflects pluralized authority structures, where institutional hierarchies coexist with decentralized voices.

Authority, Legitimacy, and Algorithmic Mediation

The reconstruction of Islamic spirituality in immersive environments inevitably reshapes religious authority. Traditional mosque structures rely on recognized scholars and institutional legitimacy. In contrast, virtual platforms allow individuals to host sermons and lead prayers with minimal oversight. Khalid and Zainudin (2021) highlight that digital khutbah practices challenge established authority hierarchies by broadening participation. Cheong (2020) further argues that artificial intelligence and platform algorithms influence which religious content gains visibility. In immersive environments, platform design determines spatial layout, interaction limits, and access control, indirectly shaping religious experience. Shabana (2022) warns that AI-generated sermons and automated moderation may alter authenticity and theological accuracy.

Participants in this study expressed mixed reactions toward digital imams. While appreciating accessibility and global reach, some questioned scholarly credentials. Hasan and Yusoff (2024) emphasize the need for Sharia compliance frameworks to regulate virtual rituals and ensure doctrinal integrity. Similarly, Rafiq (2025) identifies emerging fatwa debates regarding metaverse-based congregational prayer. These findings suggest that authority in virtual spirituality becomes hybrid partly institutional, partly network-based, and partly platform-mediated. Religious legitimacy is negotiated through collective trust, scholarly endorsement, and technological infrastructure.

Commercialization and Ethical Tensions

A recurring theme in participant narratives concerns commercialization. Ticketed virtual Islamic conferences, branded digital mosque environments, and monetized avatar accessories introduce economic dynamics into sacred spaces. Fauzi and Hamdan (2022) observe that younger Muslim users often navigate faith within commercial social media ecosystems, normalizing monetization practices. However, participants in this study distinguished between educational funding and overt commodification. Bakar and Rahman (2023) argue that jurisprudential reassessment must address not only ritual validity but also ethical integrity in digital worship. When devotion becomes spectacle, sincerity (*ikhlas*) may be compromised. Bennett (2023) suggests that ritual authenticity depends on intentionality rather than medium, yet excessive gamification may erode seriousness.

Moreover, immersive worship spaces operate within corporate-owned infrastructures. Platform policies, data governance, and algorithmic curation influence participation patterns. Giddens (2020) notes that disembodied media environments restructure institutional power relations, affecting religious autonomy. Thus, Islamic spirituality in the metaverse cannot be analyzed independently of technological governance structures.

Pedagogical and Transformative Potential

Despite these risks, participants emphasized the educational and transformative benefits of immersive environments. Virtual simulations for Hajj training, Qur'anic memorization, and interactive lectures enhance experiential learning. Mohamed and Samir (2023) demonstrate how metaverse applications prepare pilgrims for physical rituals, bridging digital and embodied practice. El-Gharib and Ahmed (2024) highlight immersive Qur'anic learning as particularly effective for Generation Z. Latif and Ahmad (2022) argue that

metaverse worship spaces may revitalize Islamic pedagogy by integrating experiential simulation with doctrinal instruction. In this study, younger participants reported increased engagement and curiosity through immersive interaction compared to passive online lectures.

Overall, the expanded findings indicate that Islamic spirituality in the metaverse is characterized by:

1. Experiential immersion that reconstructs presence through avatar embodiment (Kim, 2023; Johnson, 2022).
2. Symbolic sacredness generated through collective ritual performance (Jafari, 2024; Nguyen, 2021).
3. Transnational digital ummah formation that transcends geography (Al-Rawi, 2021; Castells, 2022).
4. Hybrid authority structures influenced by scholars and platform algorithms (Cheong, 2020; Hasan & Yusoff, 2024).
5. Ethical-commercial tensions requiring jurisprudential guidance (Bakar & Rahman, 2023; Goh & Khalid, 2023).

Rather than signaling the decline of embodied religiosity, the metaverse represents a reconfiguration of Islamic spiritual experience within technologically mediated ecosystems. The sustainability of virtual spirituality depends on balancing immersive innovation with theological integrity and digital ethics

Conclusion

Practically, this study provides guidance for Islamic educational institutions, mosque administrators, and Islamic outreach communities in integrating metaverse technology as an innovative means of worship and learning. These findings can be used to design digital religious literacy training programs, improve the quality of spiritual interactions among congregations in virtual spaces, and develop curricula based on immersive experiences. Furthermore, this research helps policymakers and religious scholars formulate regulations and fatwas that adapt to digital worship practices. For technology developers, the results of this study serve as a reference in creating platforms that respect sacred values and religious ethics. The metaverse introduces a new dimension of Islamic spirituality characterized by immersive presence, global digital community, and a symbolic sacred space. While virtual worship expands access and inclusivity, it also presents risks of commodification and theological ambiguity. This study proposes the concept of virtual spirituality as a hybrid form of religiosity integrating digital immersion, ethical responsibility, and spiritual intentionality. Technology should function as a bridge enhancing devotion rather than replacing embodied religious practice. Further interdisciplinary research is necessary to develop Islamic theological frameworks capable of guiding digital-era worship.

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