

## **Faith Behind The Scenes: The Spiritual Life Of Christian Students Of IAKN Kupang Amid The Current Of Social Media**

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### **Abstract**

*This study aims to explore and deeply understand the spiritual life of Christian students at the Institut Agama Kristen Negeri (IAKN) Kupang amidst the increasingly massive use of social media. The research employs a qualitative approach using a phenomenological method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentary studies. Informants were selected through purposive sampling, consisting of 10 active students of IAKN Kupang. The results identified three main themes: (1) social media plays a dual role as both an opportunity and a challenge for spiritual life; (2) students experience tension between digital identity and Christian faith commitment; and (3) spiritual adaptation strategies developed by students to maintain faith depth in the digital era. This study concludes that the spiritual life of Christian students at IAKN Kupang is dynamic and contextual, significantly influenced by the intensity and patterns of social media consumption, but can be managed through the formation of solid faith communities and Christian values-based digital literacy.*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The digital era has brought fundamental changes to nearly every aspect of human life, including spirituality and religious practice. Social media, a key product of the digital age, is no longer merely a means of communication; it has become a life space where identity, relationships, values, and even faith orientation are formed. Among the younger generation, particularly students, the influence of social media on spiritual life is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon.

Christian students studying at the State Christian Institute (IAKN) Kupang are in a unique position. On the one hand, they are institutionally bound to a religiously nuanced academic environment that normatively expects commitment and maturity in faith. On the other hand, they are part of Generation Z, who live, grow, and are shaped by the rapid flow of social media, with all its positive and negative influences. A fundamental question arises: what is the spiritual life of IAKN Kupang's Christian students in a reality constantly interrupted by screens and social media notifications?

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between social media and the spirituality of the younger generation. Gule & Th (2022) found that the media has a very large influence on the spiritual growth of young Christians, and that many young people experience spiritual stress due to the influence of poorly managed social media. (Yohanes et al., 2025) concluded that the consumption of digital religious content positively influences biblical understanding, worship activities, and evangelism enthusiasm. Meanwhile, Manurung (2026) reminded that students who are too dependent on technology without strong spiritual discipline tend to experience a decline in the habit of prayer and personal Bible reading.

At the local level, research specifically examining the spiritual lives of IAKN Kupang students in the context of social media is still very limited. Yet, as a Christian higher education institution in East Nusa Tenggara, IAKN Kupang faces unique challenges in maintaining the quality of its students' faith formation amidst the powerful digital tide. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap and contribute to the development of a relevant and contextual model for student spiritual development in the social media era.

The aims of this study are: (1) to describe the spiritual life patterns of Christian students at IAKN Kupang amidst the use of social media; (2) to analyze the influence of social media on students' spiritual practices, both constructive and debilitating; and (3) to identify strategies developed by students in maintaining a balance between digital life and their commitment to Christian faith.

## **2. METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research is a method that focuses on an in-depth understanding of social phenomena from the perspective of the subject experiencing them, through the use of descriptive data in the form of spoken and written words. The phenomenological approach was chosen because this study seeks to understand the lived experiences of Christian students at IAKN Kupang directly and in-depth, particularly regarding how they interpret their spiritual lives amidst the social media realities they face daily.

This research was conducted at the State Christian Institute (IAKN) Kupang. IAKN Kupang was chosen as the research location because it is a state Christian university in the East Nusa Tenggara region under the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, with a primary mandate to produce graduates who excel academically and are mature in the Christian faith.

The research subjects (informants) were selected using purposive sampling techniques, namely the selection of informants based on certain considerations in accordance with the research objectives. The informant criteria were: (1) active students of IAKN Kupang, (2) Christian, (3) active users of at least one social media platform, and (4) willing to provide information openly and in-depth. The number of informants was 7 people, consisting of students from various study programs and classes.

Data collection in this study was conducted through three main techniques: first, in-depth interviews conducted in a semi-structured manner, allowing informants the freedom to express their experiences and perspectives naturally. The interviews focused on how informants use social media, its impact on personal and community faith life, and their strategies in maintaining a deep spirituality amidst the digital flow. Second, participant observation was conducted to directly observe the daily

lives of students on campus, including their interaction patterns with social media and involvement in spiritual activities. Third, a documentation study of relevant documents such as the work programs of student organizations, the schedule of campus spiritual activities, and social media content managed by the IAKN Kupang student community.

Data analysis used the thematic analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which includes three stages: (1) data reduction, namely the process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data; (2) data presentation, namely organizing data into coherent patterns and themes; and (3) drawing conclusions and verification. This process was carried out iteratively and reflexively to ensure the depth and accuracy of interpretation (Miles et al., 1996).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Research result

This phenomenological study reveals the lived experiences of seven Christian students at IAKN Kupang in interpreting their spiritual lives amidst the reality of social media. Through thematic analysis by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, three main themes were identified. First, social media as a space for strengthening faith and as an arena for challenges. Informants acknowledged that platforms like Instagram and TikTok facilitate access to spiritual content, online sermons, and virtual prayer communities that enrich their faith lives. However, exposure to secular content, consumer culture, and the phenomenon of "performative spirituality" often leads to distraction and feelings of inadequacy in their faith. Second, the negotiation of spiritual identity in the digital world. Students reported tension between the desire to project a pious Christian image on social media and the reality of their inner struggles. Some informants felt pressured by comparisons with the seemingly perfect spiritual lives of others, leading to spiritual doubt and anxiety. Third, strategies for maintaining spiritual depth. Informants developed various adaptive methods, such as limiting social media usage time, selecting which accounts to follow, integrating traditional spiritual practices (personal prayer, Bible reading, campus fellowship), and a critical-reflective approach to digital content. Participatory observation also showed that active involvement in campus spiritual activities is an important counterbalance to the influence of social media.

Overall, this study shows that IAKN Kupang Christian students are not passive users, but rather actors who consciously negotiate with social media to maintain and deepen their faith in the digital age.

#### Discussion

##### Overview of Social Media Usage Patterns of IAKN Kupang Students

Based on interviews and observations, all informants in this study were active social media users, with an average usage time of 4-8 hours per day. The most frequently used platforms were Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, online games, WhatsApp, and Facebook. The content consumed varied widely, ranging from entertainment and news to academic and spiritual content. This finding aligns with our group's research, which found that most young Christians allocate 1-2 hours per day specifically to religious content, while the remainder is spent on general content.

Interestingly, most informants stated that the boundaries between 'digital world' time and 'spiritual' time are very fluid and difficult to distinguish. One informant with the initials RM (a fourth-semester student, Christian Religious Education Study Program) said: 'Sometimes I open Instagram for a moment, eh suddenly two hours have passed. Time that should be for morning prayer or reading the Bible is taken up.' This confession illustrates the reality that researchers term 'time displacement', the displacement of spiritual time by social media activities.

However, several informants also reported constructive use of social media for their spiritual lives. They follow religious accounts, consume sermons, daily devotionals, and worship songs available on digital platforms. An informant with the initials YT (a fourth-semester student in the Christian Religious Education Study Program) stated: "YouTube and Instagram help me stay connected to God's word even when I'm away from church or fellowship."

### **The Dual Role of Social Media: Spiritual Opportunities and Challenges**

The first theme that emerged dominantly in this study was the dual role of social media as both an opportunity and a challenge for students' spiritual lives. This finding aligns with the Knowledge Journal's conclusion that social media plays a dual role, as both a challenge and an opportunity for faith development (Wati, 2026).

As an opportunity, social media opens up vast access to high-quality spiritual resources. Sermon content from renowned pastors, online Bible courses, virtual faith communities, contemporary hymns, and daily devotionals accessible anytime and anywhere have become part of the new spiritual diet of Christian students. In their research on online devotionals, they confirmed that the use of online devotional applications has a positive impact on promoting the spiritual growth of Christians, as they provide access that is not limited by time and place.

On the other hand, as a challenge, social media presents a series of real spiritual risks. First, distraction and time displacement, where spiritual time is displaced by spiritually unproductive digital activities. Second, excessive social comparison, where the standards of life displayed on social media can give rise to dissatisfaction and erode peace and gratitude. Third, exposure to content that contradicts Christian values, including immoral content, hoaxes, and narratives that weaken faith. Fourth, the gap between the "digital faith" that appears beautiful on social media and the true spiritual life in everyday life.

An informant with the initials SR (a fourth-semester student, Church Music Study Program) shared her experience: 'I once followed the flow on social media, starting from lifestyle, values that were not in line with my faith. Slowly, I felt far from God. When I realized, I needed quite a long time to restore my relationship with God.' This experience illustrates what is called a decline in spiritual discipline due to excessive dependence on digital media.

### **Identity Tensions: Between Digital Citizens and Disciples of Christ**

The second theme identified in this study is the identity tension experienced by students between the demands of being active and connected digital citizens on the one hand and the call to be faithful and committed disciples of Christ on the other. This tension is not always conflictual, but in many cases creates a confusion of values and priorities for students.

Hasibuan emphasized that a Christian in using social media must be aware of his identity as the image and likeness of God. However, in practice, many students experience what is called 'double consciousness', one identity for the digital world and another identity for the faith community (Hasibuan, 2024). An informant with the initials DL (4th semester student, Missiology Study Program) revealed: 'On Instagram, I look active and enthusiastic in spiritual activities, but honestly, my personal prayer life has been very dry lately. There is a distance between what I show and what I actually experience.'

This phenomenon is closely related to the analysis in the Digital Process study of social media as an arena for identity exploration. On the one hand, social media allows students to express and even strengthen their faith identity through the spiritual content they share. On the other hand, the pressure to appear perfect on social media, including in the spiritual dimension, can create performative anxiety that actually hinders authentic and organic spiritual growth. Interestingly, several informants actually experienced positive growth in their faith identity through social media. They found supportive online faith communities, digital spiritual mentors, and Bible study resources that deepened their theological understanding. This context serves as a reminder of the importance of holistic character formation, which focuses not only on outward appearance but also on genuine heart transformation.

### **Spiritual Adaptation Strategies in the Social Media Era**

The third theme identified was the various spiritual adaptation strategies developed by students to maintain a balance between their digital lives and their commitment to Christian faith. These strategies were both individual and collective, reflecting students' creativity and spiritual resilience in responding to the challenges of the digital era. The first strategy was disciplined digital time management (digital fasting). Several informants stated that they consciously limited their social media usage, particularly in the morning before prayer and Bible reading, and at night before bed. Tombeu's findings support the effectiveness of this strategy, as students who consciously limited their digital media consumption experienced a deeper understanding of theology and a higher quality of spiritual life.

The second strategy is active curation of spiritual content. Informants with more stable spiritual lives tend to actively select and follow quality spiritual accounts and consciously filter the content they consume on social media.

The third strategy is maintaining a strong and authentic faith community. Students actively involved in groups, Christian student fellowships, or campus prayer groups consistently report more stable spiritual lives than those who rely on individual spirituality in the digital age. This finding aligns closely with the emphasis of the Transformation of Christian Education study, which emphasized that small groups provide a safe and comfortable space for young people amidst a culture of individualism and pressures on social media.

The fourth strategy is reclaiming social media for spiritual purposes. Several students actively use social media as a medium for ministry and faith expression, creating spiritual content, sharing Bible verses, or engaging in edifying digital faith communities.

### **Implications for Spiritual Development at IAKN Kupang**

The findings of this study have several important implications for the policy and practice of student spiritual development at IAKN Kupang. First, the institution needs to develop a digital literacy program based on Christian values that explicitly equips students with the ability to manage their social media use wisely and responsibly from a Christian perspective. Second, strengthening small faith communities on campus is crucial as spiritual bulwarks in the digital age. Third, educators and spiritual leaders at IAKN Kupang need to understand the digital landscape inhabited by their students so they can accompany and guide them in a relevant and contextual manner. As an institution committed to producing graduates who excel academically and mature in the Christian faith, IAKN Kupang has a strategic opportunity to become a pioneer in developing a comprehensive digital spiritual development model for Christian students in Eastern Indonesia. The results of this study are expected to provide an empirical basis for policy-making in the field of student affairs and spiritual development at IAKN Kupang.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This study found that the spiritual lives of IAKN Kupang Christian students amidst the flow of social media are dynamic, contextual, and complex. Three main themes identified are: (1) social media plays a dual role as an enriching opportunity and a challenge that can weaken spiritual life; (2) students experience identity tension between the demands of being active digital citizens and the calling to be faithful disciples of Christ; and (3) students develop various spiritual adaptation strategies, ranging from digital fasting, active curation of spiritual content, maintaining a faith community, to reclaiming social media for ministry purposes. The intensity and pattern of social media consumption have been shown to have a significant influence on the quality of students' spiritual lives. However, this impact is not deterministic. Students who have a solid faith community, maintained spiritual discipline, and

a strong sense of Christian identity can use social media as a tool that builds, rather than hinders, their spiritual growth.

This study recommends that IAKN Kupang: (1) integrate Christian faith-based digital literacy into the curriculum or student development program; (2) strengthen the system of small faith communities on campus as authentic spiritual development spaces; and (3) facilitate the development of quality spiritual digital content by students as a form of active participation in digital ministry. For further research, it is recommended to expand the scope with mixed methods so that the obtained picture is more comprehensive and can be generalized.

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