

## **Religious transformation of Gen Z in the new media era**

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### **Abstract**

New Media becomes an effective bridge of religious transformation in Gen Z. The presence of new media with various features offered is a new way of obtaining religious knowledge. This paper wants to explain that there has been a diverse religious pattern of Gen Z experiencing transformation due to the intensity of the use of religion-based new media. The research in this study was conducted through observations, interviews and literature studies related to the formal objects, material objects and contexts studied, then analyzed with a qualitative descriptive approach. The results of this study explain the forms of religious transformation of Gen Z in the midst of the rise of new media. The transformation occurs due to the emergence of new media that offers various religion-based platforms. The implication is that intense religious learning accessed through new media can be said to be not in line with the ideally expected understanding of religion. In other words, religious understanding, which is actually the main orientation in religious learning, has undergone a transformation as shown by the religious experience of Gen Z. Where the presence of new media can be a tool that can change a person's paradigm in religion. This study suggests the need for a balance between media literacy and religious literacy to be balanced, along with the intensity of technological penetration that is continuously evolving.

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### **Abstrak**

Media Baru menjadi jembatan transformasi agama yang efektif pada Gen Z. kehadiran media baru dengan berbagai fitur yang ditawarkan menjadi cara baru dalam mendapatkan pengetahuan agama. Tulisan ini hendak menjelaskan bahwa telah terjadi pola beragama beragam Gen Z mengalami transformasi akibat intensitas penggunaan new media berbasis agama. Penelitian dalam ttudi ini dilakukan melalui observasi, wawancara dan studi litertur terkait objek formal, objek material dan konteks yang dikaji, kemudian dianalisis dengan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif. Hasil studi ini menjelaskan terkait bentuk-bentuk transformasi beragama Gen Z di tengah maraknya media baru.

### **Keywords:**

religious transformation; Gen Z; new media; religious platform

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Transformasi itu terjadi akibat munculnya media baru yang menawarkan berbagai platform yang berbasis agama. Implikasinya adalah pembelajaran agama yang intens diakses melalui media baru dapat dikatakan belum sejalan dengan pemahaman agama yang diharapkan secara ideal. Dengan kata lain, pemahaman agama yang sejatinya menjadi orientasi utama dalam pembelajaran agama telah mengalami transformasi sebagaimana pengalaman beragama yang diperlihatkan Gen Z. Di mana kehadiran media baru dapat menjadi alat yang dapat mengubah paradigma seseorang dalam beragama. Studi ini menyarankan perlunya keseimbangan antara literasi media dan literasi agama dapat seimbang, seiring dengan intensitas penetrasi teknologi yang terus berkembang.

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## INTRODUCTION

The religious beliefs of the younger generation have been affected by the emergence of online media. This comes as media technology develops for human needs (Sumiala, 2022). The presence of online media has become a necessity in all social aspects (Luo & Hendryx, 2022), including in the search for religious literacy (Walker et al., 2021). Nowadays, the development of new religion-based media has made it easier for people to access religious literacy, including the use of media by Gen Z (Samson & Leichty, 2022). A survey released by APJII shows that every year internet users are increasing along with the variety of new media (Pabbajah et al., 2022). Ellyn Briggs' research (2023) states that 54 per cent of Gen Z spend at least four hours every day interacting with social media. (<https://www.nu.or.id>). This condition is reinforced by data released through the APJII survey in early 2024, Gen Z became the age group with the most dominant contribution level when compared to other age groups. The usage of Gen Z reached 34.4 per cent, while other age groups that also have a large contribution rate are Millennials 30.62 per cent and Gen X 18.98 per cent (<https://tekno.kompas.com>). According to a McKinsey survey, 58 per cent of Gen Z respondents spend more than an hour on social media (<https://dataindonesia.id/>). Thus, Gen Z as a representation of the younger generation needs to see the pattern of diversity transformation in the new media era.

The study of religious mediation has attracted the interest of numerous scholars. Three aspects have been the main focus of existing studies. Firstly, online media facilitate religious access (Siuda, 2021). Secondly, online media are efficient means of accessing religious content (Taira, 2020). Religion and media are closely intertwined in today's technological age (Bajan & Campbell, 2018; Dushakova, 2020; Lim & Sng, 2020). This includes the use of media for religious education agama (Mustaqim Pabbajah et al., 2021). Additionally, faith-based online media platforms have a significant impact on

religious communities in the digital age (Henry, 2021; Novak et al., 2022; Nsereka & Nwanze, 2021). Religion has become a commodity that can be easily mediated, leading to transformations (Kołodziejska et al., 2023; Pavić, 2016). However, few studies have examined how religious understanding in Gen Z has been affected by the rapidly evolving media.

By exploring the religious transformation experienced by Generation Z in the new media era, this study aims to fill gaps in existing research. The study intends to answer three questions. Firstly, what is the form of religious transformation among Gen Z in the New Media era? Secondly, what factors encourage religious transformation among Gen Z? Thirdly, how do the implications of Gen Z's religious transformation relate to current religious literacy? These three questions, besides being the discussion of this study, also attempt to map religious issues due to the presence of online media that continues to evolve.

The study is based on an assumption that the presence of new media that offer religious literacy is something that cannot be avoided. The mediatisation of religion has become a public consumption that is considered capable of becoming a quick religious learning solution. The development of online media with religious nuances provides a new method of learning religion for Gen Z that has not gone hand in hand with a deep understanding of religion. In which new media only provides a textual description of religion, it has not touched many contextual aspects, resulting in a religious pattern that tends to be passive. Online media is only used by Gen Z to find religious literacy according to their momentary needs, but not to the awareness of understanding religion as a whole. In other words, online media cannot be separated from the daily activities of the younger generation, especially in accessing religious literacy.

## **METHODS**

The study focuses on the religious transformation in Gen Z due to the influence of new media. A descriptive qualitative approach is used to analyse data gathered from observation, interviews, and literature studies. The study aims to explain the religious reality of Gen Z and their experience of transformation (Pabbajah et al., 2020). This study examines the religious dimension of social phenomena exhibited by Gen Z on online media, using a netnography approach as introduced by Kozinets (Bowler, 2010). The existing data was analysed using data reduction techniques and presented in tables. Additionally, the data is summarised through data reduction by selecting information that is relevant to answering the research questions. The analysis is presented in the

form of descriptive and narrative-analytic descriptions, focusing on the concept of religious transformation.

### *Religious transformation*

Transformation is a concept that involves systemic and profound change processes in the form of paradigmatic shifts (Amundsen dan Hermansen, 2021). Transformation has predominantly influenced semiotic processes and social relations in a changing society, so that changes can occur in formal and informal institutions in society (Tilche, 2015). Besides being non-linear, not a few transformations appear in the form of reactive, responsive, and anticipatory to challenges and vulnerabilities in a social system (Duncan et al., 2018). Orosz-Réti (2021) also said that transformation is often caused by shifting factors of new values and norms in society. As socio-religious transformation in Iran has extensive political and religious efforts to develop themselves based on moral order (Shanneik, 2023). In the context of practice, transformation often involves a process in communities or groups of people formally or informally (Northington, 2018). Therefore, transformation becomes a concept that can construct and reconstruct a social system (Grandin dan Haarstad, 2021).

Religious transformation in this case is understood and shaped by the intersection of differences, which points to the realization of the need to consider various elements. As an example for the various forms of Catholicism in Latin America, reflect the reality of modernity in which elements of pre-modern, modern and late modern worldviews and values are intertwined in very different ways (Thorsen, 2023). Likewise, the character of religion is existentially influential and has implications for respect (Costa, 2023). Religion has an important dimension to identity that deserves the same respect as race, or gender. Zu et al. (2024) mentioned that this transformation occurs through five basic mechanisms, namely actor transformation, structure transformation, mode transformation, issue transformation and situation transformation. The transformation appears in the form of relational mobilization that refers to the flow of ideas, materials, space and policies (Grandin dan Haarstad, 2021). Thus, transformation not only impacts theoretical conceptualizations, but also relational practices and the continuity of people's experiences (Baldassar, 2023).

### *New media*

New media has rapidly brought about changes to human life, including social interaction, information transmission, and the formation of a new culture (Li, 2022). Serving as an intermediate space between the virtual and the real, the new media era is

significant, with an acceleration of information dissemination that is easily accessible to various groups, from children to adults ((Rauf & Tajibu, 2020). According to Munasaroh (2021) individuals can easily access information on education, economics, politics, religion, and entertainment, which can help them build broad social relationships. This ability enables active, interactive, and creative participation in digital interactions (Darmawan et al., 2019). However, there is concern that the transformation of physical space may lead to the widespread adoption of global paradigms and a redefinition of the meaning, values, and practices of people's lives (Cabalquinto, 2023). Kornbluh (2022) continues that this happens because technology as infrastructure only functions as a symbolic order, but is not able to implement the ideology of cultural and religious rites. This demonstrates that digital advancements do not always completely alter societal traditions.

New media has brought changes in life and social relations, including religious life. According to Postman (2014), millions of religious believers around the world are already mediated by media networks (Syahputra, 2018). The use of media by clerics leads to new control over new types of media that function as media for preaching religious teachings (Syahputra, 2018). New media opens opportunities for scholars to spread da'wah and the existence of Islam (Skovgaard-Petersen, 2017). This is in line with the statement of Cleveland, Laroche, & Hallab (2013) that the transformation between religion, technology and science causes a shift in the meaning of religion as an identity into a shared consumption. Despite this, its existence causes debate, there are aspects of the benefits of technology, but it also has an effect that has the potential to be misused. Abdullah (2017) claims that the use of media distances religious believers from authority and at the same time turns obedience into a lawsuit. Skovgaard-Petersen (2017) also points out that new media with its aggressive nature creates a new structure and order, thus having a fundamental impact on changing established patterns in people's lives beyond their boundaries, and allowing for the dismantling of religious authority.

### *Generation Z*

Generation Z refers to individuals born when technology was available to almost everyone in social life (Olgum & Gülova, 2023). Additionally, Olgum & Gulova state that Generation Z is known as a digital generation that is in a period of rapid digital transition. This allows them to adapt to multiple, immediate and sophisticated digital innovations (Sitoayu et al., 2023). These values have a significant impact on their learning, communication, and worldview. Generation Z has high career aspirations,

work styles, attributes, and educational preferences, and an innovative mindset (Shatto & Erwin, 2017). This requires flexibility to be independent and confident in social life. Not only in terms of religion, race and gender, but also in terms of identity and orientation (Pandita, 2022). As such Generation Z is dominated by social media based connectivity, internet, smartphones to find and share information (Kumar & Mamgain, 2023).

Generation Z is often considered the generation that has experienced both the advantages and disadvantages of digitalisation (Olgum & Gülova, 2023). The positives include easier and faster access to information about general and religious education, entertainment, and unlimited space and time for communication. However, the potential disadvantages include screen addiction, which begins in childhood, reduced ability to analyse information, and problems with the security of personal information. Zanina et al. (2023) identified the characteristics of Generation Z, including reduced materialistic needs, decreasing importance of social values, and high prevalence. In contrast, Kumar & Mamgain (2023) identified that Generation Z is enthusiastic about acquiring, sharing, and verifying knowledge through media sources. Therefore, Generation Z is more focused on artificial intelligence technology than Generation X or Y (Tlili et al., 2022).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Gen Z's form of religious transformation

Gen Z, as active internet users, utilize the media to gain religious literacy. The digitalization of religion means that a variety of online media provide religious material that can be openly consumed. This rapid and complex technological development not only produces cultural, economic, and political products (Harahap, 2013), but also has a significant impact on the development of ideology and religion through the *media* (Abdullah, 2017). The impact of today's technological revolution has an impact on the emergence of new religious values or new theology (Annazilli, 2018). The further tracing shows that the presence of technology, accompanied by the development of technological products, brings a new method of theology in religion (Garner, 2021). Many individuals are in search of sources of religious law or theological foundations through new media, especially the Internet. This trend is particularly noticeable among Gen Z, who have greater access to online religious education. As informant 1 stated:

*"Many students use their mobile phones to search for answers during class discussions and then read them out. This practice should be discouraged as it can hinder comprehension and participation" (Interview with DM, 2024).*




Currently, the learning process cannot be separated from technology. New media, such as digital products based on the internet, have brought new values to religion among Gen Z. With the presence of new media, Gen Z can easily and quickly seek religious literacy. For instance, online media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have contributed to this development. This media is used to efficiently disseminate religious understanding and facilitate socialization (Pabbajah et al., 2021). Its existence has provided Gen Z with a new way of gaining religious knowledge.

This is evident in discussions with students, who tend to rely on their smartphones to find religious solutions. During lectures, students may use their mobile phones as a learning tool. It has been observed that Gen Z students are particularly keen on using smartphones to search for religious knowledge. Almost all students who own smartphones install religious applications on their devices (Kheradmand et al., 2023). For the Gen Z population, it is recommended that they install the Qur'an application as it serves as an effective religious learning tool (Saimroh et al., 2022). Similarly, religious applications such as those for worship procedures and prayer reminders are also useful. When searching for religious knowledge, the most commonly used tools are Google and YouTube, which are considered efficient and user-friendly.

### **The factors of Gen Z religious transformation**

The methods of religious education have undergone a transformation due to the widespread availability of the internet and online media. As of early 2024, the number of internet users in Indonesia has reached 221,563,479, with Generation Z (those born between 1997 and 2012, aged 12-27 years) being the most connected age group (<https://tekno.kompas.com>). This indicates that young people dominate the internet user population in Indonesia. In accordance with these factors, there are three main drivers that contribute to the religious transformation of Gen Z in the new media era. Finally, it is important to note that the use of the internet has made it easier for Gen Z to explore and learn about different religions. Firstly, the ease and affordability of internet access allows users to access information anytime and anywhere. Secondly, Gen Z is observed to utilize mobile phones as a medium to gain religious understanding when searching for religious literacy as part of a learning assignment. It is crucial to maintain objectivity and avoid biased language when discussing this topic. Currently, several religion-based platforms offer easily accessible reading materials for Gen Z without requiring in-depth understanding. This is supported by affordable telecommunication services that offer large data packages. Gen Z can easily find textual answers through smartphone media, as demonstrated in Table 1.

**Table 1. Providers that offer cheap internet package**

Cheap internet packages for Millenials	Best and cheapest internet service provider	Large and unlimited internet quota
		
<p>Source:  <a href="https://tech.indozone.id/gadget/921033848/6-provider-paket-internet-murah-untuk-milenial-mana-paling-cocok?page=2">https://tech.indozone.id/gadget/921033848/6-provider-paket-internet-murah-untuk-milenial-mana-paling-cocok?page=2</a></p>	<p>Source:  <a href="http://www.duta-pulsa.co.id/daftar-harga-paket-internet/">http://www.duta-pulsa.co.id/daftar-harga-paket-internet/</a></p>	<p>Source:  <a href="https://www.telkomsel.com/en/surprisedeal">https://www.telkomsel.com/en/surprisedeal</a></p>

Accessed and compiled by the Author, 2024




Secondly, the religious transformation of Gen Z is closely linked to their search for religious literacy, which has been intensified by their access to online media. Currently, religious learning is easily accessible through online media, resulting in significant changes in Gen Z's religious literacy. They share attitudes on contested issues such as the gentrification and commodification of religious symbols, as well as the role of religion in contemporary society (Samson & Leichty, 2022). The religious transformation of Gen Z is attributed to the rapid digitalization of religion. Religious material can now be accessed independently through a process of reasoning. Despite the findings of Laor & Galily (2022) that secular individuals consume more digital content than religious individuals, Gen Z still prefers to search and find information through digital content. As per the informant's statement:



*“As the younger generation, we have a strong desire for knowledge and regularly uses the internet to access information. we feel a sense of exclusion if we are not up-to-date with current trends, including those related to religion” (Interview, 2024)*

The emergence of various online media platforms has made religious learning more accessible. The emergence of various online media platforms has made religious learning more accessible. However, the mediatization of religion is now inevitable through the various platforms involved, including the visualization of religious lectures and sermons, which are increasingly popular among Gen Z ( Pabbajah et al., 2021). Religion-based platforms are online media that serve as information and communication tools for religious learning (Brey, 2021). These platforms have emerged as a new centre for Muslims to access knowledge about Islam and introduce a new style of preaching. This is part of the transformation of modern media in the Islamic sphere, which emphasizes the unification of Muslims (Pontzen, 2018). This Islamic platform serves as a medium for the da'wah of Muslims, accessible without space and time limitations. The use of online platforms and communication technology facilitates the dissemination of information and Islamic learning, reaching a wider audience (Syarif, 2020). The Islamic platform can serve as an identity for Muslims worldwide, providing comprehensive and universal education (Ramdani et al., 2016). Additionally, Islamic platforms demonstrate that religion, particularly Islam, can transcend geographical boundaries and create transnational identities through virtual communities (Arrahman et al., 2021). Table 2 below shows the representation of faith-based platforms.

**Tabel 2. Faith-based platform**

<p>Muslim Pocket, Prayer Times, Azan, Qur'an &amp; Qibla</p>	<p>Muslim Go Solat Guides, Al-Qur'an, Islamic Articles</p>	<p>Yaumi: Teman Ibadah Muslim Milenial</p>
		
<p>Source:  <a href="https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.muslim.prayertimes.qibla.app&amp;hl=id&amp;gl=US">https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.muslim.prayertimes.qibla.app&amp;hl=id&amp;gl=US</a></p>	<p>Source:  <a href="https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.ftstkmb.solat&amp;hl=en">https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.ftstkmb.solat&amp;hl=en</a></p>	<p>Source:  <a href="https://yaumi.ir.aptoide.com/app">https://yaumi.ir.aptoide.com/app</a></p>

**Accessed and compiled by the Author, 2024**

On the basis of the picture in the table, it can be seen that it is very easy to access religious platforms through online media. The variety of platforms on offer from application providers is an open space for learning about religion quickly and instantly. The three pictures are only a representation of a number of religion-based platforms. This means that religious literacy has now become public consumption with no limits on access. This is also further illustrated by the recognition of the informants from the generation Z, who stated that

*"Learning religion is now easier with the emergence of various online media that can be downloaded through mobile phones, so we can find religious lessons by opening the available applications" (Interview, 2024).*

These three factors have shifted Gen Z's learning and search for religious solutions from scriptural to virtual (Pabbajah et al, 2021). Where Gen Z's religious understanding is more likely to be textual, according to what is found in searches on online media. This

leads to an epistemological shift in religious understanding. Religious epistemology tends to pay more attention to religious knowledge than to religious understanding. While religious understanding is an interesting topic and has more epistemic value (Scott, 2017). This refers to the understanding and actions that have religious aspects to be implemented in life (Lenkov, 2019). Therefore, religious understanding is understood as a spectrum that has a lens through which learners can view the beliefs and practices they want to live by (Walshe & Teece, 2013). (Walshe & Teece, 2013). Religious understanding enables people to interact well, as shown in Marshall (2016) research, the relationship between the Chinese government and society is harmonious. These relationships are ruler or emperor-subjects, father-son, husband-wife, sibling-sibling, friend-friend. This is an expression of the religious understanding that allows for different practices in people's lives.

### **The implication of Gen Z religious transformation**

The understanding of religion inspired by the advent of new media, to which Gen Z has intense access, has implications for a shift in religious understanding. The shift can be seen in three ways. First, people tend to have a different religious spirit with the support of digital media. Second, the spirit of religion is seen in the ease with which individuals or groups claim truth based only on narrow religious texts, so they tend to be unable to accept differences with others. Third, religious enthusiasm is manifested in the visualization of religious images and symbols through social media. Where the display of images can spontaneously and instantly influence the religious spirit of the community.

The continuity of mediatization has implications for religious learning methods, especially among Gen Z. An example that can be observed is the use of online visual media such as Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. These new media are accessed by Gen Z in their daily activities (Briggs, 2022). With the presence of these media, Gen Z can search and select the religious literacy they want and even search for religious figures they like (Samson & Leichty, 2022). Even fundamentalism can prevail with the presence of religion-based online media (Missier, 2022). This certainly leads to a shift in religion, where ideally religion needs to be understood on the basis of authoritative sources (Pabbajah et al, 2020), to instant religious learning through online media. In this case, religious literacy can be a source of enlightenment, but it can also narrow Gen Z's religious understanding through the uncontrolled use of new media.

Based on these conditions, there are three implications of the digitalization of Islamic education as observed in the field when looking at the changing patterns of religious learning among Gen Z. First, the weakening of religious literacy among Gen Z

caused by the ease of finding religious materials and resources through online media. Third, a decline in religious understanding, indicating a trend of Gen Z seeking instant religious understanding through online media, rather than undergoing a comprehensive religious learning process. Third, the growth of religious spirit in Gen Z is not consistent with deep religious understanding. To put it another way, the development of religiously based new media is simultaneously increasing religious spirit (Pabbajah et al., 2022). In contrast, the religious understanding of Gen Z is more textual and passive (Gale et al., 2023).

In the process, religious understanding can also be seen in a religious system that has an organization. Sosis (2019) states that a religious system that lacks organization (authority) will fail to provide significance (meaning), abandon ceremonial activities (rituals), have no restrictions on activities (taboos), be unable to sanctify anything (sacred), offer no beings capable of transcending the natural world (supernatural agents), build no social commitments (moral obligations), or provide a narrative that can tie all these elements together into an explanatory framework (myth). In the field of education, Rossiter (2011) also highlights the importance of implying a different understanding of the importance of spiritual education and views on the role of both the state and religion in providing religious and moral understanding to young people. Therefore, a broader understanding of religion is needed at all levels of society (Kluge, 2008), particularly a balanced understanding of religion for Gen Z.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the ongoing new media era, Gen Z and online media are two inseparable elements. Gen Z is using the Internet as a tool to find religious literacy through online media, which is currently an inevitable phenomenon. This study finds three things in seeing the shape of Gen Z's religious transformation in the new media era. First, the current shift in Gen Z's religious patterns is inseparable from the emergence of various religious-based platforms that are easily and openly accessible. Second, the existence of new media that can be accessed openly has led to changing religious understanding among Gen Z. Third, the religious literacy presented in online media is difficult to avoid, resulting in a shift in Gen Z's religious understanding. Thus, religion is increasingly accessible due to the presence of various religion-based new media,

In addition to proving the reality of Gen Z's religion in the new media era, this study is also expected to be a comparative study with previous studies that focus more on the aspect of the mediatization function in facilitating people's religious literacy. Furthermore, this study provides an initial mapping of the emergence of a number of community problems within the new media era, especially Gen Z's understanding of

religion. It is hoped that this mapping will open up opportunities for constructive discussion for relevant studies.

The limitation of this paper is that it relies only on religious observation in online media as exhibited by Gen Z. Using a netnographic approach, the data sources used as informants are relatively small and are not based on actual data as empirically practiced by the wider community. Therefore, there is a need for further studies which are concerned with the phenomenon of religious society in the midst of current developments in digitalization. This is possible considering that the dynamics of people's religious life, especially the younger generation, have changed following the development of technological devices, especially in seeking religious literacy. The complexity of religious issues arising from digitalization can thus be adequately and wisely addressed.

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