



Unveiling Religious Identity in Virtual Classrooms: Insights and Impacts

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Abstract

The shift to online learning in universities, particularly following the pandemic, has prompted educators to adapt traditionally face-to-face courses such as religious education to virtual formats. This mixed-method study employed surveys with 308 college students at a Catholic institution and in-depth interviews with 27 participants to examine how online delivery shapes students' religious identity. Thematic analysis of interview data revealed four key themes: embracing adaptability and introspection, fostering connections beyond physical boundaries, broadening spiritual perspectives, and grappling with technological challenges. The findings illuminate the interplay between digital learning experiences and religious identity development, offering actionable insights for educators aiming to enhance virtual religious education. Recommendations include conducting longitudinal studies to monitor student religious identity shifts within online environments and evaluate digital religious education's enduring effects on faith and community engagement.

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Introduction

The swift growth of online learning platforms has significantly changed the landscape of higher education, extending beyond traditional classrooms to deliver global educational opportunities (Brasca et al., 2022). Hastened by the transition to online learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this shift has sparked meaningful discussions about how virtual environments impact different aspects of students' lives, including personal and spiritual growth. Experts project that online education will continue expanding by 2025 (McCue, 2018; Brasca et al., 2022), and some argue that virtual classes may ultimately replace face-to-face teaching (Waghid & Waghid, 2017). Such a transition calls for reevaluating educational approaches within technological environments, as several scholars underscore the need for adaptable pedagogy (Cambridge, 2010; Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020).

While online learning has transformed teaching methods and widened access, its impact on students' religious beliefs, a fundamental component of personal identity, remains underexplored (Gao et al., 2024). This gap is especially notable in religious education, which traditionally relies on in-person interactions to foster deep and shared learning experiences. Zain (2021) and Halevy and Gross (2023) highlight the importance of investigating how online learning environments affect these personal and communal dimensions of student growth. In religious education, where students typically engage in group discussions, hands-on activities, and rituals that strengthen their faith, the transition to online learning introduces unique challenges and opportunities (Baburajan et al., 2022; Veronica et al., 2022; Syafii & Retnawati, 2022). This study examines whether these longstanding practices retain their impact when religious teachings are delivered virtually.

At De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde, the Theology department recently shifted all its courses from face-to-face to fully online instruction. This move has prompted educators to reconsider how theological concepts are conveyed and how students connect with spiritual teachings. Faculty members in the department have embraced these changes through various virtual teaching methods, including BigSky (the institution's Learning Management System) and video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet, to replicate the interactive and communal experience central to theological education.

In light of these developments, this study addresses three critical questions by drawing on survey data and in-depth interviews: (1) How do students perceive their religious identity in an online religious class? (2) What is the overall level of religious identity among students? (3) Do male and female students and Catholic and non-Catholic students differ in how they perceive their religious identity? To probe these issues further, two hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 significance level:

- **H₀₁:** No significant difference exists in how males and females perceive their religious identity.
- **H₀₂:** No significant difference exists in how Catholics and non-Catholics perceive their religious identity.

Given the increased reliance on digital learning in educational institutions, this research is timely. Online platforms offer fresh insights into how virtual settings might shape the formation of religious identities (Algrim, 2020; Bingaman, 2020). Strengthening the spiritual dimension of religious teaching in the digital sphere sheds light on emerging pedagogical strategies and could influence future policies and practices in religious education.

As technology permeates education, it influences how religious teachings are delivered and learners interact with their faith and community. By situating this research at the intersection of spirituality and technological innovation, we aim to identify effective ways to leverage digital tools for deeper religious understanding and stronger interpersonal connections, thereby bridging the gap between traditional religious pedagogy and contemporary technologies. Ultimately, this study urges educators and institutions to reconsider how they foster spiritual development in a rapidly changing educational environment. The research highlights the value of creating inclusive, spiritually meaningful experiences that transcend physical boundaries by examining the interplay between online learning and religious beliefs. In a society shaped by continuous technological advancement, nurturing spiritual growth at individual and communal levels remains vital to all educational contexts.

Literature Review

Developing Religious Identity

Religious identity refers to how individuals relate to religion and spirituality. Earlier studies framed religious identity primarily as a product of societal and cultural norms shaped by factors like family, community, and traditions (Queen, 1996). More recent studies emphasize its diverse and evolving nature, highlighting how personal experiences, cultural settings, and spiritual practices play vital roles (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2021). Particularly for young people, religion can offer a sense of meaning, belonging, and connection with peers, relatives, and a higher power, thus acting as a guiding framework for self-discovery (King, 2019).

Scholars disagree on how best to define and develop religious identity. Some focus on traditional religious observances, whereas others prioritize individual faith and personal convictions. The debate extends to the interplay between "nature" and "nurture." While some argue that religious identity is shaped through upbringing and community, others suggest a genetic component (Kitayama & Salvador, 2017). Regardless of

theoretical stance, most researchers concur that religious identity is not static but evolves through inherited traits and intentionally cultivated beliefs.

De Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. (2021) underscore this complexity, showing how cultural contexts, personal experiences, and societal changes can reshape an individual's spiritual path. For instance, Mulder's (2018) research highlights how interacting with various subcultures, such as metal music communities, can foster empathy, challenge biases, and deepen self-reflection, ultimately enriching a person's religious identity. In our contemporary world, traditional religious practices increasingly coexist with modern approaches to faith. Open conversations with people from various backgrounds can lead to a more inclusive view of religious identity. Campbell (2020) notes that digital platforms can facilitate meaningful interfaith conversations, while Cheong et al. (2012) emphasize how these virtual interactions support community-building and inclusivity. Recent developments in immersive technologies, such as virtual reality, further expand possibilities. Liu, Li, and Gao (2023) illustrate how VR-based experiences can help users explore global religious symbols and rituals more effectively, enhancing comprehension and promoting respect for diversity.

In short, religious identity formation is a dynamic process shaped by long-established traditions and innovative technologies. Family upbringing, cultural norms, personal encounters, and societal shifts contribute to this evolution. At the same time, digital tools, from online forums to VR environments, offer opportunities for broadening spiritual perspectives and nurturing an inclusive religious identity (Campbell, 2020; Cheong et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2023). Ultimately, this synergy between tradition and innovation empowers individuals to navigate contemporary challenges while maintaining a deeply rooted sense of faith and belonging.

Exploring Online Religious Education

Against this backdrop, virtual learning has emerged as a pivotal development in modern education. While online modalities bring clear advantages, including accessibility and flexibility, some scholars point out potential drawbacks, such as the risk of distraction and difficulty replicating the communal atmosphere often integral to religious formation (Mottaqhi, 2021). Balancing these realities requires careful curricular planning to support both the personal and social dimensions of students' growth.

Multiple studies explore these complexities. Mikeska and Howell (2021) highlight the benefits of virtual environments for simulated teaching but also caution about gaps in authenticity and how a virtual platform might differ from real-world instruction. They call for a deeper focus on key authenticity aspects, including teacher embodiment and instructional effectiveness. Similarly, Al Qahtani (2019) reports that students and teachers prefer virtual English classes for convenience and communication benefits. Similarly, Shahid et al.

(2023) show how students who find helpful technology user-friendly and socially endorsed are more inclined to adopt digital learning tools positively.

These findings extend to religious education, where fostering spiritual connection often depends on collective rituals and physical gatherings. Online classes can simulate these experiences, offering forums, videoconferences, and interactive assignments, but achieving the "communal feel" in traditional settings remains challenging. Nonetheless, the potential for broader reach, cross-cultural dialogue, and immersive digital experiences highlights a clear avenue for growth in religious instruction. Such expansion depends on educators' ability to maintain the authenticity of religious traditions while adapting pedagogical methods to digital contexts.

Successful online religious education demands thoughtful design that merges conventional practices with innovative delivery modes. Programs must encourage participation, continuity of faith traditions, and meaningful engagement with religious teachings, all while leveraging digital platforms to broaden students' exposure and foster inclusivity. In today's rapidly evolving digital environment, it is increasingly important for educational institutions to examine what shapes students' willingness to embrace and actively participate in online religious education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods convergent parallel design to examine how religious identity is expressed in online educational settings. In this approach, quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously and then analyzed separately to allow for robust comparison and integration of results. By converging these two datasets, the study aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how virtual platforms influence students' religious identity and engagement in digital learning environments.

Participants in the Study

Participants were drawn from the School of Multidisciplinary Studies at De La Salle College of Saint Benilde, where theology courses have transitioned to online delivery. Of approximately 400 eligible students, 308 responded to the survey, representing diverse backgrounds regarding gender and religious affiliation. Sampling was conducted voluntarily via course announcements, ensuring that all students enrolled in the relevant courses had an equal opportunity to participate.

To gain deeper qualitative insights, 21 volunteers were selected for semi-structured interviews. These interviewees were purposefully chosen to capture variation in gender (e.g., male, female) and religious affiliation (e.g., Catholic, non-Catholic), facilitating a richer exploration of personal experiences and ensuring diverse perspectives on religious identity.

Research Instruments

The online questionnaire comprised 25 Likert-scale items, with response options ranging from "very high" to "very low." These questions were designed to measure students' self-reported religious beliefs, their perceptions of online theology classes, and various aspects of interaction and engagement in virtual learning. To ensure clarity and relevance, the instrument was piloted with a small group of students with similar backgrounds to the intended population (Turner, 2010). Feedback from this pilot led to minor wording adjustments before the final version was administered.

The semi-structured interview guide focused on capturing personal stories and lived experiences concerning religious identity online. It included questions that probed how students perceive changes in their faith, sense of community, and overall spiritual engagement within virtual learning environments. After a practice run with a small sample (Bayat et al., 2019), the interview guide was refined to ensure that each question's phrasing was clear and appropriate for the participants' experiences.

To confirm the study's rigor, the Chair of Theology and an experienced statistician reviewed all survey items for content validity and alignment with the research objectives. The survey demonstrated strong internal consistency, reflected in a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.973. This high coefficient indicates that the questionnaire reliably measured the various dimensions of students' religious experiences (see Table 1 for interpretations of Cronbach's Alpha).

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha Interpretation

Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Internal Consistency/ Reliability
$\alpha > 0.9$	Excellent
$0.8 \leq \alpha < 0.9$	Good
$0.7 \leq \alpha < 0.8$	Acceptable
$0.6 \leq \alpha < 0.7$	Questionable
$0.5 \leq \alpha < 0.6$	Poor
$\alpha < 0.5$	Unacceptable

Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection began with formal approval from the Dean of the School of Multidisciplinary Studies, ensuring adherence to institutional research guidelines. The researchers then contacted the students' professors to request permission to administer the survey. In line with ethical standards, each survey accompanied a comprehensive consent form detailing the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and an emphasis on voluntary participation. To maximize access, the survey was distributed via BigSky, the college's Learning Management System, and was made available to all students enrolled in specific theology courses.

Data Analysis

Two-sample t-tests with equal variances were conducted for the quantitative component to assess the strength of participants' religious identity in online classes. The analysis entailed two separate comparisons: one between males ($n=25$) and females ($n=25$) and another between Catholics ($n=26$) and non-Catholics ($n=26$). Before analysis, assumptions such as normality and homogeneity of variance were checked.

For the qualitative component, interviews were transcribed verbatim and then carefully reviewed for accuracy and completeness. The researcher manually coded these transcripts, identifying themes and recurring patterns related to online religious identity. Lastly, these qualitative findings were interpreted in the context of the study's overarching research questions. In keeping with a convergent parallel design, the quantitative and qualitative results will be compared to provide a comprehensive understanding of how virtual learning platforms influence students' religious identity.

Results and Discussions

RQ1: How do students perceive their religious identity in a virtual religious class?

Discussions with students and group interviews revealed four main themes that illuminate how participants perceive their religious identity in online theology courses: (1) Embracing Adaptability and Introspection, (2) Fostering Connections Beyond Physical Boundaries, (3) Broadening Spiritual Perspectives, and (4) Grappling with Technological Challenges.

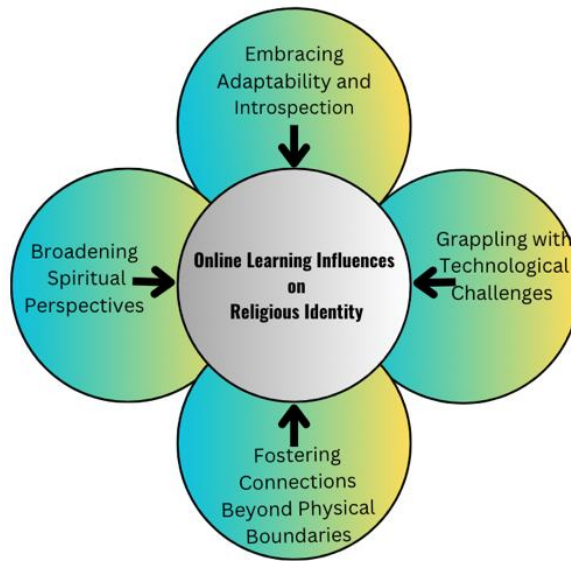


Figure 1. Schematic diagram outlining the key themes in virtual religious education

Theme 1: Embracing Adaptability and Introspection

Online learning has reshaped how students engage with religious education, turning personal spaces into havens for study and reflection. Because students can attend classes from any location, many reported feeling more relaxed and empowered to delve deeper into course content. One student observed, *"Being at home allowed me to ponder my thoughts and emotions privately, which I could not do in a traditional classroom,"* highlighting how a virtual environment can serve as a modern retreat for introspection. Another noted, *"I feel more connected to my spiritual side when I am in my environment, away from usual classroom distractions."* These observations align with Bates's (2015) findings that online platforms can enhance students' engagement with course content. Similarly, Hamilton and Friesen (2013) emphasize that digital learning environments can boost participation and self-reflection.

Theme 2: Fostering Connections Beyond Physical Boundaries

Although students are physically dispersed, virtual classrooms have successfully cultivated a sense of shared community. Interactive tools like forums, group chats, and live discussions help bridge geographic gaps and foster academic and spiritual connections. One student remarked, *"The community vibe in the class is as strong as face-to-face sessions."* Another added, *"We open up more personally because it feels safe and inclusive, which deepens the spiritual bond."* These sentiments echo Lowenthal and Moore's (2020) work, which underscores the role of digital tools in enhancing the communal aspect of online learning. Martin, Sun, and Westine (2020) further suggest that virtual religious education can transcend physical boundaries to create a dynamic, engaging learning community.

Theme 3: Broadening Spiritual Perspectives

Online theology classes expose students to diverse religious viewpoints they might not encounter in traditional settings. Classmates worldwide contribute unique perspectives on cultural practices and faith traditions, enriching spiritual understanding. One participant explained, *"Hearing insights from peers across the globe brings religious teachings to life in ways textbooks cannot replicate."* Selwyn (2014) similarly found that exposure to various religious and cultural perspectives boosts students' spiritual growth. Weller (2018) notes that the diversity in virtual classrooms fosters tolerance and encourages deeper interfaith discussions.

Theme 4: Grappling with Technological Challenges

Despite these advantages, online religious education also poses challenges. Students sometimes experience unreliable internet connections or technical glitches that disrupt class flow and reduce active participation. However, such hurdles spur creative solutions, including asynchronous activities accommodating varied schedules and time zones. One student commented, *"Although technical glitches can be frustrating, they teach us patience and adaptability, which are important spiritual lessons."* Research by Barbour and LaBonte (2019) indicates that technical interruptions can affect student engagement, but Barbour and Reeves (2009) argue that overcoming these setbacks can foster resilience. Martin, Polly, and Ritzhaupt (2020) likewise emphasize that well-designed educational technologies can minimize barriers and maintain an inclusive environment.

In summary, students generally felt that the virtual format deepened their connection to faith by providing flexibility and opportunities for introspection not always found in face-to-face settings. Despite being physically separated, a strong sense of community emerged, aided by interactive tools that transcend geographic limitations. Furthermore, exposure to diverse viewpoints broadens students' religious perspectives, while dealing with technological challenges often cultivates resilience. These four themes illustrate how online religious education can strengthen students' spiritual lives in ways that traditional classrooms may not fully replicate.

RQ2: What is the student's overall level of religious identity?

Quantitative data showed a notable difference in perceived religious identity based on gender and religious affiliation. Female students reported a higher average religious identity score (4.0392) than males (3.9084). Similarly, Catholic students had a higher average score (4.106923) than non-Catholic students (3.575769). These findings suggest that demographic factors, particularly gender and religious upbringing, can influence

how strongly students connect with their faith in an online learning setting. This outcome reinforces the importance of recognizing individual differences when designing and delivering virtual religious education.

RQ3: Is there a significant difference in the perceived level of religious identity between?

Male and Female Students

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in the perceived level of identity between males and females.

Table 2 shows the results of a two-sample t-test with equal variances, indicating a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in religious identity scores between male and female students. Female participants reported higher levels of religious identity, aligning with Charzyńska and Heszen Celińska's (2020) observation that women often exhibit more pronounced religious commitments than men.

Table 2. t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances

	Mean: Male	Mean: Female
Mean	3.9084	4.0392
Variance	0.010855667	0.014957667
Observations	25	25
Pooled Variance	0.012906667	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	48	
t Stat	-4.070574461	
P(T<=t) one-tail	8.71246E-05	
t Critical one-tail	1.677224196	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.000174249	p-Value = 0.0
t Critical two-tail	2.010634758	

Catholic and Non-Catholic Students

H₀₂: There is no significant difference in the perceived level of identity between Catholics and Non-Catholics. Similarly, Table 3 presents the results for Catholic vs. non-Catholic students, revealing a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in religious identity scores. Catholic students generally reported higher levels of religious identity, suggesting that a student's religious upbringing can shape how they experience spirituality in virtual classrooms.

Table 3. t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances

	Catholic	Non-Catholic
Mean	4.106923	3.575769
Variance	0.010238	0.046377
Observations	26	26
Pooled Variance	0.028308	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	50	
t Stat	11.38254	
P(T<=t) one-tail	8.63E-16	
t Critical one-tail	1.675905	
P(T<=t) two-tail	1.73E-15	p-Value = 0.0
t Critical two-tail	2.008559	

These findings underscore how personal identity factors such as gender and religious background can affect students' engagement and spiritual growth. Carrington and Scott (2022) similarly argue that various demographic variables shape the online learning experience. Kahn et al. (2017) highlight the significance of self-reflection in virtual learning, suggesting that spiritual beliefs can play a pivotal role in how students perceive and navigate their education. Lapsley and Kelley's work further indicates that Catholic identity influences the guiding principles of Catholic education, emphasizing the need to integrate religious values into teaching methods for holistic student development. Collectively, these results illustrate the importance of recognizing and accommodating individual and cultural identities within online learning environments. Educators and administrators must tailor instructional approaches that respect diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, enhancing student engagement and fostering an inclusive academic setting.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, future research should explore tailored strategies and teaching methods in online religious education that account for both men's and women's spiritual needs, particularly those that might deepen male students' sense of connection while reinforcing the engagement of female learners. Given that Catholic students report a more robust religious identity than non-Catholics, further investigation into the societal and cultural factors driving this disparity could illuminate how upbringing and community norms shape students' spirituality. Longitudinal studies could also help determine whether improvements in religious identity persist over time, shedding light on how ongoing virtual engagement contributes to spiritual growth and commitment. Finally, examining the effectiveness of interfaith dialogues and inclusive pedagogical

approaches in digital settings is vital for broadening students' religious perspectives and cultivating a more welcoming, enriching environment for all learners, regardless of their faith backgrounds.

Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted impact of virtual learning on students' spiritual development. Through the combined examination of statistical results and in-depth qualitative data, the study uncovered four central themes: (1) Embracing Adaptability and Introspection, (2) Fostering Connections Beyond Physical Boundaries, (3) Broadening Spiritual Perspectives, and (4) Grappling with Technological Challenges. These themes illustrate how flexible, interactive, and reflective online learning environments can act as modern sanctuaries, where students deepen their faith through self-reflection, share and appreciate diverse religious viewpoints, and forge meaningful virtual communities that transcend physical distance.

At the same time, demographic trends point to distinct differences in religious identity, with female and Catholic students reporting higher levels of perceived faith than their male and non-Catholic counterparts. These findings reinforce the need for inclusive and adaptable teaching strategies acknowledging individual backgrounds and spiritual traditions. Navigating technological challenges, from connectivity issues to platform learning curves, often fosters resilience and a more profound commitment to one's faith, further underscoring the transformative potential of online religious education.

This research suggests that well-structured virtual classrooms can uphold academic standards and nurture profound spiritual growth, particularly when teachers and administrators tailor methods to meet diverse needs. As digital platforms evolve, so do opportunities to create welcoming, reflective, and community-centered learning experiences for students across varying religious affiliations. By thoughtfully considering demographic factors and leveraging technology, educators can pave the way for more robust faith-based engagement, setting the stage for a spiritually enriching future in online religious studies.

Implications for Educators

The outcomes of this research hold notable relevance for religious education and the broader arena of virtual learning. In highlighting four key themes: Embracing Adaptability and Introspection, Fostering Connections Beyond Physical Boundaries, Broadening Spiritual Perspectives, and Grappling with Technological Challenges, the results demonstrate how online platforms can reshape traditional teaching approaches by emphasizing flexibility, reflective practice, and inclusive community-building. Educators are encouraged to

leverage these features to create digital spaces where students can safely and deeply explore their faith, strengthening individual self-understanding and a collective sense of belonging.

Moreover, the data on gender and religious affiliation reveals that female and Catholic students generally report higher levels of religious identity, suggesting the need for gender-responsive and culturally attuned pedagogical strategies. Educators can foster more equitable environments for students from various faith traditions and backgrounds by adapting course content and activities to diverse learning needs. Tools such as synchronous discussions, breakout rooms, and moderated forums can bridge geographical gaps, encourage interfaith dialogue, and broaden learners' spiritual perspectives.

At the same time, recurring technological hurdles underscore the importance of institutional support and flexible course design. Ensuring reliable access, offering asynchronous options, and providing digital training can help minimize disruptions and maintain robust engagement. Incorporating solutions that address connectivity constraints or scheduling conflicts enhances participation and cultivates resilience and adaptability, qualities that align closely with many religious teachings.

Ultimately, these insights point to a future where virtual religious education can uphold high academic standards while deepening students' spiritual growth. Educators, administrators, and policymakers should consider these implications to nurture more inclusive, reflective, and dynamic digital learning environments. Such environments respect and celebrate the diverse religious identities of all students.

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