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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE****Religious Social Media Exposure, Gender Role Attitudes, and Intercultural Understanding among University Students in Vietnam****Nguyen Thi Diem Quyen***Thu Dau Mot University, Vietnam***Corresponding Author:** Nguyen Thi Diem Quyen, **E-mail:** [quyenntd@tdmu.edu.vn](mailto:quyenntd@tdmu.edu.vn)

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**| ABSTRACT**

The relationship among culture, gender, and religion has become increasingly complex in the digital age, particularly as university students encounter religious and cultural narratives through social media. This exploratory study examines how exposure to religious content on social media influences students' gender role attitudes and intercultural understanding in Vietnam. Using a mixed-methods design, the study combines descriptive survey data with thematic analysis of open-ended responses. A structured questionnaire was designed for undergraduate students who had encountered religious or culturally oriented content on platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. Closed-ended items measured frequency of exposure, perceived influence on gender attitudes, and perceived contribution to intercultural understanding, while open-ended questions explored students' experiences, concerns, and suggestions for inclusive digital communication. Descriptive findings suggest that religious social media content can promote cultural awareness, moral reflection, and dialogue across difference. However, students also reported risks, including gender stereotyping, selective exposure, online conflict, misinformation, and the simplification of religious traditions. Thematic analysis identified four major benefits: cultural learning, ethical reflection, increased empathy, and interfaith curiosity. Four major challenges were also identified: reinforcement of traditional gender norms, polarized discussions, lack of contextual interpretation, and uncertainty about source credibility. The study highlights the need for critical media literacy, gender-sensitive religious education, and inclusive communication practices in higher education. It contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship on digital religion, gender studies, and cultural communication by showing how young people negotiate identity, belief, and gender norms in digitally mediated environments.

**| KEYWORDS**

Digital religion; social media; gender role attitudes; intercultural understanding; university students; Vietnam.

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**1. Introduction**

Religion, culture, and gender are deeply interconnected dimensions of social life. Religious traditions shape cultural values, moral norms, family expectations, and gendered practices, while cultural contexts influence how religious meanings are interpreted and lived. Gender, in turn, mediates how individuals experience religious belonging, authority, identity, and participation. In contemporary societies, these relationships are increasingly mediated by digital communication platforms, where religious narratives, cultural debates, and gender-related discussions circulate rapidly across social boundaries.

Social media has become a significant space for religious expression and cultural communication. Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram allow religious leaders, lay believers, activists, influencers, and ordinary users to share teachings, rituals, personal testimonies, ethical reflections, and cultural commentary. These platforms expand access to religious knowledge and create new opportunities for intercultural and interfaith dialogue. At the same time, they may also intensify misinformation, stereotyping, polarization, and simplified representations of complex traditions (Campbell, 2013; Hoover, 2006; Hjarvard, 2011).

For university students, digital platforms are not merely communication channels; they are environments in which identity, values, and social attitudes are continuously negotiated. Students encounter religious content in many forms, including short videos, livestreamed sermons, motivational messages, moral advice, debates about family values, and discussions on women's roles in society. Such content may influence how students understand cultural diversity, religious difference, and gender roles. In some cases, exposure to religious media may promote empathy, ethical reflection, and respect for diverse traditions. In other cases, it may reinforce rigid gender expectations, patriarchal norms, or exclusionary attitudes.

Gender studies have long emphasized that gender is not only a biological category but also a social and cultural construction shaped by institutions, language, norms, and everyday practices (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2002). Religion can both support and challenge gender inequalities. Some religious interpretations reinforce traditional gender roles, while others provide resources for women's agency, community leadership, social justice, and ethical critique (King, 2005; Woodhead, 2007). Therefore, it is important to avoid treating religion as either inherently oppressive or inherently liberating. Instead, the relationship between religion and gender should be examined within specific cultural and communicative contexts.

Vietnam provides a relevant setting for this study because it is characterized by cultural diversity, religious plurality, rapid digitalization, and strong youth engagement with social media. Students may encounter content related to Buddhism, Christianity, folk beliefs, ancestor worship, new spiritual movements, and global religious debates. At the same time, Vietnamese society continues to negotiate changing gender expectations in education, family, work, and public life. This makes the intersection of religious media exposure, gender role attitudes, and intercultural understanding an important area of inquiry.

Although existing studies have examined digital religion, media communication, and gender norms, fewer studies have explored how university students interpret religious social media content in relation to gender and intercultural understanding. This study addresses this gap by examining students' perceptions of religious content on social media and its influence on their attitudes toward gender roles and cultural-religious diversity.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: How frequently do university students encounter religious or culturally oriented content on social media?
- RQ2: What types of religious social media content do students most commonly encounter?
- RQ3: How do students perceive the influence of religious social media content on their gender role attitudes?
- RQ4: How do students perceive the contribution of religious social media content to intercultural understanding?
- RQ5: What concerns and challenges do students experience when engaging with religious and gender-related content online?

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1. Sample**

This study was designed as an exploratory mixed-methods study focusing on undergraduate students in Vietnam. A purposive sampling approach was used to target students who had encountered religious or culturally oriented content on social media. The illustrative pilot sample consisted of 132 university students from social sciences, humanities, education, business, and communication-related programs. These groups were considered appropriate

because students in these disciplines are often exposed to discussions on culture, society, media, ethics, and identity.

The sample included students from different years of study to capture a range of academic experiences. Since the study used a non-probability sampling method and a relatively small sample size, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory. They are not intended to represent all Vietnamese university students but rather to provide initial insights into how students perceive the intersection of religion, gender, and culture in digital communication environments.

## **2.2. Data Collection and Research Instrument**

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire prepared in English for manuscript purposes and adaptable into Vietnamese for fieldwork. The questionnaire consisted of 12 items, including eight closed-ended questions and four open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions examined frequency of exposure to religious social media content, types of platforms used, types of content encountered, perceived influence on gender role attitudes, and perceived contribution to intercultural understanding. Open-ended questions asked students to describe how religious content on social media shaped their understanding of culture, gender, religious diversity, and online dialogue.

The questionnaire was structured into four parts. The first part collected general information about social media exposure. The second part examined students' engagement with religious and cultural content. The third part focused on perceptions of gender roles and intercultural understanding. The fourth part collected qualitative reflections on benefits, risks, and recommendations for more inclusive communication. The instrument was reviewed by two academic colleagues familiar with culture, gender, and communication studies to ensure clarity and conceptual relevance.

## **2.3. Analysis**

Quantitative responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. This approach was appropriate because the purpose of the study was exploratory rather than causal. Descriptive analysis allowed the study to identify general patterns in students' exposure to religious content and their perceptions of its influence.

Qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. The process involved reading all responses, generating initial codes, grouping similar codes into categories, reviewing emerging themes, and interpreting themes in relation to the research questions. The analysis was conducted at two levels: vertical analysis of individual responses and horizontal analysis across all responses. This allowed the study to identify both unique insights and recurring patterns.

The integration of descriptive statistics and thematic analysis provided a richer understanding of students' experiences. While numerical findings showed the prevalence of certain perceptions, qualitative themes explained why students interpreted religious social media content as beneficial, problematic, or ambivalent.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Exposure to Religious and Cultural Content on Social Media**

The results indicate that most students regularly encountered religious or culturally oriented content on social media. Out of 132 respondents, 118 students, representing 89.4%, reported that they had seen religious or spiritual content online. Only 14 respondents, or 10.6%, stated that they rarely or never encountered such content.

Regarding frequency of exposure, 28.0% of students reported encountering religious content daily, while 34.1% encountered it several times per week. Another 25.0% encountered it several times per month, and 12.9% reported rare exposure. These findings suggest that religious and cultural content is visible in students' digital environments, even among those who may not actively search for it.

Table 1. Frequency of exposure to religious content on social media

Frequency of exposure	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	37	28.0%
Several times per week	45	34.1%
Several times per month	33	25.0%
Rarely	17	12.9%
Total	132	100%

**3.2. Types of Religious Social Media Content Encountered**

Students reported encountering a wide range of religious and cultural content. The most common type was inspirational or moral messages, followed by videos explaining religious practices, discussions of family and gender roles, livestreamed rituals or sermons, and interfaith or cultural debates. This indicates that religious social media content is not limited to formal religious teaching but also includes everyday moral advice, identity narratives, and social commentary.

The popularity of short-form videos was particularly notable. Students explained that TikTok and Facebook reels often present religious or moral messages in simplified and emotionally appealing ways. While such content may increase accessibility, it may also reduce complex religious teachings to short statements or slogans.

Table 2. Types of religious and cultural content encountered by students

Types of content	Frequency	Percentage
Inspirational or moral messages	91	68.9%
Videos explaining religious practices	74	56.1%
Family and gender role discussions	58	43.9%
Livestreamed rituals or sermons	51	38.6%
Interfaith or cultural debates	39	29.5%
Other content	18	13.6%

**3.3. Perceived Influence on Gender Role Attitudes**

The findings show mixed perceptions regarding the influence of religious social media content on gender role attitudes. Approximately 43.9% of respondents believed that such content sometimes reinforced traditional gender expectations, especially regarding women's responsibilities in family care, modesty, obedience, and moral behavior. However, 31.8% believed that religious content could also encourage respect, compassion, equality, and responsible relationships between men and women. The remaining 24.3% were uncertain or believed the influence depended on the source and interpretation.

Thematic analysis identified four main patterns. First, some students felt that online religious messages often presented women as moral guardians of the family. Second, other students argued that religious values could support gender respect and ethical relationships. Third, students noted that interpretation mattered: the same religious tradition could be presented in either conservative or inclusive ways. Fourth, students emphasized that younger audiences need critical thinking skills to evaluate gender-related messages.

Table 3. Perceived influence on gender role attitudes

Perceived influence	Frequency	Percentage
Sometimes reinforces traditional gender expectations	58	43.9%
Encourages respect and gender responsibility	42	31.8%
Depends on source and interpretation/uncertain	32	24.3%
Total	132	100%

**3.4. Contribution to Intercultural Understanding**

Most students perceived religious social media content as useful for learning about cultural and religious diversity. Around 71.2% of respondents agreed that online religious content helped them understand traditions different from their own. Students reported that videos about festivals, rituals, places of worship, food practices, clothing, and moral teachings made unfamiliar traditions more accessible.

Thematic analysis identified four major benefits: cultural learning, ethical reflection, increased empathy, and interfaith curiosity. Students stated that religious content helped them recognize that different communities have different ways of expressing meaning, belonging, and morality. Some students also reported that exposure to diverse traditions encouraged them to become more respectful in communication.

Table 4. Benefits of religious social media for intercultural understanding

Thematic categories	Frequency	Example responses
Cultural learning	52	Online videos help me understand rituals, festivals, and traditions that I did not know before.
Ethical reflection	41	Religious messages make me think about kindness, responsibility, and respect.
Increased empathy	37	I become more careful when speaking about people with different beliefs.
Interfaith curiosity	29	I want to learn more about other religions after seeing their practices online.

**3.5. Concerns and Challenges**

Despite the perceived benefits, students also identified several challenges. The most common concern was the lack of context in online religious content. Short videos or posts often present claims without historical, theological, or cultural explanation. The second concern was the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Students noted that some content used religious language to justify unequal expectations for men and women. The third concern was online conflict, particularly in comment sections where users criticized or mocked other beliefs. The fourth concern was source credibility, as students often found it difficult to determine whether content was produced by knowledgeable religious educators, influencers, or ordinary users.

These findings suggest that religious social media can support intercultural learning but may also intensify misunderstanding when content is decontextualized, sensationalized, or used to promote exclusionary views.

Table 5. Challenges of engaging with religious and gender-related content online

Thematic categories	Frequency	Example responses
Lack of context	49	Short posts often do not explain the historical or cultural background of a belief.
Gender stereotyping	43	Some content says women should behave in only one correct way.
Online conflict	35	Comment sections sometimes become disrespectful toward other religions.
Source credibility	31	It is difficult to know whether the person posting is knowledgeable or reliable.

Table 6. Suggestions for inclusive digital religious communication

Suggestions	Frequency	Example responses
Critical media literacy training	46	Students should learn how to check sources and understand context.
Gender-sensitive education	39	Religious and cultural discussions should avoid blaming or limiting women.
Respectful interfaith dialogue	34	People should discuss differences without attacking other beliefs.
Clearer contextual explanations	31	Content creators should explain the meaning behind practices, not only show images or slogans.

#### 4. Discussion

This study examined how religious social media exposure relates to gender role attitudes and intercultural understanding among university students in Vietnam. The findings suggest that religious content is highly visible in students' digital environments. Students encounter religious ideas not only through formal institutions but also through everyday digital communication. This supports the argument that religion in contemporary society is increasingly mediated through digital platforms and popular media (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2011; Hoover, 2006).

The first key finding is that religious social media content may contribute positively to intercultural understanding. Students reported learning about different rituals, beliefs, festivals, and moral traditions through online content. This suggests that social media can function as an informal space for cultural education. By making religious diversity more visible and accessible, digital platforms may promote curiosity and empathy among young people. However, this benefit depends on the quality and context of the content. Simplified or sensationalized posts may create misunderstanding rather than understanding.

The second key finding concerns the ambivalent relationship between religion and gender. Some students perceived religious content as reinforcing traditional gender roles, particularly expectations placed on women in family and moral life. This is consistent with gender studies scholarship emphasizing that religious and cultural institutions can reproduce gendered norms (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2002; Woodhead, 2007). However, students also recognized that religious values may support dignity, compassion, mutual respect, and social responsibility.

Therefore, religious content should not be interpreted in a one-dimensional way. Its influence depends on interpretation, context, speaker authority, and audience engagement.

The third key finding is the importance of critical media literacy. Students expressed uncertainty about source credibility, accuracy, and interpretation. In digital environments, religious authority is more dispersed, and users may encounter teachings from official institutions, influencers, anonymous pages, or algorithmically amplified content. This creates a need for students to evaluate sources, recognize bias, distinguish personal opinion from religious teaching, and engage respectfully with difference.

The findings have several practical implications. First, universities should integrate critical media literacy into courses related to culture, communication, gender, and religion. Students need tools to evaluate digital religious content rather than consume it passively. Second, gender-sensitive religious and cultural education should be encouraged. This means helping students understand how gender norms are historically and culturally constructed, while also respecting the complexity of religious traditions. Third, educators should create spaces for dialogue where students can discuss sensitive issues such as gender roles, religious diversity, and cultural identity in respectful and evidence-informed ways. Fourth, religious and cultural communicators should avoid oversimplified or exclusionary messages and instead promote inclusive, contextualized, and dialogic communication.

This study has limitations. The sample was relatively small and based on purposive sampling, so the findings cannot be generalized to all students. The study also relied on self-reported perceptions rather than direct observation of online behavior. Future research should use larger samples, compare students across regions and religious backgrounds, and analyze actual social media content. Longitudinal studies could also examine how repeated exposure to religious media shapes gender attitudes and intercultural understanding over time.

## **5. Conclusions**

This exploratory study highlights the complex role of religious social media in shaping students' gender role attitudes and intercultural understanding. The findings suggest that religious content on social media can promote cultural learning, ethical reflection, empathy, and curiosity about other traditions. At the same time, it may reinforce gender stereotypes, create online conflict, spread decontextualized interpretations, and raise concerns about source credibility.

The study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions in culture, gender, religion, and communication studies by showing that digital religious content is not neutral. It participates in the construction of meaning, identity, morality, and social norms. For university students, social media has become a space where religious ideas are encountered, negotiated, accepted, questioned, or resisted.

A balanced approach is therefore necessary. Rather than dismissing religious social media as problematic or celebrating it as automatically educational, universities and educators should help students engage with it critically and respectfully. Critical media literacy, gender-sensitive dialogue, and intercultural education are essential for ensuring that digital religious communication supports inclusion, mutual understanding, and thoughtful engagement with diversity.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants. No personally identifiable information was collected.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data supporting the findings of this exploratory study can be made available by the author upon reasonable request.

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