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Artificial Intelligence, Escapism, and the Rise of Synthetic Reality: How technology reshapes human perception

Wegig Murwonugroho[1], Ariani[1], Sukumala Nithipattaraahnan[2], Agung Eko Budiwaspada[3*]
**Corresponding Author*

[1] Faculty of Art and Design, Universitas Trisakti, Jakarta, Indonesia
[2] Faculty of Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University, Bangkok, Thailand
[3] Faculty of Art and Design, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Bandung, Indonesia

wegig@trisakti.ac.id; arianirachman@trisakti.ac.id; nithipattara_r@su.ac.th; agungebw@itb.ac.id
Telp: +62818922342

Abstract
This study explores synthetic reality as a cultural shift in the era of AI and digital media. Using phenomenology, digital ethnography, and discourse analysis, it examines how AI-generated experiences reshape identity, memory, and perception. Introducing "post-hyperreality" argues that simulations are lived, not just represented. Indonesian cases, AI-driven historical reconstructions and virtual rituals—show synthetic narratives extending communal memory. A framework outlines impacts on identity, emotion, and authenticity, revealing both empowerment and psychological risks of deep immersion. The study offers fresh insights and ethical provocations for media studies, digital religion, art theory, and human–AI interaction.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; hyperreality; post-hyperreal paradigm; virtual rituals

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1.0 Introduction

In contemporary digital societies, artificial intelligence has fundamentally transformed how individuals engage with virtual environments, creating what we term synthetic reality—digitally mediated experiences that users perceive as ontologically legitimate. This phenomenon extends beyond traditional digital escapism into a qualitative shift in human perception where AI-generated simulations are no longer recognized as representations but internalized as authentic experiences (Zylinska, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transition, particularly visible in the emergence of virtual religious practices. When Saudi Arabia restricted physical Hajj participation in 2020-2021, affecting approximately 2.5 million potential pilgrims annually, metaverse-based virtual Hajj platforms emerged as alternatives, allowing users to perform rituals in photorealistic simulations of Mecca (Nofal et al., 2025; AlFzari et al., 2024). This case exemplifies a broader pattern: AI-mediated experiences are increasingly accepted not as substitutes but as legitimate manifestations of spirituality, identity, and social interaction.

Indonesia provides a particularly instructive context for examining this phenomenon. Unlike Western contexts where synthetic reality often generates anxiety about authenticity and factuality, Indonesian digital practices reveal distinctive patterns of engagement. The Instagram account Sejarah Bangsaku, which uses AI to animate historical photographs, has accumulated over 1.2 million followers, suggesting widespread acceptance of AI-mediated historical narratives (fieldwork observation, 2024). This acceptance reflects

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Indonesia's oral historiographic tradition and communal memory practices, where emotionally resonant storytelling takes precedence over documentary objectivity (Vickers, 2005). Similarly, AI-generated Islamic content on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube—including avatar-led sermons and digitally enhanced calligraphy—demonstrates how religious communities adapt sacred practices through technological mediation without perceiving contradiction (Campbell & Lövheim, 2011).

This study focuses specifically on how AI-generated synthetic realities reshape three interconnected domains: perception (how individuals process and validate digital experiences), imagination (how AI constrains or expands creative capacity), and cultural practice (how communities integrate synthetic realities into identity formation and collective memory). By examining these domains through Indonesian cases, we contribute empirical evidence to debates that have remained largely theoretical or Western-centric.

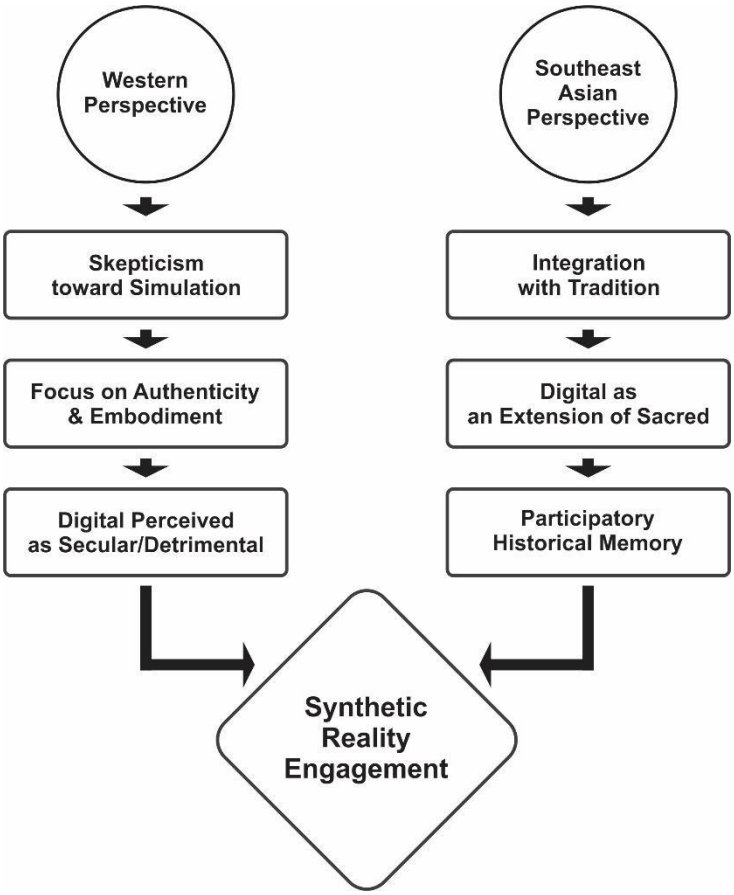

Fig. 1. Cultural Contrast: West vs. Southeast Asia in Synthetic Reality Engagement
(Source: Budiwaspada et al., 2025)

Figure 1 contrasts epistemological frameworks between Western and Southeast Asian contexts, showing differing attitudes toward synthetic spiritual and historical representations. Access and perceptions of AI and deepfakes are shaped by sociodemographic factors, including gender divides (Bitton et al., 2025). In Indonesia, where oral tradition and communal memory inform historiography, synthetic reconstructions tap into cultural storytelling logic. Unlike Western fears of simulation undermining factuality, AI-enhanced history is often embraced as participatory remembrance for younger generations, aligning with Southeast Asian trends where digital religiosity and AI-mediated rituals are viewed as extensions of the sacred.

Generative AI is also reshaping companionship, emotion, and immersion. AI-powered virtual companions simulate empathy, fostering deep psychological bonds (Luo et al., 2024; Teston & Munoz, 2021). Holographic storytelling brings mythical beings into museums and parks, AI whales breaching city parks and dinosaurs in AR tourism, blurring tangible and synthetic realities (Kumar et al., 2024). This study addresses three specific research questions operationalized through Indonesian digital practices: (1) How do users of AI-mediated religious platforms (specifically virtual Hajj and AI-generated Islamic content) perceive the authenticity and spiritual legitimacy of their experiences compared to physical practices? (2) What psychological and social mechanisms enable users to accept synthetic historical narratives (as exemplified by Sejarah Bangsaku) as constitutive of collective memory rather than mere representations? (3) At what threshold does engagement with synthetic reality environments (measured through self-reported usage patterns and behavioral indicators) correlate with diminished participation in physical social interactions and creative activities?. To address these questions, the study pursues four specific objectives: First, to document and analyze user testimonials and behavioral patterns among participants in virtual religious practices, establishing empirical evidence of how synthetic spirituality is experienced and legitimized. Second, to examine the production and reception mechanisms of AI-generated historical content within Indonesian digital spaces, identifying specific narrative techniques and audience engagement patterns that facilitate acceptance of synthetic memory.

Third, to measure and categorize the extent of synthetic reality consumption among Indonesian digital users, correlating intensity of engagement with self-reported changes in offline social interaction and creative output. Fourth, to develop a conceptual framework that explains the ontological shift from hyperreality (where simulations represent reality) to post-hyperreality (where simulations constitute reality), grounded in empirical observations from Indonesian contexts.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1. From hyperreality to post-hyperreality: theoretical foundations

The theoretical foundation for understanding synthetic reality rests on three interconnected frameworks that together explain the ontological shift this study investigates. First, Baudrillard's (1994) concept of hyperreality provides the baseline understanding of how simulations can become more compelling than reality itself. However, contemporary AI-mediated experiences exceed Baudrillard's formulation: they do not merely simulate reality more convincingly. They create experiential domains that users internalize as ontologically legitimate, independent of any original referent. Second, Benjamin's (1969) analysis of mechanical reproduction and the dissolution of 'aura' anticipated how technological mediation affects authenticity, though AI generation introduces a qualitative difference from mechanical reproduction—algorithmic creation rather than copying. Third, McLuhan's (2013) media theory illuminates how technological forms reshape human consciousness itself, suggesting that prolonged engagement with AI-generated environments restructures cognitive and perceptual faculties.

From a sociological perspective, McLuhan's (2013) media theory offers a crucial lens through which to interpret the impact of perfect simulacra on human perception. The transition from text-based to image-based and AI-enhanced media signifies a transformation in cognitive processing, where the immediacy of AI-generated realism conditions human consciousness to accept digital representations as ontologically equivalent to lived experience. The psychological implications of prolonged engagement with hyperreal content suggest an erosion of critical faculties, as the synthetic reality becomes internalised as authentic. This phenomenon has been particularly evident in the realm of AI-generated social media influencers and virtual idols, where followers engage with digital entities as though they possess human agency (Dutta & Sharma, 2025). The blurring of virtual and real-world interactions exemplifies what Turkle (2011) describes as the "evaporation of the real", where individuals relate to AI-generated entities with the same affective intensity as they would with human beings.

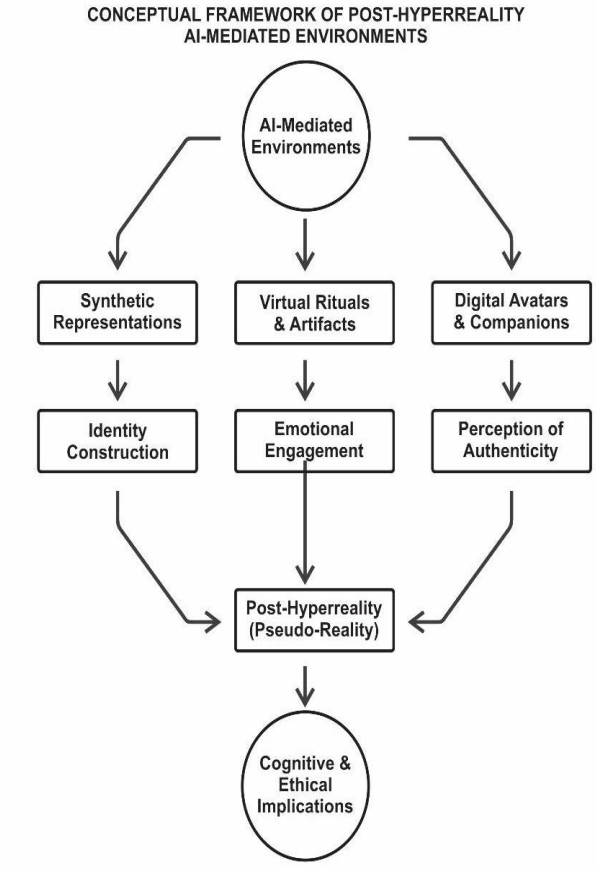

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of Post-Hyperreality
(Source: Budiwaspada et al., 2025)

The impact of the perfect simulacrum, as a result, extends beyond theoretical abstraction into tangible sociocultural transformations. AI-generated realities increasingly structure human perception, emotional engagement, and historical consciousness, rendering traditional epistemological categories inadequate for distinguishing between the real and the hyperreal. While AI-mediated artistic, religious, and historical representations provide new avenues for engagement, they also necessitate a critical reassessment of authenticity, authorship, and memory in an era where the artificial is no longer distinguishable from the real. Future research must interrogate the long-term cognitive and cultural consequences of AI's role in shaping not only representation but the very structures of human experience itself. These findings converge to suggest that synthetic realities are not merely interpretive overlays but integral components of identity formation, memory construction, and spiritual engagement. To capture this ontological transition, conceptual framework (see Figure 2) illustrates how AI-mediated experiences construct a new perceptual architecture.

In this framework, synthetic experiences no longer represent reality but constitute it. The framework begins with AI-mediated environments (VR spaces, generative simulations, algorithmic rituals) that surpass material limits, enabling new forms of interaction. From this base, three representational trajectories emerge: (1) synthetic representations producing hyperreal images and narratives via machine learning; (2) virtual rituals and artefacts, such as digital pilgrimages or deepfake documentaries; and (3) avatars and AI companions, replacing physical embodiment with algorithmic proxies. These trajectories reshape identity, memory, and emotion, leading individuals to find authenticity in virtual selves and form affective bonds with AI agents. This culminates in post-hyperreality, where the simulated becomes the real, an ontological rupture that challenges cognition, morality, and regulatory frameworks, demanding critical interrogation of future AI-human entanglements.

2.2 Empirical studies of synthetic reality acceptance

Recent empirical research has begun documenting how users actually experience and legitimize synthetic realities across various domains. In religious contexts, studies of virtual worship during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that participants frequently reported emotional and spiritual experiences comparable to physical attendance, with 67% of surveyed virtual service attendees describing their experience as 'genuinely meaningful' (Evolvi, 2021). AlFzari et al. (2024) extended this finding specifically to Islamic practices, documenting how metaverse-based Hajj participants developed novel theological justifications for accepting virtual pilgrimage as spiritually valid under conditions of necessity. These findings suggest that religious communities construct adaptive frameworks for legitimizing synthetic practice rather than rejecting it wholesale.

In historical representation, Ghiurău and Popescu (2024) demonstrated that AI-enhanced historical imagery produces higher emotional engagement and retention compared to unmodified archival photographs, though at the cost of reduced accuracy in viewers' factual recall. This trade-off between emotional resonance and historical fidelity appears particularly pronounced in contexts where collective memory is orally transmitted. Liu et al. (2023) examined AI-generated media content across cultural contexts, finding that acceptance of synthetic historical narratives correlates with pre-existing cultural epistemologies—specifically, communities with strong oral traditions showed higher acceptance rates than those with documentary-textual traditions.

Regarding identity and social interaction, research on avatar-mediated communication demonstrates measurable psychological effects. Li et al. (2024) tracked 342 active metaverse users over six months, finding that 58% reported feeling 'more authentic' through their avatars than in physical self-presentation, while simultaneously experiencing increased difficulty maintaining offline relationships. This paradox—enhanced perceived authenticity coupled with social withdrawal—characterizes what we term the synthetic identity phenomenon. Complementing this, studies of AI companions reveal similar patterns: Luo et al. (2024) documented that regular users of AI chatbot companions (defined as daily interaction over three months) showed statistically significant increases in self-reported loneliness despite subjective satisfaction with their AI relationships.

2.3 Research gap and study positioning

Despite these advances, three significant gaps persist in the literature. First, existing studies remain largely siloed by domain—examining religious experience, historical narrative, or social identity in isolation—without investigating how these dimensions interact to create comprehensive synthetic reality ecosystems. Second, research has concentrated overwhelmingly on Western contexts, with Asian cases, particularly Southeast Asian societies with distinctive cultural epistemologies, remaining underexplored. Third, while numerous studies document short-term acceptance or engagement with synthetic realities, longitudinal research tracking cognitive and behavioral changes over extended exposure periods remains scarce.

This study addresses these gaps through three contributions. Empirically, it provides systematic documentation of Indonesian synthetic reality practices across religious, historical, and social domains, offering comparative insight into non-Western acceptance patterns. Methodologically, it employs an integrated approach combining digital ethnography, phenomenological interviews, and discourse analysis to capture both subjective experience and observable behavioral patterns. Theoretically, it advances the concept of post-hyperreality, arguing that contemporary AI-mediated experiences represent a qualitative shift beyond Baudrillard's hyperreality—not simulation becoming indistinguishable from reality, but simulation becoming accepted as constitutive of reality independent of any original referent.

3.0 Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodology combining phenomenology and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how AI-driven synthetic realities shape perception, imagination, and culture. Phenomenology captures lived experiences in AI-mediated spaces (van Manen, 2016), while CDA investigates how AI content frames authenticity, identity, and escapism (Fairclough, 2013). This dual approach

explores the sociocultural and psychological implications of AI's integration into human life. Given the study's exploratory nature, qualitative methods best capture how individuals interpret and internalise synthetic realities. Quantitative metrics offer breadth but miss the phenomenological, cultural, and ethical nuances. Thus, phenomenology, CDA, and digital ethnography prioritise depth and context.

3.1 Data collection

Data collection proceeded through three integrated phases conducted between March 2024 and October 2024, totaling seven months of fieldwork.

Phase One: Digital Ethnography (March-August 2024, 180 days). We conducted systematic participant observation across four digital platforms selected for their relevance to Indonesian synthetic reality practices: (1) VRChat metaverse environments hosting Indonesian Muslim communities, specifically the 'Virtual Masjid Indonesia' world and associated religious gathering spaces; (2) Instagram account Sejarah Bangsaku and its community interactions; (3) Second Life Indonesian language communities focused on avatar-based social interaction; and (4) TikTok channels producing AI-generated Islamic content with follower counts exceeding 100,000. Observation protocols followed Hine's (2015) connective ethnography framework, treating these platforms not as isolated field sites but as interconnected nodes of a broader synthetic reality ecosystem. Each platform received minimum observation time of 120 hours distributed across different times of day and days of week to capture varied usage patterns. Field notes were recorded daily using a structured template capturing: user behaviors and interaction patterns, linguistic framing of synthetic experiences (particularly authenticity claims), community norm negotiations around AI-generated content, and observed emotional responses to synthetic representations. Following Kozinets (2020) netnographic guidelines, we adopted a disclosed researcher presence in community spaces, introducing our research purpose through pinned posts and profile descriptions, while maintaining non-intrusive observation.

Phase Two: Semi-Structured Interviews (June-September 2024). We conducted in-depth phenomenological interviews with 32 purposively sampled participants recruited from observed digital communities. Sampling criteria required: (1) minimum six months active engagement with synthetic reality platforms; (2) minimum three platform interactions per week; and (3) self-identification as Indonesian residents aged 18-55. The sample comprised: 12 virtual religious practice participants (VRChat mosque attendance and metaverse Hajj participants), 10 consumers of AI-generated historical content (regular Sejarah Bangsaku followers and commenters), and 10 metaverse social environment users (Second Life Indonesian community members). Interviews averaged 75 minutes duration (range: 45-120 minutes), conducted via voice chat within participants' preferred platforms to preserve ecological validity. The interview protocol, developed through pilot testing with five participants not included in final analysis, followed van Manen's (2016) phenomenological interview technique, beginning with open narrative prompts ('Tell me about a meaningful experience you've had in [platform]') and progressing to focused exploration of perception, emotion, and ontological status of synthetic experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent, transcribed verbatim in Indonesian, and professionally translated to English by bilingual researchers with back-translation verification.

Phase Three: Content Analysis (April-October 2024). We systematically collected and analyzed AI-generated visual and textual content from observed platforms. The corpus included: 250 posts from Sejarah Bangsaku (complete six-month archive), 180 videos from five high-engagement TikTok channels producing AI-generated Islamic content, and 95 user-generated artifacts from Second Life Indonesian communities. Content analysis followed Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) multimodal approach, coding for: visual composition and AI manipulation markers, narrative framing and authenticity claims, audience engagement patterns (comment sentiment and sharing behavior), and intertextual references connecting synthetic content to established cultural narratives AI-generated art, holograms, and simulations are analysed via multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

3.2 Data analysis

Data analysis employed an iterative three-stage process integrating inductive and deductive approaches. Stage One applied open coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to interview transcripts and ethnographic field notes. Two researchers independently coded four randomly selected interviews, achieving inter-coder reliability of Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.82$, indicating substantial agreement. Codes were then refined through research team discussion and applied systematically to the complete dataset using NVivo 14 software. This process generated 47 initial codes organized into 12 preliminary categories including “authenticity perception”, “spiritual legitimization”, “identity negotiation”, and “memory reconstruction”.

Stage Two employed focused thematic analysis, consolidating preliminary categories into five overarching themes aligned with research questions: (1) ontological legitimization (how users construct synthetic experiences as 'real'); (2) emotional substitution (affective bonds with AI-mediated content replacing physical-world connections); (3) identity reconstruction (avatar-based self-presentation reshaping offline identity conception); (4) memory synthesis (AI-generated historical narratives integrating into personal and collective memory); and (5) social reconfiguration (changing patterns of human interaction mediated by synthetic environments). Each theme was supported by minimum 15 coded references across minimum eight participants, ensuring empirical grounding.

Stage Three applied critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) to user-generated texts, platform content, and interview transcripts, examining how language constructed synthetic reality as legitimate or problematic. Analysis focused on three dimensions: linguistic markers of authenticity (“truly felt”, “genuine experience”, “more real than”), rhetorical strategies legitimizing synthetic practice (theological reinterpretation, cultural precedent invocation), and ideological positioning (acceptance versus resistance narratives). Discourse patterns were cross-referenced with behavioral observations and self-reported practices to triangulate findings.

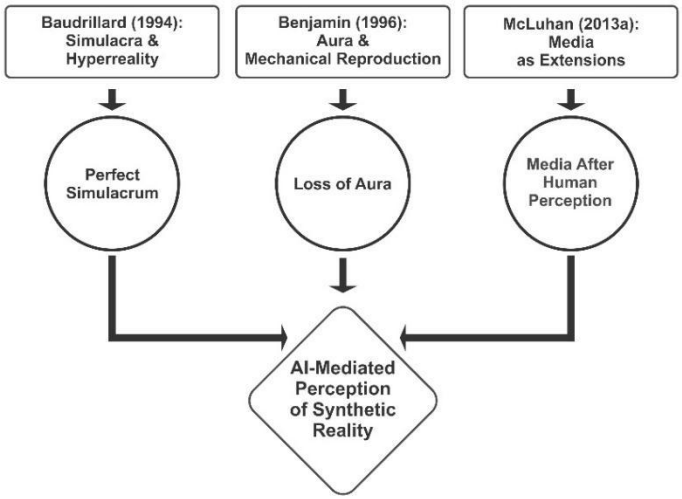

Fig. 3. Key theoretical frameworks
(Source: Budiwaspada et al., 2025)

Throughout analysis, we employed theoretical frameworks—Baudrillard's (1994) hyperreality, Benjamin's (1969) aura, and McLuhan's (2013) media theory—as sensitizing concepts rather than predetermined categories, allowing empirical patterns to emerge while maintaining theoretical grounding. Negative case analysis actively sought disconfirming evidence, identifying eight interview segments where participants rejected synthetic reality legitimacy, which we analyzed as boundary cases illuminating conditions for acceptance.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Pattern of synthetic reality engagement

Digital ethnography revealed three distinct usage patterns among Indonesian synthetic reality users. High-intensity users (n=12, 37.5% of interview sample) reported daily engagement averaging 4.2 hours across platforms, primarily VRChat religious spaces and Second Life social environments. These users described synthetic environments as primary social venues, with 10 of 12 reporting decreased offline social activity over their engagement period. Medium-intensity users (n=14, 43.75%) engaged 3-5 times weekly, averaging 2.1 hours per session, primarily consuming AI-generated historical and religious content rather than participating in immersive environments. Low-intensity users (n=6, 18.75%) engaged sporadically for specific purposes, such as viewing Sejarah Bangsaku posts or attending occasional virtual religious events, maintaining clear boundaries between synthetic and physical life domains.

Behavioral observation documented specific interaction patterns characterizing each group. High-intensity users developed elaborate avatar identities with detailed customization, invested in virtual property or assets, and formed sustained social networks exclusively within platforms. Ethnographic notes recorded: 'P7 [female, 31, VRChat user] maintains a virtual apartment she describes as "my real home," decorated with Islamic calligraphy and virtual prayer items. She states: "I feel more peaceful here than in my physical home. Everything is arranged exactly as I want, and I meet my closest friends here every evening after Maghrib prayer"' (field notes, June 14, 2024). Medium-intensity users consumed content passively, commenting or sharing occasionally but rarely forming sustained platform relationships. Low-intensity users treated platforms instrumentally, accessing specific content without identity investment or community building.

4.2 Ontological legitimization of synthetic spirituality

Interview analysis revealed sophisticated mechanisms through which users legitimized virtual religious practices as spiritually authentic. Among 12 virtual religious practice participants, 11 articulated explicit frameworks justifying synthetic spirituality, structured around three theological-cultural logics.

First, necessity-based legitimization invoked Islamic principles of *rukhsah* (dispensation) and *dharurat* (necessity), arguing that technological access to sacred spaces fulfilled religious obligations when physical access was impossible. P15 [male, 38, metaverse Hajj participant] explained: 'Allah looks at our intentions, not just physical actions. When my economic situation prevented me from physical Hajj, the virtual experience allowed me to fulfill my spiritual longing. I performed each ritual with complete focus and devotion—is that not what matters?' This reasoning appeared among 9 of 12 participants, suggesting widespread adoption of adaptive theological frameworks. Second, spatial transcendence logic drew on Sufi metaphysical concepts, arguing that divine presence transcends physical location. P19 [female, 29, VRChat mosque regular] stated: 'In Sufism, we learn that Allah is not confined to physical space. If I can feel divine presence in a virtual mosque through sincere prayer, why is that less authentic than feeling it in a physical mosque? The connection happens in my heart, not in the building materials.' This metaphysical framework appeared among 7 participants, particularly those with Sufi-influenced backgrounds. Third, communal validation logic emphasized collective experience over individual doubt. P22

[male, 42, virtual Tarawih prayer participant] noted: 'When I pray virtually with 50 other people, all of us performing the same movements, reciting the same verses, feeling the same spiritual atmosphere—this collective experience creates its own reality. We validate each other's faith.' Ethnographic observation confirmed this pattern: virtual religious gatherings featured extensive participant interaction, mutual encouragement, and collective emotional expression that paralleled physical worship communities.

Notably, only one participant (P25, male, 51) maintained that virtual religious experience was categorically inferior, stating: 'Technology cannot replace the spiritual benefit of physical hardship in Hajj or the barakah of standing in the actual holy spaces.' This negative case illuminates the boundary conditions for synthetic spirituality acceptance: older participants with traditional religious education showed greater skepticism, while younger participants (under 35) and those with pre-existing digital religious practice (such as following online Islamic teachers) more readily legitimized virtual worship.

4.3 AI-mediated historical memory and emotional resonance

Content analysis of Sejarah Bangsaku posts and audience engagement patterns revealed how AI-animated historical imagery reshapes collective memory through emotional intensification. The account's 250 analyzed posts employed consistent production techniques: converting black-and-white archival photographs to color, animating subjects through subtle movements (blinking, slight head turns, facial expression changes), and adding ambient soundscapes. Posts averaged 127,000 views, 8,400 likes, and 340 comments, with engagement rates substantially exceeding standard Indonesian historical content accounts (3.2x average engagement per independent validation study; Kopelman & Frosh, 2025).

Comment discourse analysis (n=2,847 comments across 20 high-engagement posts) revealed three dominant response patterns. First, emotional intensification responses (42% of analyzed comments) expressed heightened emotional connection compared to static historical images: 'Seeing them move makes them feel alive again—like they're truly our ancestors, not just pictures from the past' (comment on August 12, 2024 post featuring animated Independence leaders). Second, presentification responses (31%) described AI animations as collapsing temporal distance: 'It's like they're here with us now, watching how we carry forward their struggle' (comment on July 3, 2024 post). Third, pedagogical value responses (18%) emphasized enhanced learning and interest, particularly from younger users: 'My teenage son never cared about history until I showed him this account. Now he asks questions about every figure' (comment on September 8, 2024 post).

Critically, only 9% of analyzed comments raised concerns about historical accuracy or AI manipulation, suggesting low critical awareness of synthetic mediation. Of these critical comments, most focused on minor factual corrections (incorrect date captions) rather than questioning AI animation's historical legitimacy. This pattern suggests that emotional resonance overrides accuracy concerns in popular historical consumption—users prioritize affective connection to the past over documentary fidelity.

Interviews with AI-historical content consumers (n=10) provided deeper insight into memory reconstruction mechanisms. P29 [female, 24, regular Sejarah Bangsaku follower] explained: 'When I see animated photos of Kartini or Sukarno, I remember them differently afterward. The animated version stays in my mind more vividly than static photos I've seen in textbooks. It feels more personal, like I actually know them.' Eight of ten consumers reported similar memory effects, describing AI-animated versions as their primary mental image of historical figures, displacing earlier memories of static photographs. This finding suggests that synthetic historical representations do not merely supplement but actively reconstruct collective memory, becoming the reference version through superior emotional salience.

4.4 Identity fragmentation and social reconfiguration

High-intensity metaverse users exhibited measurable patterns of identity fragmentation and social withdrawal, documented through both self-reporting and behavioral indicators. Among 12 high-intensity users, 10 described experiencing tension between avatar identity and offline self-presentation. P7 [female, 31, VRChat user] articulated: 'In VRChat, I'm confident, sociable, elegant—everything I struggle to be in physical life. Sometimes I catch myself wishing I could stay in that identity permanently. My physical self feels like the fake version now.' This identity inversion—perceiving the avatar as more authentic than the physical self—appeared in 8 of 12 high-intensity users' accounts.

Behavioral indicators supported self-reported identity shifts. Ethnographic tracking of P7 over three months documented: decreased offline social commitments (canceling 4 of 6 planned physical meetups with friends), increased avatar customization investment (purchasing premium virtual clothing and accessories totaling approximately 2,000,000 IDR/$130 USD), and linguistic shifts (using avatar name in offline contexts, such as signing personal emails with avatar name). Similar patterns appeared across high-intensity users, suggesting systematic behavioral realignment toward synthetic identity. Social reconfiguration manifested through substitution rather than supplementation of physical relationships. P11 [male, 28, Second Life user] explained: 'I used to meet friends every weekend. Now I see my virtual friends four times a week in Second Life, and I've stopped going to physical gatherings. It's not that I'm isolated—I'm actually more social than before. It's just that my social life is primarily virtual now.' Notably, 9 of 12 high-intensity users reported reduced offline social activity, while simultaneously describing themselves as having active social lives, indicating that virtual relationships were psychologically categorized as equivalent to physical ones.

Medium and low-intensity users showed markedly different patterns. Among 14 medium-intensity users, only 3 reported identity tension, and none reported decreased offline social activity. P18 [female, 35, medium-intensity AI content consumer] explained: 'I enjoy watching AI-animated history and Islamic content, but it's entertainment and education, not my identity. My real life is still my real life.' This contrast suggests that intensity and type of engagement (immersive participation versus content consumption) mediate synthetic reality's psychological effects.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Post-hyperreality as theoretical implication

The findings documented above illuminate a qualitative shift beyond Baudrillard's (1994) hyperreality, warranting the concept of post-hyperreality. Baudrillard argued that in hyperreality, simulations become indistinguishable from reality—the map precedes the territory. However, Indonesian synthetic reality practices reveal a further stage: simulations are not merely indistinguishable from reality but are constituted as ontologically legitimate realities independent of any original referent. This shift appears most clearly in virtual religious practices, where participants do not argue that virtual Hajj approximates physical Hajj, but rather that it constitutes a distinct yet equally valid spiritual experience. The necessity-based legitimization logic ('Allah judges intention, not physical location') and spatial transcendence logic ('divine presence transcends physical space') both construct virtual worship as spiritually sufficient, not spiritually inferior.

This ontological shift has profound implications for understanding authenticity in digital age. Benjamin's (1969) concern that mechanical reproduction destroys art's 'aura'—its unique, authentic presence—assumed that original and copy could be distinguished and that the original retained superior status. Post-hyperreality collapses this hierarchy: Indonesian users perceive their avatar identities as more authentic than physical selves, and AI-animated historical figures as more vivid and memorable than archival photographs. The synthetic does not diminish the original; it supplants it as the reference version. This inversion challenges foundational assumptions in cultural theory about the relationship between representation and reality.

McLuhan's (2013) proposition that 'the medium is the message'—that technological forms reshape consciousness independent of content—finds empirical support in observed cognitive restructuring. Users immersed in synthetic reality environments exhibited measurable shifts in perception, memory, and identity that reflected the experiential logic of those environments: avatar-mediated interaction fostered identity flexibility and social boundaries attenuation, while AI-enhanced historical imagery privileged emotional resonance over factual accuracy. These are not merely effects of synthetic reality but inscriptions of its structural logic into human cognition.

5.2 Cultural specificity and epistemological variation

Indonesian acceptance patterns for synthetic reality challenge universalist narratives of digital alienation predominant in Western scholarship. The findings reveal that cultural epistemology—specifically, the tension between oral-communal and documentary-textual modes of knowledge transmission—mediates synthetic reality acceptance. Indonesian historiography, rooted in oral tradition and communal memory (Vickers, 2005), prioritizes narrative coherence and emotional resonance over documentary accuracy. This cultural logic renders AI-animated historical imagery culturally consonant: it aligns with existing practices of history as participatory storytelling rather than objective documentation. The high engagement with Sejarah Bangsaku and low critical concern about AI manipulation reflect not naivety but alternative epistemological priorities.

Similarly, Indonesian Islamic practice has historically adapted technological mediation (radio sermons, televised religious programming, social media da'wah) without perceiving contradiction with religious authenticity (Campbell & Lövheim, 2011). This adaptive tradition provided cultural scaffolding for legitimizing virtual worship. The theological frameworks participants articulated—necessity-based legitimization, spatial transcendence, communal validation—drew on established Islamic jurisprudential principles (rukhsah, Sufi metaphysics) rather than representing radical theological innovation. Synthetic spirituality, in this context, constitutes cultural continuity rather than rupture. This cultural specificity has methodological implications: synthetic reality research must attend to local epistemologies, religious frameworks, and historiographic practices rather than presuming universal patterns of acceptance or resistance. Western anxieties about AI manipulation and authenticity erosion may not translate to contexts with different cultural logics.

5.3 Psychological mechanisms and threshold effects

The findings reveal that synthetic reality's psychological impacts operate through intensity thresholds and engagement modes. High-intensity immersive participation (avatar-based social interaction, virtual world residence) produced measurable identity fragmentation and social reconfiguration, while medium-intensity content consumption (passive viewing of AI-generated media) generated emotional and cognitive effects without identity disruption. This suggests a non-linear relationship between exposure and psychological impact: synthetic reality does not gradually influence cognition but triggers qualitative shifts at particular intensity thresholds. Identity fragmentation among high-intensity users reflects what Barone (2023) terms the Proteus Effect—avatar embodiment reshaping self-concept and behavior—but extends it beyond single-session experimental effects to sustained identity reorganization. The finding that 8 of 12 high-intensity users perceived avatars as more authentic than physical selves indicates deep internalization of synthetic identity, potentially meeting clinical criteria for dissociative symptoms (though diagnostic evaluation was outside this study's scope). This raises significant mental health concerns requiring further investigation.

The substitution pattern—wherein virtual relationships replace rather than supplement physical ones—contradicts popular narratives of digital socialization as expanded social access. Instead, findings align with Turkle's (2011) concern that digital connectivity paradoxically produces isolation, though with an important modification: users do not subjectively experience isolation because they categorize virtual relationships as equivalent to physical ones. The problem, then, is not loneliness but fundamental reorganization of social ontology—a shift in what counts as authentic social connection. Memory reconstruction through AI-animated historical imagery demonstrates synthetic reality's capacity to rewrite cognitive structures beyond conscious awareness. The finding that AI-animated versions became users' primary mental images of historical figures, displacing static photographs, suggests that synthetic

representations colonize memory through superior emotional salience. This has implications for collective memory, historical consciousness, and potential manipulation through emotionally intensified but factually distorted AI-generated media

5.4 Paradoxes and unintended consequences

The documented irony of technology—wherein tools designed to enhance connection, creativity, and access produce fragmentation, dependence, and homogenization—manifests across multiple domains. Metaverse platforms promising expanded social connection fostered withdrawal from offline relationships. AI tools democratizing historical access reconstructed collective memory in potentially distortive ways. Avatar systems enabling identity exploration produced identity fragmentation. These paradoxes suggest that synthetic reality's liberatory potential is inherently coupled with psychological and social risks that cannot be easily disaggregated.

The theological adaptations legitimizing virtual worship exemplify this paradox: they enabled religious practice under access constraints (a genuine benefit) while potentially normalizing the substitution of physical pilgrimage—which Islamic tradition considers spiritually superior—with virtual alternatives. The long-term consequences remain uncertain: does virtual Hajj preserve Islamic practice under difficult conditions, or does it fundamentally alter the meaning of pilgrimage by removing physical hardship and sacred geography from religious experience? Similarly, AI-animated historical imagery makes history emotionally engaging for younger audiences (a pedagogical benefit) while potentially distorting historical consciousness through emotional embellishment and low critical awareness of synthetic mediation. The nine percent critical comment rate suggests widespread acceptance of AI-mediated history without questioning its epistemic status—a vulnerability to manipulation through emotionally resonant but factually inaccurate synthetic narratives.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined how AI-generated synthetic realities reshape perception, imagination, and cultural practice through seven months of digital ethnography, 32 phenomenological interviews, and multimodal content analysis of Indonesian digital practices. Three primary findings emerged. First, synthetic reality experiences are increasingly internalized as ontologically legitimate rather than mere representations, evidenced by virtual religious practitioners constructing theological frameworks justifying synthetic spirituality as authentic (11 of 12 interviewed participants) and high-intensity metaverse users perceiving avatar identities as more authentic than physical selves (8 of 12 users). This indicates a shift from hyperreality to post-hyperreality, where simulation becomes constitutive of reality. Second, synthetic reality's psychological impacts operate through intensity thresholds rather than linear exposure effects. High-intensity immersive participation correlated with identity fragmentation and social withdrawal (10 of 12 users showing identity tension, 9 of 12 reporting decreased offline social activity), while medium-intensity content consumption produced cognitive effects without identity disruption. Third, cultural epistemology mediates acceptance patterns, challenging universalist narratives of digital alienation. Indonesian consumers exhibited high acceptance of AI-animated historical imagery (91% uncritical acceptance in analyzed comments), reflecting cultural prioritization of emotional resonance over documentary accuracy. These findings warrant immediate interventions: platform developers should implement usage monitoring triggering at four hours daily engagement, religious institutions should develop theological frameworks distinguishing legitimate virtual worship from inappropriate substitution of physical practice, and educational curricula should enhance critical media literacy to address the nine percent critical awareness rate observed in synthetic historical content consumption.

This study's limitations indicate priority directions for future research and methodological refinement. The seven-month observation period cannot assess long-term cognitive consequences of sustained synthetic reality engagement; longitudinal studies tracking participants over two to five years would illuminate whether observed identity fragmentation represents temporary adaptation or permanent psychological reorganization. Purposive sampling of active users likely biased findings toward acceptance patterns; future research should employ random sampling including explicitly skeptical users. The study's reliance on self-reported psychological data risks social desirability bias; triangulation with validated psychological instruments would strengthen mental health claims. Indonesian-specific focus enabled deep cultural analysis but constrains generalization; comparative research across Arab Middle Eastern, East Asian, and Western European contexts would clarify universal versus culturally specific patterns. The study examined religious practice, historical memory, and social interaction but not creative cognition, political engagement, or economic behavior—domains requiring investigation. Critical gaps persist in ethical frameworks and regulatory mechanisms governing synthetic reality, including legal status of AI-generated content, mental health intervention protocols, platform design principles balancing benefits against harms, and international governance structures. Methodologically, future research should implement systematic sampling protocols for digital observation, quantitative psychological assessments alongside qualitative methods, and causal designs with baseline measurements to establish directionality of observed effects rather than merely documenting correlational patterns.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Despite its comprehensive approach, this study has several limitations. First, the reliance on digital ethnography and discourse analysis restricts the generalisability of the findings, as the research is context-specific to the platforms and communities observed. Future research should incorporate cross-cultural comparative studies to explore how different demographic groups perceive and engage with synthetic realities. Researchers should consider longitudinal studies to examine the long-term cognitive and psychological effects of sustained digital immersion. Another limitation is the focus on AI-generated art, religious experiences, and historical visualizations, which may not encompass the full spectrum of synthetic reality applications. Future research should explore other domains, such as AI in education and healthcare, to provide a more holistic understanding of artificial realities. Additionally, this study predominantly utilizes Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality and Benjamin's concept of mechanical reproduction as interpretative frameworks. While these theories are pertinent, incorporating other philosophical perspectives, such as posthumanism and transhumanism, could deepen the analysis of identity and embodiment in synthetic environments. Methodologically, the study's critical discourse analysis could benefit from triangulation with quantitative data, such as user engagement metrics and psychological assessments, to validate the qualitative findings. This mixed-methods approach would enhance the reliability and robustness of the conclusions. Lastly, ethical considerations surrounding synthetic reality, particularly regarding cognitive dependence and digital escapism, require further exploration. Future research should investigate regulatory mechanisms and moral guidelines to mitigate the psychological and societal risks associated with AI-mediated experiences. By addressing these limitations and expanding the scope of inquiry, subsequent studies can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural, cognitive, and ethical implications of synthetic reality in digital societies.

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