Digitizing the Divine: How Technology Reshapes Access to Spiritual Knowledge and Challenges Traditional Embodied Practices in Pakistan

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Abstract

Spiritual knowledge through technology is exclusively shaping people's lives and playing a key role in enriching the values and ethics across the globe, including Pakistan. This article examines the intersection of digital infrastructure and Sufism in Pakistan, exploring how technology reshapes access to spiritual knowledge while challenging traditional embodied practices. Increasing youth engagement (75% participation in digital Sufi events) and narrowing gender gaps in mobile internet access, algorithmic tools like ChatGPT lack the nuanced mentorship of a Shaykh. While digital platforms democratize Sufi teachings, they risk commodifying spiritual experiences, as transcendent states (Ḥāl) remain tied to physical rituals. Hybrid models, combining online outreach with in-person guidance, emerge as a viable solution, balancing scalable access with the sanctity of Silsilah (Spiritual lineage). Notably, Pakistan's digital divide, with only 21% rural internet access compared to 55% urban, further complicates equitable participation in digital Sufism, exacerbating existing socio-spiritual hierarchies. This study highlights tensions between technological inclusion and the preservation of Sufi epistemology in Pakistan's evolving digital landscape.

Keywords: Digital infrastructure, Sufism, technology, algorithmic tools, Silsilah, hybrid models, Sufi epistemology.

Introduction

Sufism has ancient origins, with Taṣawwuf tracing its roots back to the time of Ḥaḍrat Muḥammad (Peace be upon him). Meanwhile, the practitioner of Islamic Taṣawwuf is regarded as **'Ṣūfī.'** Following the advent of Islam, it came to be more specifically known as Islamic Sufism. Its theme is mentioned in the Holy Book, Al-Qurʾān:

> *"And those who strive for Us - We will surely guide them to Our paths. And indeed, Allāh is with the doers of good."*[1]

Afterwards, at different times, it has been widening its presence, having enlightened the hearts of humanity. In Pakistan, Sufi shrines such as **Laʿal Shahbāz Qalandar's Dargāh** (Sufi shrine) function as vital centers of spiritual and communal practice. While digital initiatives like virtual pilgrimages aim to transcend spatial barriers, they often fail to reproduce the

embodied, sensory dimensions essential to traditional devotional experiences.[2]

While Sufism's foundations remain rooted in personalized mentorship[3] (Hirschkind, 2006), digital infrastructures, which have now surpassed print in reach[4] (Ferguson, 2018; Hempton, 2022), are reconfiguring its practice in Pakistan.

One can ask his problem to a tech-based application, and in the very next moment, the answer appears. What matters most is the *authenticity* of the material. In the field of Sufism, there could be a division into 'Knowledge' and 'Practice'. With the concern up to Knowledge, it is rather easy and acceptable to a broader extent. The history, introduction, fields, and works of Sufism are therefore being searched using network devices. While for practical implementation, the spiritual course is covered with the entire precaution and care of a Spiritual teacher (Shaykh). The seeker (Spiritual student) is advised to follow the guidelines of his Shaykh to gain progress in spirituality. This pattern is thought to be difficult to spot in the tech world. However, some spiritual gatherings such as Sufi gatherings, Dhikr Meḥfal, lectures, and digital media are available for the viewers, but they can be considered *"Public-oriented according to their interests"*. Pure spiritual teaching is based on individual attention of the Sufi master. When switching, Artificial Intelligence (AI) apps may refer to several spiritual teachers, especially in Pakistan. Depending on the factors such as accessibility and participation, a certain variation (of population) has been noted countrywide, which has been put into effect. Islamic groups not only comply with the doctrine of Sufi projects but also include students, workers, and administrators of diverse backgrounds. The enactment of Sufism is observed as the 'mainspring' of any sort of field or any organizational department.

Literature Review

As digital technologies advance globally, Pakistan's evolving infrastructure has introduced gradual but consequential shifts in religious engagement, including the adaptation of Sufi practices to new media. Paulius Bergaudas, in his research paper, *'Digitalization of Knowledge in the Islamic Civilization: A History'*, provided an analysis of Islamic knowledge transmission and preservation, offering insights for contemporary Muslim responses to knowledge digitalization. Loso Judijanto has expressed views on the role of technology in the modern Islamic education system, highlighting the need for support at both the administrative and communal levels for the application of technology in such management in his work, *'Innovation in Education: A Review of the Literature on Methods and Practices.'* Recent studies on Sufism in Pakistan, such as those examining the Khānqāh-e-Suharwardiyyah Narālī, highlight how modern Sufi masters like Ḥasan Nawāz Shāh blend digital outreach with traditional mentorship, offering pragmatic spiritual guidance tailored to contemporary needs. It has been penned down by Muhammad Bilal Ramazan in 'Friday Times' on the title, *'Sufism's Potential In Transforming 21st-Century Pakistani Society.'* The study by Malik Muzaffar Shakeer and Talita Afifah Husni, *'Transformation of Educational Information Technology: An Analysis of the Development of Islamic Universities in Pakistan,'* analyzes the strategic models used by Islamic institutions to foster growth through educational technology initiatives aimed at ensuring organizational sustainability. Islamic communication in such a digital globe is important as well. Abdulrohim E-sor, Mahmudulhassan, and others have discussed the application of Islamic communication in the 21st century in *'Islamic Communication in the 21st Century: Principles, Methods, Practices, Digital Transformation and Contemporary Applications.'* Muslim, in his research, has significantly contributed to the analytical study of integrating digital technologies, such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Artificial Intelligence

(AI), into Islamic education, highlighting their transformative potential.

Methodology

This study adopts a Qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to examine how digital technologies are reshaping Sufi practices in Pakistan. The research design incorporates:

1. Textual Analysis

There will be a close reading of scholarly works on Islamic digitalization (Bunt, 2018; Sehlikoglu, 2023) and Sufi epistemology (Buehler, 1998). Special attention is given to the critique of algorithmic mediation in spiritual guidance, as exemplified by the limitations of ChatGPT in replicating the Murshid-Murid dynamic.[5]

In addition, the results of this research are based on the examination of primary sources: Sufi orders' digital content (Websites, WhatsApp groups, Live-streamed Dhikr)

2. Case Studies

The study examines three representative Sufi communities (Qādirī, Naqshbandī, Chishtī) and their digital adaptation strategies. The Naqshbandī order's hybrid model, using WhatsApp for logistical coordination while reserving Dhikr (Remembrance; Sufi devotional practice of repetitive invocation of God's name) for in-person gatherings, illustrates a pragmatic balance.

3. Participant Observation

The methodology incorporated participant observation through engagement with eight digital Sufi events, including webinars and virtual Dargāh tours, with interview data revealing that 68% of participants prioritized live-streamed Dhikr for convenience while reporting diminished Ḥāl (transient spiritual/ecstatic state) compared to physical gatherings.[6] Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three Mashāikh (Sufi masters) and twelve practitioners to examine technology's role in their spiritual practice.

4. Data Triangulation

The research methodology employed a cross-analysis of three primary data sources: academic literature on digital Sufism, digital ethnography of online Sufi communities, and quantitative survey data from Gallup Pakistan (2025) to comprehensively examine participation trends in digitally-mediated spiritual practices.

Discussion

Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications like ChatGPT and DeepSeek offer instant responses to queries on Sufi concepts (e.g., defining Tawakkal, i.e., complete trust/reliance on God in Sufi spirituality), yet their algorithmic responses lack the nuanced mentorship of a shaykh. As Lawrence (2002) notes[7], this reduces religious authority to informational rather than transformational exchange.

For instance, when queried about overcoming spiritual arrogance (Takabbur), ChatGPT cites the Qurʾānic verses (e.g., And do not make your cheek crooked in arrogance while talking, nor walk upon the earth scornfully; indeed, Allāh dislikes any boastful, arrogant person.[8]) but ignores personalized diagnostic practices like Murāqabah.

This underscores a critical tension: while digital tools expand access to knowledge (Bunt 2018)[9], they cannot replicate the embodied, relational transmission essential to Sufi practice (Sehlikoglu 2023)[10]. Consequently, a majority of Pākistānī practitioners report diminished Ḥāl during digital dhikr (Saeed 2018; Mandaville 2019)[11], revealing technology's limits in facilitating transcendent states.

The need for digital inclusion has been seen as rather dire in Pakistan. Key factors highlighting the urgency for digital equality and improved technology infrastructure include the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2021)[12], the high cost of digital services (Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2021)[13], persistently low internet penetration (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2020), and significant gender disparity in digital access (GSMA, 2020).[14]

Youth Participation in Virtual Ṣūfī Events

75% of Pākistānī university students (aged 18–24) participated in ≥1 digital Ṣūfī event in 2025, primarily through:

68% in Live-streamed Dhikr sessions, other events include:
➢ Ṣūfī poetry webinars (52%)
➢ Virtual Dargāh tours (41%)[15]

This high engagement coexists with infrastructural barriers that exclude rural communities.

Gender Participation

Recent data indicate that Pakistan has achieved a notable reduction in the gender gap for mobile internet access, with the disparity between male and female users declining from **38% to 25%** in 2024 (GSMA, 2024)[16]. Yet deeply rooted socio-cultural norms continue to shape usage patterns: Though female engagement rises with improved access, evident in Sufi poetry webinars (52%) and virtual Dargāh tours (41%), male users dominate technical interactions. For instance, AI-driven queries about Sufi concepts (e.g., Tawakkal or Takabbur) skew **2:1 male-to-female** (Gallup Pakistan, 2025), reflecting broader digital literacy gaps.

Sufi Adaptations: Hybrid Models

Hybrid models, such as those employed by the **Suharwardiyyah order in Narālī**, demonstrate how technology can complement but not replace embodied practice. Ḥasan Nawāz Shāh's approach, which integrates career counseling with spiritual mentorship, reflects a modern adaptation of Sufism's holistic ethos.

A Spiritually centered **Khānqāh-e-Naqshbandiyyah Mujaddidiyyah Ṣadriyah** *(Khānqāh: Sufi lodge or retreat center for spiritual training)* welcomes people to gain benefit from their Silsilah, originally founded by Qāḍī Muḥammad Ṣadr-ul-Dīn. It has created online platforms, such as the website named 'Sadria.pk', WhatsApp Groups to let people know about and achieve spiritual guidance.

Notably, **tech-savvy shaykhs** (e.g., in Qādiriyyah circles) strategically navigate this shift, using WhatsApp for organizing Suḥbah while reserving practices like Murāqabah for in-person settings, demonstrating communal agency in digital integration.

Similarly, the children ought to be under the finest spiritual care. In such a case, television channels could be integrated with Islamic content, displaying Islamic programs, talk shows, and games. It would fascinate a huge number of individuals.[17]

Nabila (2023) expresses the significance of Islamic preaching through digitalization.[18] According to her, Islamic scholars should switch to digital media to engage the active users, especially the young ones, in religious discussions.

While the concept of the virtual platforms' impact on the religious body of Pakistan, with a core focus on **'Youth's Club'**, has been mentioned by Rauha Salam-Salmaoui.[19] It, thus, generates the idea of **'Digital Daʿwah'** and an increase in Knowledge.

Communication through digital media is, nonetheless, an important factor to consider. Mindset has been changed by modernization, keeping people more anti-ethical and hyper-rational toward spirituality. A safer approach must be carried out by the new social media (Sufi) users to match the users' behavior and technological patterns.[20]

Through the consideration of elevation in the social media users' graph, spiritual mentorship might be executed on the virtual platforms. While digital platforms democratize access to Sufi knowledge—evidenced by 75% youth participation (Gallup Pakistan, 2025) and narrowing gender gaps (GSMA, 2024) - they simultaneously risk commodifying spiritual experiences into algorithmic interactions. The surge in virtual Dhikr sessions (68%) and AI-driven queries (e.g., ChatGPT on Tawakkul) prioritizes convenience over the Silsilah (Spiritual chain of transmission) central to Sufi epistemology (Bunt, 2018). This paradox mirrors Pakistan's broader digital landscape: despite rising connectivity, infrastructural inequities (PTA, 2020; A4AI, 2021) exclude rural and low-income communities from even basic access, replicating offline hierarchies online.

Crucially, as Sehlikoglu (2023) notes, transcendent states (Ḥāl) remain tied to embodied rituals, breath control in Murāqabah, the tactile rosary (Tasbīḥ), or the shared resonance of live Qawwālī. Digital replication of these practices, as Saeed (2018) observes, often dilutes their affective potency. Thus, technology's role should be reimagined not as a replacement for the Shaykh-Murīd (master-disciple) bond but as a bridge: apps may disseminate texts or schedule Ṣuḥbah (Spiritual discourse/companionship) with authorized teachers, while AI could flag heterodox content, but the Asrār (mysteries) of Sufism demand physical presence. Future efforts must empower Sufi authorities to gatekeep embodied practice while leveraging technology for scalable access—a hybrid approach balancing digital inclusion with traditional sanctity.

Policy and Practical Recommendations

1. Infrastructure Development

Public-private partnerships should be prioritized to expand broadband access in rural regions, with implementation models such as subsidized internet programs administered through the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority serving as viable mechanisms. Concurrently, gender-inclusive digital initiatives must be developed by adapting GSMA (2024) frameworks to enhance female digital literacy, with community-based madrassahs serving as strategic implementation sites given their cultural legitimacy and existing educational infrastructure.

2. Sufi Institutional Adaptations

Sufi institutions should implement hybrid certification systems that combine accredited online Ṣuḥbah with mandatory in-person Dhikr (remembrance) sessions to maintain the integrity of the Silsilah. Concurrently, AI literacy programs for spiritual mentors must be developed, focusing on training Shaykhs to utilize chatbots such as curated ChatGPT responses as supplementary tools that enhance rather than replace traditional mentorship.

3. Ethical Digital Daʿwah

Sufi governing bodies, including organizations like the Sunni Ittehad Council, should formulate content moderation guidelines to address the proliferation of heterodox AI-generated Fatāwā (Religious rulings). Furthermore, embodied-affective design principles should be employed to create immersive virtual reality Dargāh tours incorporating haptic feedback technologies such as simulated Tasbīḥ (Prayer beads) to facilitate deeper transcendent

engagement while preserving sensory dimensions of devotion.

4. Future Research Directions

Future scholarship should prioritize longitudinal studies examining differences in Ḥāl attainment between Digital and Physical Dhikr practices. Additionally, comparative cross-cultural research with Sufi communities in Indonesia and Turkey would yield critical insights into contextual adaptations of digital spirituality across Muslim societies.

Conclusion

This study has examined the complex interplay between digital infrastructure and Sufi practice in Pakistan, revealing both the transformative potential and inherent limitations of technology in mediating spiritual traditions. While digital platforms have expanded access to Sufi teachings, evidenced by high youth engagement (75%) and narrowing gender disparities in mobile internet access, they fall short of replicating the embodied, relational dimensions central to Sufi epistemology. Algorithmic tools like ChatGPT, despite their informational utility, lack the transformative mentorship of a Shaykh, reducing spiritual authority to transactional exchanges (Lawrence, 2002). The persistence of transcendent states (Ḥāl) in physical rituals, Murāqabah, tactile Tasbīḥ, and live Qawwālī underscores the irreplaceable role of embodied practice (Sehlikoglu, 2023; Saeed, 2018).

Yet, hybrid models emerging in Pakistan, such as tech-savvy Mashāikh using WhatsApp for Suḥbah while reserving core practices for in-person settings, demonstrate adaptive strategies to balance scalability with tradition. These innovations, however, coexist with infrastructural inequities that exclude rural and marginalized communities, mirroring offline hierarchies in digital spaces (Bunt, 2018; A4AI, 2021).

The path forward necessitates a critical negotiation: leveraging digital tools for inclusive access while safeguarding the Silsilah's sanctity. Future research should explore how Sufi institutions can institutionalize such hybridity without commodifying spiritual experience. Ultimately, this study underscores that while technology reshapes Sufism's accessibility, its essence remains rooted in the physical presence and personalized guidance of the Shaykh-Murīd relationship, a dynamic that defies full digitalization.

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