Between Scaffolding and Self-Direction

Technology Use in Young Adults' Religious Practice

BYU BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

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Human-Centered Computing • Empirical Studies in HCI

1 Background

As young adults move into independent living, religious practice often becomes self-directed for the first time — many navigate belief and practice with fewer family, community, and routine-based supports than before.

Prior work shows that technology helps sustain connection through life transitions and mediates spiritual formation, authority, and participation — but less is known about what young adults want from these tools, or the tensions that surface around authority, trust, and doctrinal integrity.

RQ1: How do newly independent young adults use technology in religious practice?

RQ2: What design opportunities and tensions emerge for technologies that support religious practice during this transition?

2 Methodology

Five participatory design workshops with young adults at a private religious university (Feb. 2024 – Jun. 2025), each lasting approximately 2 hours: sharing current practice, small-group discussion of challenges, affinity diagramming, and low-fidelity paper prototyping.

35 PARTICIPANTS

5 WORKSHOPS



Data (audio, facilitator notes, worksheets, prototypes) were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, with two researchers double-coding an initial subset before coding the full data set.

2.1 Setting

Participants were recruited from a private religious university (30 Latter-day Saint, 4 Muslim, 1 both). This setting was analytically useful: religious identity, institutional expectations, peer visibility, and technology use were all salient at once. Findings are a situated account of religiously engaged young adults, not a representative account of all young adults.

All participants provided informed consent under an approved Institutional Review Board protocol.

3 Findings: Four Areas of Concern

3.1 Distraction Fragments Attention

Devices, academic pressure, and the demands of early adulthood pulled focus from religious practice. Participants treated interrupted study or prayer as spiritually consequential, not just a productivity lapse.

> *"It's easier for me to put time into where I'm gaining more money as opposed to just sitting down and dedicating an hour to reading the scripture."*
>
> **– Workshop 2**

- **"Defense" strategies:** hiding apps, giving away passwords, recurring study times
- **Prototypes:** Distraction Blocker, Study Starter, Religious Habit Tracker

3.2 Fragmented Study Resources

Scripture, study guides, cross-references, and commentary live in separate places, so participants had to piece together their own path. Because source authority is itself religiously meaningful, picking the wrong source raised trust concerns, not just inefficiency.

> *"Study this scripture... [with] a study guide right here in this chapter... instead of [navigating to] a feature or a separate app."*
>
> **– Workshop 3**

- **Prototypes:** Religious Studies LLM, Religious Keyword Web Crawler, Religious Database
- **Design need:** reduce hidden labor of choosing where to start and which sources to trust

3.3 Community: Support & Pressure

Community offered participation and accountability, but also produced pressure and self-consciousness—especially when entering a new congregation after a move. Moving to independent adulthood meant accountability and belonging had to be actively built rather than assumed.

> *"When am I performing a religious activity because everyone is watching me... versus me just making that decision to do it because it's the right thing to do?"*
>
> **– Workshop 2**

- **Prototypes:** Religious Community Finder, Congregation/Food Calendar, Social Activity Tracker
- **Design need:** low-stakes entry without turning participation into public monitoring

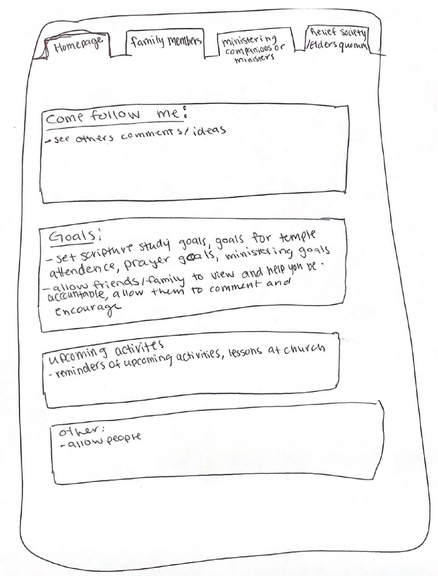
3.4 AI: Authority & Reliance

Participants approached AI most carefully of any technology, valuing its promise while worrying about substituting it for human or divine connection and about accountability to trusted religious sources.

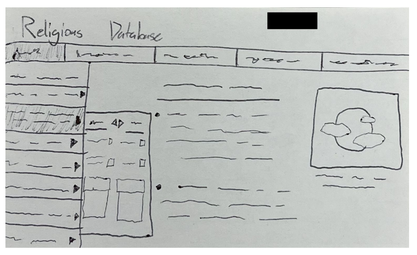
> *"Turn to AI for companionship and connection, even though it's like a piece of technology instead of... going to friends or family or looking to God."*
>
> **– Workshop 4**

- The "Using AI" Gospel Library prototype situates AI guidance inside a trusted platform, linking outputs to official teachings and vetted resources.

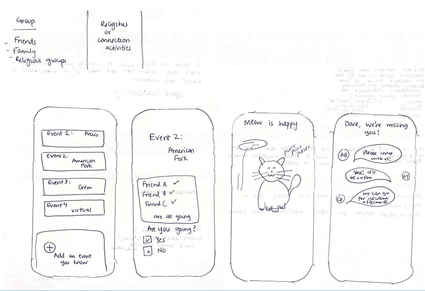
4 Participants' Prototypes



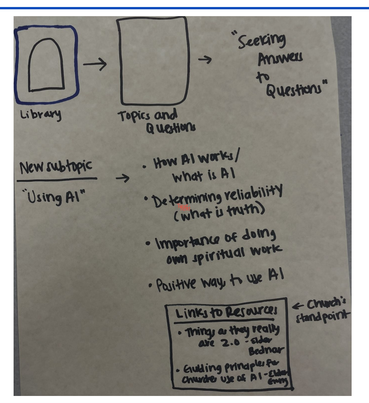
Religious Habit Tracker - Makes spiritual commitments visible through calendar and progress markers **(WS 2)**



Religious Database - Consolidates scriptures, study guides, and vetted commentary in one searchable hub **(WS 3)**



Social Activity Tracker - Selective visibility without broadcasting one's own attendance **(WS 2)**



"Using AI" Gospel Library - Embeds AI guidance inside an official, trusted religious platform **(WS 5)**

5 Limitations & Future Work

Findings come from a Latter-day Saint–majority sample at a private religious university. Future work should extend to more religiously diverse samples where authority and community operate differently.

Selected References

- *Campbell & Bellar (2023) Digital Religion: The Basics.*
- *Hiniker & Wobbrock (2022) Reclaiming Attention: Christianity and HCI.*
- *Smith et al. (2021) What is Spiritual Support? Proc. ACM HCI.*
- *Campbell-Esen et al. (2026) Co-Designing Islamic AI Ethics. CHI '26.*

Implications for Design

Technology can help young adults protect time for practice, navigate study resources, lower the social cost of entering community, and set clear boundaries around AI — without undermining the intentionality, authority, accountability, privacy, and trust that make religious practice meaningful.

1 Intentionality
Lower friction to begin practice without eroding what makes it meaningful

2 Authority
Consolidate study resources without flattening authoritative vs. unvetted sources

3 Accountability & Privacy
Support connection and motivation without public monitoring

4 Trust
Keep spiritual judgment with the person, not the model

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