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Digital Dervishes in the Classroom: Teaching Sufism through Digital Pedagogy in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how digital pedagogy transforms Sufism education in higher education through redesigning a 300-level undergraduate course. It addresses two research questions: Firstly, how can digital tools facilitate deeper understanding of Sufism as historical and contemporary phenomenon? Secondly, how does digital media reshape student engagement with Sufi texts, practices, and communities? The study employed a qualitative case study design, analyzing data from 25 undergraduate students enrolled in a redesigned Sufism course at American University of Sharjah during Spring 2025. Data sources included student multimedia projects, digital ethnographies, and virtual museum exhibits. Findings revealed that digital storytelling, online fieldwork, and collaborative media projects significantly enhanced student engagement, interpretive depth, and intercultural awareness. Students demonstrated improved ability to analyze religious experience beyond textual boundaries and critically assess Sufi social media presence. Digital pedagogy establishes a replicable model for exploring Sufism as a lived, networked phenomenon, enhancing inclusivity and digital literacy while reshaping the epistemological contours of how Sufism is studied and experienced.

Keywords:

Digital pedagogy, digital religion, networked religion, social media and spirituality, Sufism online, virtual communities.

Introduction

In an era marked by rapid technological advancements and the pervasive influence of social media, the landscape of education is evolving to embrace digital methodologies that enhance learning experiences. This paper focuses on the innovative integration of digital pedagogy in the teaching of Sufism within higher education, particularly through a case study of a redesigned 300-level undergraduate General Education Requirement (GER) course.

Current digital pedagogy in Islamic studies has developed along three distinct trajectories: institutional platforms (MOOCs, LMS systems, and mobile applications), social media communities replicating traditional teacher-student relationships, and digital humanities approaches to manuscript digitization and textual analysis (Abdullahi et al. 2024; Santos et al. 2024). While these developments have enhanced accessibility and broadened reach, they remain

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fundamentally limited by their emphasis on cognitive over spiritual learning and their struggle to preserve the embodied, relational dimensions essential to Islamic educational traditions (Mathiesen 2017; Nurdin et al. 2022).

Although the digital shift in religious studies has progressed quickly in disciplines such as media studies, religious studies, and even Islamic studies more broadly, the systematic integration of digital tools and methods into the teaching of Sufism remains underdeveloped and understudied. For Sufism specifically, the digital landscape reveals significant gaps. Existing online implementations focus primarily on content delivery and text-based analysis, failing to address the contemplative practices, spiritual mentorship models, and community formation central to traditional Sufi pedagogy (Mathiesen 2017). Current platforms lack systematic approaches for translating embodied practices digitally, validating online spiritual authority, or fostering authentic mystical communities in virtual spaces. Moreover, the field demonstrates minimal integration of immersive technologies (VR/AR) for experiential learning or AI-enhanced spiritual guidance systems that align with Islamic epistemological frameworks (Muslim 2024). There remains a gap in how digital teaching methods can be applied to Sufism, making the topic more interesting and appealing for students, helping them connect with the material and the tradition, and allowing them to experience it more deeply through social media and the digital world instead of just depending on traditional text analysis, which renders the topic too abstract.

This study employs a design-based research (DBR) approach, which iteratively develops and tests educational innovations in authentic settings (Anderson & Shattuck 2012). DBR is particularly suited for this investigation because it bridges theory and practice, allowing for real-time refinement of digital pedagogy interventions while generating empirically grounded insights into how students engage with Sufism through digital media. Unlike traditional action research, which focuses primarily on practitioner reflection and improvement, DBR systematically generates theoretical knowledge about learning processes and design principles. Unlike pure qualitative case studies, which emphasize description and interpretation of existing phenomena, DBR actively intervenes in the educational setting to test and refine innovative pedagogical models.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to transform the pedagogical landscape of Sufism education, moving beyond traditional textual analysis to encompass lived, mediated experiences. There is a need for innovative pedagogical approaches that preserve the authenticity of Sufi educational traditions while leveraging digital technologies to enhance accessibility and engagement in contemporary higher education contexts. By addressing and highlighting student experiences and learning outcomes, this research demonstrates the transformative

power of digital tools in creating inclusive and participatory learning environments. Ultimately, this paper presents a model for rethinking the teaching of Sufism in the digital age, one that honors both the enduring traditions and contemporary manifestations.

The redesigned course begins with a foundational understanding of Sufism's historical development, key principles, and significant figures, before transitioning to an examination of how contemporary Sufi communities engage with digital media. By employing frameworks such as mediatization theory, networked religion, globalization, and affordance theory, the course invites students to engage with Sufism not merely as a historical subject but as a dynamic tradition that thrives in the digital realm. Students utilize multimedia storytelling, digital ethnography, and virtual exhibitions to investigate how Sufi groups cultivate online communities, disseminate teachings, and enact rituals through various digital tools. This approach encourages critical reflection on notions of spiritual authority, authenticity, and community in the context of social media. This innovative approach not only enhances students' understanding of Sufism but also reflects the broader trends in how religious traditions adapt to the digital age. This adaptation highlights the importance of blending traditional teachings with modern technology, ensuring that Sufism remains relevant and accessible in today's digital landscape. This blending of tradition and technology allows Sufism to reach a global audience, fostering community and spiritual engagement beyond geographical limitations.

The Intersection of Digital Pedagogy and Religion

Exploring Opportunities

Digital pedagogy in higher education emphasizes the importance of engaging students through interactive and participatory methods that leverage technology. One must emphasize the importance of designing learning experiences that are not only engaging but also contextually relevant to students' lives. This aligns with the innovative approach taken in the current course, where the integration of digital tools fosters a participatory learning environment that encourages collaboration and critical reflection. By leveraging technology, educators can create opportunities for students to construct knowledge together, as highlighted by Tan et al. (2024), thus enhancing their understanding of complex subjects. The framework advocates for a shift from traditional instructional methods to more dynamic and interactive forms of teaching, which resonates with the need to adapt religious education to the demands of the digital age.

It is also imperative to emphasize that the integration of digital tools in education not only enhances learner-centered approaches but also fosters an environment conducive to collaborative learning. By prioritizing student agency, educators can create immersive experiences that encourage active participation and critical thinking. This participatory framework is essential for preparing learners to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape, ultimately leading to a more sustainable educational transformation (Huang et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the adaptability promoted through innovative methodologies equips students with the skills necessary to thrive in an ever-evolving world. According to Garrison (2011), effective online learning environments promote collaboration among students, allowing them to construct knowledge together through interaction and shared experiences.

A study by Hjarvard (2013) explores the concept of mediatization and its implications for religious communities in the digital age. The analysis focuses on how various religious groups engage with media to shape and express their identities. Hjarvard emphasizes the importance of understanding religion as a dynamic practice that adapts to contemporary media landscapes. The study highlights the role of social media in transforming religious practices, allowing communities to connect and communicate in new ways. Hjarvard's analysis provides valuable insights into the intersection of media and religion, illustrating how religious communities navigate and utilize digital platforms to enhance their presence and relevance in modern society.

Campbell and Tsuria (2021) highlight the growing significance of digital media in shaping contemporary religious practices and discourses. They argue that the mediatization of religion reconfigures traditional notions of authority, identity, and community, urging scholars to adopt new methodological approaches that account for the dynamic interplay between religion and digital culture. Their work underscores the need to understand religion not only through texts and institutions but also through media practices and digital interactions.

The Impact and Importance of Digital Pedagogy in Teaching Sufism

The integration of digital pedagogy into Sufism education can enhance the accessibility and engagement of students, fostering a deeper understanding of spiritual practices in contemporary contexts. This approach not only broadens the reach of Sufi teachings but also adapts traditional methods to meet the needs of modern learners. This evolution in teaching methods reflects the necessity to harmonize spiritual education with technological advancements, ultimately benefiting both educators and students alike. By leveraging digital tools, educators can create immersive learning experiences that resonate with the values of Sufism, promoting spiritual awareness in a technology-driven world (Wahid & Maskhuroh, 2023). Incorporating interactive elements such as online resources can further enrich the learning experience, making Sufism more relevant in today's digital landscape.

Campbell and Tsuria (2021) emphasize the role of digital media in shaping religious identities, suggesting that online platforms serve as vital spaces for the negotiation and

expression of faith among younger generations. This aligns with the notion that digital pedagogy can broaden the reach of Sufi teachings while adapting traditional methods to meet the needs of modern learners.

The evolution in teaching methods reflects the necessity to harmonize spiritual education with technological advancements. A study by Sudadi et al. (2024) highlights how online learning environments can foster collaborative learning experiences, which resonate with the communal aspects of Sufism. By leveraging digital tools, educators can create immersive learning experiences that promote spiritual awareness in a technology-driven world. Incorporating interactive elements such as online resources can further enrich the learning experience, making Sufism more relevant in today's digital landscape.

The use of digital ethnography as a pedagogical tool has been shown to facilitate deeper engagement with the subject matter. According to a study by Brien (2022), students who engage in digital ethnography are more likely to develop a nuanced understanding of religious practices and community dynamics, which is particularly relevant for the study of contemporary Sufi communities online. This approach not only enhances students' understanding of Sufism but also reflects broader trends in how religious traditions adapt to the digital age.

Lundby (2014) discusses how the mediatization of communication fundamentally alters how religious communities interact with their followers and disseminate teachings. This shift is particularly evident in Sufi practices, where the traditional roles of spiritual authority are being redefined in digital contexts. The use of social media and online platforms allows for a more decentralized approach to spiritual education, enabling multiple voices within the Sufi community to contribute to the discourse. This democratization of knowledge challenges the conventional hierarchies of authority, as individuals can now access teachings and engage with practices that were once restricted to direct, personal transmission.

This shift also illustrates the democratization of Sufi knowledge in digital environments, where spiritual teachings once transmitted through face-to-face mentorship are now accessible to global audiences through social media and virtual communities. Such openness decentralizes traditional hierarchies of authority and enables diverse interpretations to circulate across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; González, 2025; Rizki & Rusdi, 2024). Yet, as scholars note, this transformation also raises questions about authenticity, depth, and the preservation of spiritual integrity in mediated settings (Shadiqin & Jamil, 2024; Ergen, 2023). By embedding these critical perspectives, the study situates its pedagogical approach within broader debates on how digital religion reconfigures access, authority, and community in contemporary Sufism.

Rizki and Rusdi (2024) provide empirical insights into how Sufi education is being transformed through digital platforms. Their research highlights that the integration of technology in Sufi teachings not only facilitates the dissemination of knowledge but also fosters a sense of community among practitioners across diverse geographical locations. The authors argue that digital platforms have become essential tools for Sufi orders, enabling them to maintain spiritual connections and perform rituals in virtual spaces. This shift has significant implications for how spiritual authority is perceived, as online environments allow for a broader range of voices and interpretations within the Sufi tradition. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that the accessibility of Sufi teachings through digital means democratizes spiritual education, allowing individuals who may have previously been excluded from traditional learning environments to engage with Sufism.

The integration of digital pedagogy in Sufi education is further emphasized by González (2021 and 2025), who explores the globalizing impact of social media on spiritual practices within the Sufi tradition. González argues that social media platforms have become vital conduits for disseminating Sufi teachings, allowing practitioners to connect with a worldwide audience and fostering a sense of community that transcends geographical boundaries. This democratization of access not only enables individuals from diverse backgrounds to engage with Sufi spirituality but also encourages the sharing of varied interpretations and practices within the tradition. By leveraging social media, Sufi communities can maintain their relevance in the contemporary digital landscape, adapting their spiritual messages to resonate with modern

audiences. This highlights the necessity of incorporating digital tools in pedagogical approaches, as they facilitate a more inclusive and participatory learning environment that reflects the evolving nature of Sufism in the 21st century. Such insights reinforce the transformative potential of digital pedagogy in reshaping the educational landscape of Sufism, allowing students to experience it as a living tradition that thrives in the digital age.

Challenges and Counterarguments

Shadiqin and Jamil (2024) explore the challenges and opportunities presented by the digitalization of Sufi practices, emphasizing the dual nature of this transformation. On one hand, the authors highlight that the rise of digital platforms has enabled Sufi communities to reach a wider audience, fostering inclusivity and engagement among practitioners who may not have access to traditional Sufi teachings. This democratization of knowledge allows for diverse interpretations and practices to flourish within the Sufi tradition, encouraging a more vibrant and dynamic community. However, the authors also caution against potential pitfalls, such as the risk of diluting spiritual teachings in the quest for broader appeal or the challenge of maintaining authentic connections in virtual environments. They argue that as Sufi practices adapt to the digital age, it is essential for educators and practitioners to navigate these complexities thoughtfully, ensuring that the essence of Sufism remains intact while embracing the opportunities that technology offers for spiritual growth and community building. This nuanced perspective underscores the importance of incorporating digital pedagogy in Sufi education, as it not only enhances accessibility but also prompts critical discussions about authenticity, authority, and the evolving nature of spiritual practices in the contemporary world.

Shadiqin and Jamil (2024) caution that while digital platforms can broaden access to Sufi teachings, they may also risk oversimplifying complex spiritual concepts in the pursuit of wider appeal. This tension raises questions about the validity of online transmissions of spiritual knowledge, particularly regarding traditional practices that emphasize direct interaction between spiritual guides and disciples (Rizki & Rusdi, 2024). Additionally, Hjarvard (2013) points out that the shift towards digital platforms can lead to a fragmented understanding of religion, where diverse interpretations may emerge without the necessary contextual grounding provided by traditional education.

As Sufism continues to adapt to the digital landscape, it is essential to consider the implications of this transformation on the authenticity and integrity of its teachings. While digital platforms provide unprecedented access and engagement opportunities, they also pose risks related to the dilution of Sufi principles and the potential for misinterpretation (Ergen, 2023). For instance, the rapid spread of Sufi poetry and teachings on social media can lead to a superficial understanding of complex concepts, as audiences may consume content without the necessary context or depth traditionally provided in face-to-face learning environments (Saeed et al., 2021).

Therefore, educators must navigate these challenges by fostering critical thinking and discernment among students, encouraging them to engage with Sufi teachings not just as passive consumers but as informed participants who can appreciate the richness of the tradition while utilizing modern tools. Recent studies support this approach, suggesting that critical digital literacy is crucial for students to appreciate the richness of Sufi tradition while utilizing modern tools (Hakim et al., 2024; Usman et al., 2023). This balance between embracing technological advancements and preserving the essence of Sufism is crucial for the continued relevance of the tradition in a fast-evolving digital era.

Connecting Previous Scholarship with Current Study

The work of Campbell and Tsuria (2021) focuses on the ethical implications of digital engagement in religious contexts. The authors discuss the challenges of authenticity and commodification that arise when spiritual practices are transposed into online environments. This concern is echoed in the current study, which emphasizes the need for critical engagement with the ethical dimensions of digital interactions within Sufi communities. In fact, the tension between

maintaining traditional practices and embracing digital platforms is a recurring theme in recent literature, highlighting the complexities faced by contemporary Sufi practitioners (Adnan, 2024; Hidayat, 2023)

In addition, studies by Cantwell and Petersen (2021) as well as Tsuria et al. (2017) explore the pedagogical benefits of integrating digital methodologies in teaching religious studies. Their findings suggest that digital tools can enhance student engagement and foster a more participatory learning environment. This aligns with the objectives of the current redesigned course, which aims to transform students from passive recipients to active participants in their learning process. Their insights into the effectiveness of digital pedagogy provide a strong foundation for understanding how such approaches can be applied to Islamic mysticism education.

In summary, recent studies underscore the transformative potential of digital pedagogy in the teaching of Sufism, revealing the adaptability of the tradition in the digital age. As scholars continue to explore the implications of digital engagement in religious practices, it becomes increasingly evident that integrating digital tools into religious education not only enhances student learning but also fosters a deeper understanding of contemporary spiritual expressions. The current study contributes to this growing body of literature by demonstrating how a redesigned undergraduate course on Sufism can bridge the gap between traditional teachings and modern technological advancements, ultimately enriching the educational experience for students in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how the redesign of a traditionally structured course on Sufism can be transformed into a more engaging and contemporary learning experience for undergraduate students. The original course centered on the historical development of Sufism, its key principles, and its major figures, presenting the tradition largely through a chronological and institution-focused lens. While these foundational elements remain integral, the redesigned course extends beyond this historical overview by introducing students to the contemporary relevance of Sufi teachings. It emphasizes how key Sufi figures and their ideologies can be applied to pressing modern-day issues, including environmental ethics, interfaith dialogue, and personal spiritual development. Students are also encouraged to explore the modern applications of Sufi teachings, examining how spiritual insights can inform contemporary conversations around personal growth, emotional well-being, technological engagement, cultural diversity, and modern relationships. In this way, the course bridges classical Sufi thought with current global concerns.

Additionally, the course incorporates a critical examination of Sufism's evolving digital presence. Students investigate how Sufi teachings and communities are represented and engaged with across social media platforms, gaining insight into the ways in which spiritual authority, community, and tradition are being reimagined in the digital age. In the final weeks of the course, students explore how Sufi traditions have adapted to operate within online spaces. This aims to highlight the pedagogical value of linking past and present, allowing students to encounter Sufism as a living, evolving tradition.

This redesigned approach demonstrates that students are no longer passive recipients of information; rather, they become active participants in the learning process. Through their own investigations - scraping social media data, analyzing hashtags and content, and conducting independent digital ethnographies - students contribute original analyses to the study of contemporary Sufism. This shift from passive to active learning fosters deeper engagement and relevance, making the subject more meaningful and intellectually stimulating for 21st-century university students.

Ultimately, the purpose of the study is to show that reimagining tradition-based subjects through a modern lens benefits both the discipline and student learning, making abstract concepts more tangible and relevant to a digitally literate generation. The approach demonstrates how Sufism today is increasingly vibrant and accessible, particularly through the integration of digital tools and social media platforms.

Traditionally, sufism might have seemed abstract, often confined to texts and esoteric teachings. However, the digital age has brought sufi practices and philosophies into the public sphere, making them more relatable and engaging for students. Social media platforms serve as powerful tools for accessing resources, including videos, podcasts, blogs, vlogs, and influencers that highlight contemporary interpretations of sufi thought. This exposure enriches their understanding and encourages active participation in discussions around Sufism, making the subject feel alive and relevant to current societal issues. This innovative approach allows students to link the historical and traditional aspects of Sufism to contemporary expressions and practices, demonstrating how age-old teachings can evolve and remain relevant in today's digital landscape.

Moreover, students can engage with Sufi practitioners and scholars from around the world, gaining diverse perspectives that enhance their learning experience. The ability to share insights and experiences through blogs, forums, and social media creates a collaborative environment where students can explore Sufism in a way that resonates with their own lives and contemporary culture.

Learning Outcomes and Transformative Insights

The integration of digital technology into undergraduate-level teaching of Sufism as a GER course offers significant pedagogical benefits, enhancing accessibility, interactivity, and relevance to contemporary student experiences. One primary advantage of digital pedagogy is its ability to broaden accessibility. Online platforms allow students from diverse backgrounds and geographical regions to access primary sources, multimedia materials, and scholarly interpretations of Sufism, creating a more inclusive learning environment. Digital tools facilitate interactive learning experiences. Platforms such as discussion forums and multimedia assignments enable dynamic engagement with the material, encouraging critical inquiry, creativity, and peer-to-peer learning. Multimedia integration - such as podcasts, videos, and visualizations - caters to various learning styles, helping students internalize complex metaphysical concepts.

Digital pedagogy also bridges traditional Sufi thought with contemporary concerns, encouraging students to explore how Sufi principles are adapted in modern contexts. This approach strengthens critical thinking and affirms the relevance of Sufi teachings in addressing current ethical, social, and existential challenges. Additionally, digital learning platforms foster collaboration and community building. Students can participate in group projects and co-create digital content, reflecting the communal dimensions of many Sufi traditions. The flexibility of asynchronous digital learning accommodates varied schedules and supports deeper engagement with complex concepts.

Moreover, digital pedagogy develops key twenty-first-century research and communication skills. It supports personalized learning paths, allowing students to pursue inquiries aligned with their intellectual and spiritual interests. Assignments may include social media analysis, multimedia storytelling, and digital mapping of Sufi networks, integrating traditional scholarship with data collection and narrative construction. For instance, students have utilized tools like *Hootsuite* and *Brand24* for social media monitoring, *Canva* and *Prezi* for creating visually compelling content, and *Trello* and *Slack* for project management and communication. Gamification tools like *Kahoot!* and *Quizziz* create engaging assessments, while mind-mapping platforms such as *Coggle* help synthesize complex ideas visually. *Moodle* provides a structured environment for course delivery and resource sharing. This personalization fosters intrinsic motivation and deeper engagement with the subject matter. The shift towards a more interactive and technology-driven pedagogy enhances students' engagement and appreciation for the complexities of Sufi traditions in modern contexts.

Course Re-Design and Pedagogical Strategy

This course, originally titled *Sufism: Readings in Islamic Mysticism*, began as a traditional introduction to Sufi thought, centered on close readings of foundational texts in translation. The emphasis was on cultivating a nuanced understanding of Sufi theology, metaphysics, and practice through direct engagement with primary sources. However, over time, I recognized the limitations of a purely textual approach in capturing the living, dynamic, and often experiential nature of Sufism, especially in the eyes of a generation of students shaped by digital culture and interdisciplinary curiosity.

In response, the course underwent a comprehensive pedagogical redesign. While preserving the core commitment to rigorous textual and historical inquiry, I restructured the course to create a more interactive, collaborative, and contextually rich experience. Students now engage not only with canonical texts but also with Sufi practices, institutions, and digital expressions - developing tools to study Sufism both as a classical tradition and as a living, global phenomenon.

The course is divided into three interlocking units. The first presents Sufism as an organic synthesis of Islamic spirituality, asceticism, and mysticism. Drawing on a recent study, *Rethinking Conceptual Sufism: A Synthesis of Islamic Spirituality, Asceticism and Mysticism* (Al-Kaisi, 2021), we begin by tracing Sufism's Quranic and Prophetic roots, before students are walked through the early sparks of ascetic and spiritual practice in Basra and later Baghdad. Here, we examine foundational individuals like Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (d. 44/665), al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 110/728), Farqad al-Sabakhi (d. 132/749), 'Abd al-Wahid b. Zayd (d. ca. 133/750), Ibrahim b. Adham (d. 160/777), 'Abd Allah b. al-Mubarak (d. 181/797), Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 185/801), and Fudayl b. Iyad (d. 188/803).

As we move to Baghdad, we meet Ma'ruf al-Karkhi (d. 200/815), Bishr al-Hafi (d. 227/842), al-Harith al-Muhasibi (d. 243/857), Sari al-Saqati (d.253/867), Abu al-Qasim al-Junayd (d. 298/910), and Mansur al-Hallaj (d.309/922). In Baghdad we observe the formation of distinct mystical communities such as the schools of sobriety and intoxication, where early mystical practices were further elaborated and systematized.

Through the examination of key figures in these contrasting schools of thought students begin to appreciate the diversity of Sufi approaches to divine experience, including the metaphysical tension between *fana'* (annihilation of the self) and *baqa'* (subsistence in God). Here, students also encounter the emergence of key Sufi concepts such as *hal* (spiritual state), *maqam* (station), *dhikr* (remembrance), *khalwah* (retreat), and *sama'* (audition).

The second unit is an exploration of four towering figures in the Sufi tradition. This course provides an introduction to the eminent scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) and his integration of Sufi thought within the framework of Sunni orthodoxy, subsequently progressing to the more lyrical and metaphysical dimensions of Sufism as articulated in the literary contributions of Farid al-Din 'Attar (d. 618/1221), followed by an exploration of philosophical Sufism as conceptualized by Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240), and ultimately culminating in the profound insights of Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 672/1273) and his love poetry. These figures are not studied in isolation but as part of an evolving constellation of ideas that shaped Islamic spirituality across centuries and regions. Lectures are supplemented with collaborative visual tools such as concept maps and storyboards to help students engage both analytically and imaginatively.

It is at this juncture that the course adopts a collaborative and creative learning model. Students are divided into large groups, which are then subdivided into smaller teams. Each team engages in a research-based project centered on a major Sufi figure or concept. These projects use digital storytelling, visual mapping, and virtual curation to reanimate the classical material in innovative formats. This structure encourages peer learning, methodological diversity, and a sense of shared intellectual inquiry.

One of the most rewarding class projects focuses on Ibn 'Arabi. One team created a stunning conceptual map of *wahdat al-wujud* (Unity of Being), visually representing key terms and theological relationships. Another developed an interactive timeline of Ibn 'Arabi's

intellectual journey, while a third explored the modern applications of his thought in environmental ethics, interfaith dialogue, and spiritual psychology.

A similar structure is used to explore Rumi. One group conducted close textual readings of Rumi's works to trace major themes such as divine love, spiritual transformation, and universal brotherhood. Another group authored a "Modern-Day Rumi Blog," translating his teachings into accessible reflections on issues like mental health, cultural diversity, and social media burnout. A third group created a living timeline of Rumi's life and influence, drawing from both historical sources and contemporary adaptations. Students used platforms like *Padlet*, *Canva*, and *ArtSteps* to design these multimedia projects, blending rigorous inquiry with aesthetic creativity.

This restructured format of how this unit is delivered reflects a broader shift in the study of religion, toward forms of pedagogy that treat tradition as a dynamic process rather than a static inheritance. It also responds to the intellectual and affective needs of a new generation of students, for whom the boundaries between the textual and the digital, the academic and the experiential, are increasingly porous.

The final unit introduces students to key methods and theories in the emerging field of digital religion. We examine how Sufi communities engage with digital platforms to transmit teachings, perform rituals, recruit followers, and contest authority. Special attention is given to the Naqshbandi Haqqani order, which has cultivated an extensive online presence through digital *dhikr* sessions, social media broadcasts, and websites offering step-by-step spiritual initiation.

For their capstone assignment, students conduct digital ethnographic research on contemporary Sufi communities online. While the Naqshbandi Haqqani order is recommended due to the wealth of available material, students were encouraged to choose their own focus, provided they maintain an explicit digital angle. One standout project explored the Chishti order in the Indian subcontinent, resulting in an impressive two-floor virtual museum hosted on the *VIVERSE* platform. The exhibit integrated poetry, manuscript art, devotional music, and clips from popular media, offering a holistic portrait of the order's cultural presence. Other projects explored social media rituals, hashtag analysis, and *YouTube* engagement metrics. Students visualized Sufi networks through digital mapping tools, performed discourse analysis of online sermons, and experimented with ethnographic documentation methods. These are further discussed below. The projects were scaffolded through workshops on ethical research design, data collection strategies, and digital analysis tools.

These layered assignments serve as a gateway into a pedagogical framework that treats Sufi texts and practices not as relics of the past, but as living resources for spiritual, ethical, and artistic engagement in the present. By the end of the course, students are not only familiar with the major historical trajectories of Sufism but are also equipped to study how these traditions are being reimaged in the digital age, with all the challenges and possibilities that entails.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology with design-based research (DBR) approach, which iteratively develops and tests educational innovations in authentic settings (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). As a bounded case study, it focuses on a single redesigned 300-level undergraduate course with 25 registered students implemented over one semester at the American University of Sharjah. DBR is particularly suited for this investigation because it bridges theory and practice, allowing for real-time refinement of digital pedagogy interventions while generating empirically grounded insights into how students engage with Sufism through digital media. The research followed three iterative cycles: 1. initial course design based on mediatization theory and networked religion frameworks; 2. implementation with ongoing student feedback and observational data collection, and; 3. analysis and refinement of pedagogical strategies based on student outcomes. The case study approach was selected for its

capacity to provide rich, contextual understanding of how digital tools reshape student engagement with Sufi traditions within a specific educational setting (Stake, 1995).

The study addresses two primary research questions: 1. How can digital tools facilitate deeper understanding of Sufism as both a historical and contemporary phenomenon? 2. How does digital media reshape student engagement with Sufi texts, practices, and communities?

The study incorporates design-based research principles through its systematic course redesign process, which integrates theoretical frameworks of mediatization, networked religion, and globalization with practical pedagogical interventions (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). This dual methodological approach enables both deep exploration of student experiences (case study) and the development of a replicable pedagogical model (DBR) for teaching Sufism in digital contexts.

Research Setting, Context, and Student Demographics

The study was conducted at American University of Sharjah (AUS), a comprehensive, independent, non-profit, coeducational institution of higher education that promotes excellence in teaching, learning, research and creative work. The course, Sufism - Readings in Islamic Mysticism, is a 300-level undergraduate General Education Requirement (GER) course offered through the Department of Arabic and Translation Studies within the College of Arts and Sciences. It is open to students from any discipline who meet its co/pre-requisites, reflecting the course's interdisciplinary appeal. While the course does not cater to a specific major, it can be applied toward a minor in Arabic or Islamic Studies. Although previously characterized by low enrollment, the course consistently reached full capacity following its redesign, demonstrating renewed student interest through the inclusion of interactive digital projects and modular assessments in place of a traditional final exam.

The study sample comprised a total of 25 undergraduate students enrolled in the redesigned course during Spring 2025, comprising 12 male and 13 female students. The course ran for one full semester (15 weeks), meeting twice weekly for 75-minute sessions. No prior religious background or familiarity with Sufism is required, and the course assumes no pre-existing expertise in Islamic studies or digital literacy. As such, students' digital literacy levels varied widely, and no pre-course assessment was conducted. Instead, the course design intentionally accommodates this diversity by allowing students to explore digital tools and storytelling techniques according to their individual competencies. The student body reflected significant demographic diversity, with a mix of local nationals, and resident expatriates. Although religious identity was not formally recorded, names and self-identifications suggested that the majority identified as Muslim.

Participants and Sampling

The dataset for this study derives from student-produced projects during a single semester *i.e.* Spring 2025. Eighteen final projects were submitted, as students were permitted to work individually or in pairs. Of these, nine projects were selected for qualitative analysis: three centered on Ibn `Arabi, three on Rumi, and three representing final capstone projects on contemporary Sufi communities. Selection followed a purposive sampling strategy, privileging projects that demonstrated originality, methodological clarity, and creative integration of digital tools. While the chosen examples were notably strong, they are broadly representative of the cohort's overall performance and illustrate the pedagogical potential of digital approaches to Sufism education. No projects were excluded on ethical grounds, and while some written submissions showed evidence of possible AI-generated content, these were excluded from analysis to preserve academic integrity. The identified issue has since prompted a revision of course policy to require interactive, voice-narrated digital presentations in lieu of static essays to ensure authentic student engagement.

Data Collection Methods

Following established case study protocols (Yin, 2018), this study employed multiple qualitative data collection methods to capture comprehensive insights into student experiences and learning outcomes. Data collection occurred through four primary sources: student multimedia projects, digital ethnographies, reflective essays, and virtual museum exhibits, with specific focus on how these outputs reflected students' understanding of Sufism as a living digital tradition.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, specifically employing qualitative content analysis to evaluate how student outputs demonstrated their evolving comprehension of Sufi practices in digital contexts. This analytical approach aligns with case study methodology's emphasis on pattern identification and meaning-making within bounded contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The analysis process involved systematic coding of all student artifacts to identify recurring themes, patterns of engagement, and evidence of transformed understanding regarding the intersection of traditional Sufi spirituality and contemporary digital manifestations.

In guiding students through the process of social media data collection, a structured framework was provided to ensure methodological rigor, ethical integrity, and alignment with each student's research objectives. Students were informed that the approach to data collection would vary depending on the nature of their research questions, the policies of the chosen social media platforms, and the broader ethical considerations involved.

The first step in the process required students to clearly define their research objectives. This entailed identifying the specific types of data they intended to collect - such as posts, comments, likes, follower counts, or engagement metrics - and articulating the research questions these data points were intended to address. Establishing clarity at this stage was critical to ensuring methodological coherence throughout the project.

Subsequently, students were instructed to select the most relevant social media platform(s) for their research. Choices included widely used platforms such as *X (formerly Twitter)*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *YouTube*, and *TikTok*. Once the platform(s) were selected, students were required to review the platform-specific terms of service and data collection policies, ensuring that their methods would remain compliant with legal and ethical standards. The third step involved selecting an appropriate data collection method. Students were introduced to several options:

1. Manual Collection, which involves browsing profiles and recording data through direct observation - either by copying information or capturing screenshots. This method was recommended for small-scale, qualitative studies or focused analyses of specific interactions or content.
2. Platform APIs, which allow structured access to social media data. For example, the Twitter API provides access to tweets, user profiles, and trending topics; the Instagram Graph API offers data for business accounts; and the *YouTube Data API* allows for the retrieval of video statistics and user comments. Students opting for this method were required to register as developers on the respective platforms, obtain API keys or tokens, and write data collection scripts using languages such as *Python* or *R*.
3. Web Scraping, using tools such as BeautifulSoup, Selenium, or Scrapy, to extract information directly from websites. Students were cautioned to remain mindful of legal and ethical boundaries, as web scraping may violate platform terms of service.
4. Third-Party Tools, including social media analytics platforms like *Hootsuite*, *Sprout Social*, *Brandwatch*, and *Brand24*, as well as research-specific tools such as *Netlytic*, *NodeXL*, and *NVivo* for qualitative analysis.

Students were also explicitly instructed to consider ethical dimensions at all stages of the data collection process. These included obtaining informed consent when accessing private data, ensuring the anonymity of individuals, and adhering to relevant data protection regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), as well as platform-specific guidelines.

Following data collection, students proceeded to the data cleaning and analysis phase. They were advised to organize their datasets using spreadsheets or databases, and to conduct their analyses using appropriate statistical or qualitative tools, such as *Python*, *R*, or *NVivo*.

Finally, students were required to maintain comprehensive documentation of their data collection processes to ensure transparency and replicability. A mandatory component of this documentation was the submission of a screen recording that demonstrated their data collection workflow. This recording needed to show how they accessed the platform, implemented their selected data collection method (whether manual, API-based, scraping, or using third-party tools), and how the collected data was subsequently cleaned and analyzed.

Methodological Rigor and Data Triangulation

To strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of findings, this study employed data triangulation by integrating multiple qualitative data sources. These included student-produced multimedia artefacts, digital ethnographies, and virtual museum exhibits. Each source offered a distinct perspective on learning outcomes: while multimedia projects demonstrated students' applied understanding of digital tools, virtual exhibits, provided insight into collaborative creativity and curatorial interpretation of Sufi traditions.

The triangulated approach enabled cross-verification of recurring themes identified through thematic analysis, ensuring that interpretations were not drawn from any single artefact type or student performance. The analytic process followed an iterative cycle of coding, categorization, and thematic comparison across artefact genres. Student work was evaluated both holistically and against a detailed rubric, focusing on methodological clarity, creativity, engagement with scholarship, and digital literacy. By correlating patterns across these varied sources, the analysis achieved greater depth and validity, reflecting a balanced view of how digital pedagogy shaped students' understanding of Sufism as a living tradition.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights into how digital pedagogy can reshape the teaching of Sufism, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, as a single-semester case study conducted at one institution (AUS) with a cohort of 25 students, the findings are context-specific and may not be broadly generalizable. Second, the convenience sampling approach means the sample may not represent the full range of students who might enroll in Sufism courses at other institutions. Third, the absence of pre-course assessments of students' digital literacy may have influenced the extent and consistency of their engagement with technological tools. Recognizing these limitations reinforces the transparency of the research and underscores the need for future studies employing larger, comparative, or mixed-method designs to validate and expand upon these findings.

Grading

The evaluation of the final project was structured around a detailed grading rubric that was shared with students at the outset of the assignment. This rubric outlined seven key assessment criteria designed to ensure both academic rigor and digital fluency: (1) *Clarity of Topic and Focus* evaluated the precision with which students articulated their research objectives and formulated guiding questions. (2) *Use of Digital Tools* assessed the appropriateness, effectiveness, and sophistication of the digital platforms and technologies employed in the research. (3) *Methodology* focused on the transparency, rigor, and suitability of the research design and data collection processes. (4) *Referencing and Source Integrity* measured the accuracy of citation practices and the credibility of sources, with students required to explicitly identify the digital platforms and accounts analyzed, the timeframes considered, and any relevant contextual data. (5) *Engagement with Scholarship* evaluated the depth of critical engagement with relevant academic literature, particularly studies on digital research methods and the emerging field of Digital Sufism. (6) *Content Quality and Depth* examined the originality, coherence, and analytical

insight of the project's findings. (7) *Presentation and Autonomy* assessed the professionalism, creativity, and degree of independent thinking demonstrated in the execution and delivery of the final presentation. Each criterion was scored on a scale ranging from Excellent to Needs Improvement, allowing students to understand both their strengths and areas for growth. This structured yet flexible framework supported a rich diversity of projects while maintaining academic rigor and technical accountability.

Outcomes

As examples of the outcomes of these final projects, students produced a range of original, creative, and methodologically rigorous works that reflected both deep engagement with Sufi traditions and critical analysis of their digital manifestations. In addition to what has already been mentioned above, one notable project delivered a statistical analysis of the Naqshbandi Haqqani *YouTube* ecosystem. The group collected and analyzed video data from March 2024 to April 2025, giving special focus to the Ramadan periods of both years within the dataset. Their aim was threefold: (1) to examine trends in subscriber counts, video likes, comment activity, and posting frequency; (2) to assess whether seasonal religious observances corresponded with changes in posting behavior and audience interaction; and (3) to deliver a focused, data-driven profile of the Naqshbandi Haqqani order's *YouTube* presence, rooted in quantifiable insights and activity metrics.

Another standout group project focused on analyzing social media engagement across platforms used by the Naqshbandi Haqqani Sufi order. The students demonstrated a high level of initiative by collecting and analyzing data manually from Instagram, *TikTok*, *Facebook*, and *X*, due to the lack of a single tool capable of extracting all the desired metrics. They examined each post individually, recording the number of likes, hashtags, tagged users, post types (e.g., image, video, reel, live stream), and thematic content. Themes included *suhba* (companionship), *dhikr* (alt. *zikr*, that is, remembrance), donation appeals, *du'a'* (supplication), and Quranic recitations. To ensure consistency, the team focused exclusively on posts from the year 2025 and organized their findings into a detailed Excel spreadsheet, which formed the basis for a comprehensive dashboard presentation. Their analysis showed *Facebook* as the most active platform with 189 posts, while *X* had the least with only 18 posts. A content filter allowed for nuanced insights - such as the fact that all 29 posts featuring *suhba* and *dhikr* were *Facebook* live streams. *Facebook* also led in viewership with 71.8% of total views, followed by *Instagram* (22.64%), *TikTok* (4.97%), and *X* (0.5%). Notably, view counts on *Facebook* and *Instagram* were limited to video content, as image viewership data was unavailable. These patterns reflected the Naqshbandi order's more active presence on *Facebook* and *Instagram*. Two key performance indicators (KPIs) highlighted the scope of their analysis: 296 posts were analyzed, yielding a total of 90,666 likes. For *TikTok* and *X*, all posts were reels and videos, respectively, which aligned with platform norms.

In tracking likes, comments, and shares over time, the group found that likes consistently outnumbered other forms of engagement, likely due to the ease of liking compared to commenting or sharing. Engagement spiked in early January 2025 - possibly tied to New Year reflections - and peaked again in March 2025, which coincided with Ramadan, underscoring the month's spiritual significance. A pie chart illustrated the dominance of content related to Islamic lectures, donations, *suhba*, *dhikr*, and *du'a'*, suggesting that the Naqshbandi digital presence is geared toward education, spiritual practice, and community support. Islamic stories received the most likes, likely due to their compelling and mystical narratives, while event announcements received the least. A final chart on language revealed that English-language posts garnered the most likes, followed by Arabic. Posts in regional Pakistani languages received the fewest likes, possibly due to their limited accessibility among a global audience. This project showcased rigorous data collection, insightful analysis, and a nuanced understanding of digital Sufi communication.

Another impressive final project submitted in the course was focused on *Tracking Social Media Hashtags and Sentiments*. The student's work stood out for its methodological clarity and depth of analysis. The student examined the sentiments and tones associated with a range of

hashtags, moving from broad terms like #zikr to more specific ones such as #Sufi to more specific ones like #Naqshabandi and finally to #NaqshabandiHaqqani. Utilizing social media analytics tools such as *Hootsuite* and *Brand24*, the student demonstrated how these platforms allow users to track engagement levels, sentiment breakdowns (positive, neutral, negative), and time-based activity peaks. For instance, in analyzing the hashtag #Sufi, the student noted that *Hootsuite* limited her to data from only the past two weeks, which restricted her original plan to study changes during Ramadan. Despite this constraint, she provided a detailed walkthrough of her research process, showing how she input hashtags, set parameters, and interpreted results. In her analysis of #zikr, she found approximately 6,000 engagements across 182 posts, with 9.4% expressing positive sentiment, 0.4% negative, and the vast majority neutral. Positive themes included the benefits of *dhikr*, expressions of personal spirituality, and shared prayers and Quranic reflections, while negative sentiments revolved around concerns about religious authenticity and guidance. Her work also incorporated a qualitative component, tracking user comments on Instagram to further contextualize sentiment data. One notable example included a highly offensive comment contrasting the Prophet Muhammad with Jesus, which she addressed within the broader framework of emotional response. Importantly, the student concluded that love was the most prominent emotion associated with #zikr. She applied this analytical framework to several other hashtags relevant to the Naqshabandi Haqqani order. Her project exemplified the potential of digital ethnography to illuminate how contemporary Sufi discourse circulates online, making it a standout submission in both scope and execution.

These are just a few illustrative examples, but they demonstrate the range and depth of student engagement with both classical Sufi ideas and their contemporary digital reconfigurations. What emerges from these projects is a rich tapestry of digital ethnography and data analysis, where students were not merely writing about Sufism - they were watching it unfold in real time, investigating its transformation across platforms, and asking critical questions such as: What happens when a *dhikr* becomes a reel? When a *shaykh* (master) becomes a hashtag? When sacred tradition is mediated through algorithms and metrics?

Conclusion

In this redesigned course, students stepped beyond passive learning to become researchers, curators, and interpreters of a living, evolving digital spirituality - bringing together tradition and technology in ways that were both intellectually rigorous and profoundly human. The integration of digital pedagogy in the teaching of Sufism not only transforms the educational experience but also enriches students' understanding of the tradition as a dynamic and contemporary practice. By moving away from a purely textual analysis and embracing interactive, multimedia approaches, students are empowered to engage with Sufism in ways that resonate with their own lives and the realities of the digital age. This shift fosters a more profound connection to the material, enabling students to appreciate the complexities of Sufi teachings while actively participating in their exploration.

The course redesign exemplifies how educational frameworks can adapt to the evolving landscape of religious studies, emphasizing the importance of blending traditional teachings with modern technological tools. As students navigate the digital realm of Sufism, they not only develop critical skills in digital literacy but also cultivate a deeper appreciation for the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the tradition. This approach encourages students to become informed participants in the discourse surrounding Sufism, allowing them to contribute original insights and analyses that reflect the lived experiences of contemporary practitioners.

Furthermore, the course highlights the necessity of ongoing research and adaptation in religious education, particularly as digital platforms continue to shape how spiritual communities interact, share knowledge, and maintain their identities. By addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital age, educators can ensure that Sufism remains relevant and accessible to future generations, fostering a sense of community and spiritual engagement that transcends geographical boundaries.

Ultimately, this innovative pedagogical model not only honors the rich heritage of Sufism but also positions it as a vibrant and evolving tradition that speaks to the complexities of modern life. As Sufi communities increasingly embrace digital platforms, the potential for meaningful engagement and understanding grows, inviting students and practitioners alike to explore the transformative power of spirituality in the digital age. Through this journey, students emerge not only as scholars of Sufism but also as active participants in a global conversation about faith, identity, and the search for meaning in an interconnected world.

The digital toolkit employed in Spring 2025 already demonstrated the pedagogical value of accessible, low-threshold platforms. These tools supported students with varying digital literacy levels, allowing them to produce multimedia narratives, curate virtual exhibits, and design interactive timelines. The continued use and refinement of this toolkit will ensure that creativity and accessibility remain balanced, particularly as new digital storytelling technologies emerge.

An assessment rubric emphasizing both intellectual and creative dimensions was likewise piloted in Spring 2025. It included criteria such as conceptual understanding of Sufi concepts, methodological clarity, originality, and ethical engagement. The integration of formative feedback checkpoints - rather than a single summative grade - proved somehow effective in encouraging iterative improvement and discouraging overreliance on generative AI tools. Future iterations of the course should continue refining this blueprint by aligning it with broader institutional digital learning standards.

Given the increasing visibility of AI-generated material in student submissions, a formal Ethics and Integrity Checklists should be incorporated into future iterations of the course. This document would require students to disclose any AI assistance, reflect on authorship boundaries, and affirm that all submitted work represents their own intellectual effort. Embedding this reflective and ethical component within digital humanities pedagogy not only safeguards academic integrity but also fosters critical digital literacy, which is an increasingly vital skill in contemporary scholarship.

While this study offered insights from a single semester, future research should expand the dataset and employ mixed-method approaches, including student surveys, post-course reflections, and interviews. Such triangulated evidence would help assess the longitudinal impact of digital Sufism pedagogy on student learning, engagement, and perception of spirituality in mediated environments. Comparative studies across semesters or institutions could further clarify the transferability of this model within global Islamic Studies contexts. By integrating ethical safeguards with tested digital pedagogical tools and an evidence-based assessment model, this study underscores the potential of digital Sufism as a replicable, rigorous, and ethically responsible framework for humanities teaching in the post-digital era.

As Sufism continues to evolve within the digital landscape, future research could focus on the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in shaping spiritual practices and community engagement. For instance, AI-driven chatbots could serve as virtual spiritual guides, offering personalized advice and resources to seekers while raising questions about the authenticity of such interactions. This intersection of technology and spirituality invites critical examination of how AI might influence traditional teachings and the nature of spiritual authority within Sufi communities. Moreover, exploring the implications of digital literacy in navigating these AI-driven platforms could further enhance educational strategies, ensuring that students are equipped to engage thoughtfully with both the opportunities and challenges presented by these advancements in technology (Silaban et al., 2024). By fostering a dialogue around these emerging technologies, educators can prepare students to critically assess their impact on spiritual practices and the broader implications for Sufism in an increasingly interconnected world.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. All contributions were made objectively without any personal, financial, or institutional influence that could compromise the integrity of the work.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles and academic integrity. All procedures were carried out responsibly, with informed consent obtained from participants (when applicable) and strict confidentiality maintained.

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