

DIGITAL RELIGIOSITY AND RECONFIGURATION OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how digital technologies are reshaping religiosity in Kazakhstan through changes in religious practices, authority, and community formation within digitally mediated environments. Drawing on theories of digital religion, mediatization, and networked communication, the study explores how online platforms transform religious engagement in a post-Soviet context shaped by institutional regulation and religious revival. The research employs a qualitative interpretivist approach integrating digital ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and qualitative content analysis across Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, and TikTok. The findings show that digital platforms have become important spaces for religious learning and interaction, enabling continuous access to religious knowledge beyond traditional institutional settings. Religious authority is increasingly negotiated through visibility, audience engagement, and platform-specific communication styles, while institutional legitimacy and state regulation continue to shape credibility and trust. The study also identifies the emergence of hybrid religiosity in which online and offline religious practices function as interconnected dimensions of everyday life, particularly among younger generations. The article introduces the concept of constrained pluralization of religious authority to explain how digital media expand religious participation and interpretive diversity while remaining embedded within institutional and regulatory structures. By focusing on Kazakhstan, the study contributes to broader discussions on digital religion beyond Western contexts and advances a context-sensitive understanding of religiosity in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital Religion, Religiosity, Religious Authority, Kazakhstan, Mediatization, Hybrid Religiosity.

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Қазақстандағы сандық діндарлық және діни биліктің өзгеруі

Аңдатпа. Бұл мақалада сандық технологиялардың діни тәжірибелердегі, биліктегі және қоғамдастықтың сандық медиациялық ортада қалыптасуындағы өзгерістер арқылы Қазақстандағы діндарлықты қалай қайта қалыптастырып жатқаны қарастырылады. Сандық дін, медиатизация және желілік коммуникация теорияларына сүйене отырып, зерттеу онлайн платформалардың институционалдық реттеу мен діни қайта өрлеу арқылы қалыптасқан посткеңестік контексте діни қатысуды қалай өзгертетінін зерттейді. Зерттеуде сандық этнографияны, жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттарды және Instagram, YouTube, Telegram және TikTok арқылы сапалық контент талдауын біріктіретін сапалы интерпретативтік тәсіл қолданылады. Зерттеу нәтижелері сандық платформалардың діни білім мен өзара әрекеттесу үшін маңызды кеңістіктерге айналғанын, дәстүрлі институционалдық ортадан тыс діни білімге үздіксіз қол жеткізуді қамтамасыз ететінін көрсетеді. Діни билік көрінуі, аудиториямен байланыс және платформаға тән коммуникация стильдері арқылы барған сайын келіссөздер жүргізілуде, ал институционалдық заңдылық пен мемлекеттік реттеу сенімділік пен сенімді қалыптастыруды жалғастыруда. Зерттеу сонымен қатар онлайн және офлайн діни тәжірибелер күнделікті өмірдің, әсіресе жас ұрпақ арасында өзара байланысты өлшемдері ретінде қызмет ететін гибриді діндарлықтың пайда болуын анықтайды. Мақалада діни биліктің шектеулі плюрализациясы тұжырымдамасы енгізіліп, цифрлық медианың институционалдық және реттеуші құрылымдарға еніп, діни қатысу мен түсіндірме әртүрлілігін қалай кеңейтетінін түсіндіреді. Зерттеу Қазақстанға назар аудара отырып, батыс контекстінен тыс цифрлық дін туралы кеңірек талқылауларға ықпал етеді және цифрлық дәуірдегі діншілдіктің контекстке сезімтал түсінігін дамытады.

Түйін сөздер: цифрлық дін, діншілдік, діни билік, Қазақстан, медиатизация, гибриді діншілдік.

Цифровая религиозность и изменение религиозного авторитета в Казахстане

Аннотация. В данной статье рассматривается, как цифровые технологии меняют религиозность в Казахстане посредством изменений в религиозных практиках, авторитете и формировании сообществ в условиях

цифровой среды. Опираясь на теории цифровой религии, медиатизации и сетевой коммуникации, исследование изучает, как онлайн-платформы трансформируют религиозное взаимодействие в постсоветском контексте, сформированном институциональным регулированием и религиозным возрождением. В исследовании используется качественный интерпретативный подход, интегрирующий цифровую этнографию, полуструктурированные интервью и качественный контент-анализ в Instagram, YouTube, Telegram и TikTok. Результаты показывают, что цифровые платформы стали важными пространствами для религиозного обучения и взаимодействия, обеспечивая непрерывный доступ к религиозным знаниям за пределами традиционных институциональных условий. Религиозный авторитет все чаще формируется посредством видимости, вовлеченности аудитории и специфических для платформы стилей коммуникации, в то время как институциональная легитимность и государственное регулирование продолжают формировать доверие и авторитет. Исследование также выявляет появление гибридной религиозности, в которой онлайн- и офлайн-религиозные практики функционируют как взаимосвязанные измерения повседневной жизни, особенно среди молодого поколения. В статье вводится концепция ограниченной плюрализации религиозной власти, чтобы объяснить, как цифровые медиа расширяют религиозное участие и разнообразие интерпретаций, оставаясь при этом в рамках институциональных и нормативных структур. Сосредоточившись на Казахстане, исследование вносит вклад в более широкие дискуссии о цифровой религии за пределами западного контекста и способствует контекстно-зависимому пониманию религиозности в цифровую эпоху.

Ключевые слова: цифровая религия, религиозность, религиозная власть, Казахстан, медиатизация, гибридная религиозность.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has profoundly transformed contemporary social life, reshaping how individuals communicate, acquire knowledge, construct identities, and participate in communities. Within this broader transformation, religion has increasingly become embedded within digitally mediated environments, where online platforms facilitate new forms of religious expression, interaction, and learning. In recent decades, the internet and social media platforms have emerged as important spaces for the negotiation, dissemination, and performance of religious beliefs and practices, contributing to the development of digital religion as a growing field of scholarly inquiry concerned with the relationship between digital media and lived religiosity. Digital media are now deeply integrated into everyday religious experience, enabling forms of engagement that increasingly extend beyond traditional institutional settings and geographically bounded communities [1].

A substantial body of scholarship has examined how digital platforms reshape religious communication, authority, and community formation. Existing studies demonstrate that online environments facilitate the circulation of religious knowledge beyond institutional boundaries, allowing a wider range of actors, including bloggers, influencers, and independent preachers, to participate in religious discourse. This development has been interpreted in different ways within the literature. Some scholars emphasize the democratization of religious authority through increased accessibility and participation, while others highlight the fragmentation of authority resulting from the multiplication of competing voices and interpretations. Digital platforms

have also enabled the emergence of networked religious communities that transcend territorial boundaries and create new forms of interaction and belonging [2].

Despite the rapid expansion of scholarship on digital religion, much of the existing literature has been developed within Western or comparatively liberal sociopolitical contexts characterized by relatively limited state regulation of religious life. Consequently, prevailing theoretical approaches often assume conditions of relatively open religious pluralism and therefore do not fully explain how digital religion operates in societies where religious institutions remain closely connected to state governance and regulatory control. In such contexts, digital media may simultaneously expand opportunities for religious participation while also reinforcing existing structures of legitimacy and institutional authority [3]. This limitation highlights the need for more context-sensitive approaches capable of explaining how digitalization interacts with specific political, historical, and institutional conditions [4].

Kazakhstan represents a particularly important case for examining these dynamics. As a multi-confessional society with a Muslim majority and a significant Orthodox Christian population, Kazakhstan has experienced a gradual religious revival since gaining independence in 1991 following decades of Soviet secularization. Religious institutions continue to shape public discourse, while the state maintains an active role in regulating religious organizations and defining the boundaries of legitimate religious expression. Simultaneously, the rapid diffusion of digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, and TikTok has transformed the religious landscape by creating new spaces for communication, interpretation, and engagement beyond formal in-

stitutional structures. Within these environments, believers increasingly access religious knowledge, encounter diverse interpretations, and interact with both institutional and non-institutional religious actors [5].

Although digital religion has become an increasingly important area of global scholarship, empirical research on digitally mediated religiosity in Kazakhstan remains limited [6]. More importantly, existing studies have not sufficiently examined how digital media reshape religious authority and practice within post-Soviet contexts characterized by the simultaneous interaction of religious revival, institutional authority, and state regulation. Addressing this gap is important not only for understanding contemporary transformations of religiosity in Kazakhstan, but also for advancing broader theoretical discussions concerning the diversity of digital religious experiences beyond Western contexts.

This article therefore examines how digital technologies are reshaping contemporary religiosity in Kazakhstan. It addresses three interrelated research questions: (1) how believers engage with religious content and practices through digital platforms; (2) how digitally mediated environments transform the production, negotiation, and legitimization of religious authority; and (3) how hybrid forms of religiosity emerge through the interaction of online and offline religious practices.

This study makes three principal contributions to the field of digital religion. First, it introduces the concept of constrained pluralization of religious authority to explain how digital media expand the range of religious actors and interpretations while remaining shaped by institutional legitimacy and state regulation. In contrast to dominant perspectives that interpret digital religion primarily through frameworks of democratization or fragmentation, the concept emphasizes the coexistence of pluralization and structural constraint within regulated religious environments. Second, the article demonstrates that in post-Soviet contexts digital platforms function as compensatory infrastructures that partially address uneven access to formal religious education and religious expertise. Third, the study advances a context-sensitive understanding of digital religiosity by conceptualizing it as the outcome of interactions among technological affordances, institutional religious authority, and regulatory governance. By foregrounding these interconnected dynamics, the article contributes to ongoing efforts to decenter Western assumptions within the sociology of religion and digital media studies.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative interpretivist research design to examine how digital technologies reshape religious practices, authority, and meaning-making within Kazakhstan's digitally mediated religious environment. Given the paper focus on lived experience, mediated interaction, and the negotiation of religious authority, a qualitative framework is particularly appropriate for capturing the contextual and relational dimensions of digital religiosity. The research adopts a triangulated multi-method approach integrating digital ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and qualitative content analysis in order to enhance analytical depth, methodological rigor, and validity. The integration of multiple methods enables cross-verification of findings while providing a comprehensive understanding of how digital infrastructures, institutional authority, and everyday religious practices intersect within a regulated post-Soviet context.

Digital ethnography was conducted over a six-month period across four major social media platforms widely used in Kazakhstan: Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, and TikTok. These platforms were selected due to their prominence in religious communication, high levels of user engagement, and differing communicative affordances. Using purposive sampling, approximately 30 religious accounts were identified based on audience size, posting frequency, interaction intensity, and relevance to religious discourse. The researcher adopted a non-participant observational role in order to minimize intervention and preserve the authenticity of online interactions. Throughout the observation period, field notes were systematically recorded to document recurring communicative patterns, audience interactions, forms of religious instruction, and processes through which authority and legitimacy were negotiated within digital environments. Particular attention was given to how platform affordances shape religious communication through short-form videos, algorithmic visibility, interactive question-and-answer formats, and peer-to-peer engagement practices. The following methodological component involved qualitative content analysis of approximately 150 digital posts, videos, sermons, and discussion threads collected from the selected platforms. The sample included short-form educational videos, religious lectures, interactive discussions, and audience comment sections. Content was selected according to thematic relevance, engagement levels, recurrence within observed networks, and diversity

of communicative formats. The analysis focused on the discursive construction of religious authority, communicative adaptation to platform logics, forms of audience participation, and the emergence of hybrid forms of religiosity combining online and offline practices. The inclusion of audience interactions alongside primary content enabled examination not only of message production but also of interpretation, circulation, and negotiated meaning-making within digital religious communities.

Expansion of Digital Religious Practices

The findings reveal a significant expansion of religious practices within digitally mediated environments, where social media platforms operate as infrastructures for the production and circulation of religious knowledge rather than simply as channels of communication. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, and TikTok enable religious actors to deliver teachings in formats that are temporally flexible, highly accessible, and shaped by audience interaction. Digital ethnographic observations identified numerous accounts on Instagram and TikTok that regularly post short videos addressing everyday religious questions, such as prayer timing, fasting practices, or ethical dilemmas, often accompanied by prompts encouraging users to ask follow-up questions in the comments. Such change reflects broader transformations in the organization of religious practice, as engagement with religious knowledge becomes embedded in everyday digital routines instead of being confined to institutional settings [7].

Digital ethnographic observations demonstrate that religious content is systematically shaped by the communicative affordances of social media. Formats such as short-form videos, question-and-answer exchanges, and visually structured explanations are especially prominent, enabling religious messages to be condensed into accessible and easily consumable forms. A commonly observed format involves short Q&A videos in which a religious actor responds to a single user-submitted question, for example, whether it is permissible to delay prayer due to work obligations, followed by concise explanations and references to religious sources. These videos frequently generate extended comment threads in which users ask additional questions or share personal situations. These points to the process of platformization, whereby cultural and social content is increasingly organized and shaped by the technical infrastructures and

algorithmic logics of digital platforms [8]. Within this environment, religious communication is reformulated to maximize visibility and engagement, privileging brevity, clarity, and immediacy. The prevalence of one-minute explanatory videos addressing everyday religious concerns such as fasting practices or ethical conduct demonstrates how religious knowledge is increasingly shaped by the temporal rhythms of digital consumption. In this context, religious instruction shifts away from sustained engagement in formal learning environments toward fragmented, on-demand micro-units of information [9].

This transformation has significant implications for the accessibility and circulation of religious knowledge. Interview data reveal that participants frequently depend on digital platforms as primary sources of religious guidance, particularly in contexts where access to formal religious education is constrained. As one participant noted, "If I have a question, I just search it on Instagram or TikTok and watch a few short videos instead of going somewhere in person". Another explained, "I usually watch religious videos during small breaks, on the bus or at home - it fits into my routine". The possibility of asynchronous engagement enables the integration of religious learning into everyday routines, reflecting a broader temporal reconfiguration in which religious practice becomes continuous and individualized [10]. The availability of multiple sources also enables users to compare interpretations and selectively engage with content that aligns with their concerns and experiences. Religious learning is thus restructured in ways that expand interpretive possibilities while simultaneously reshaping how authority is encountered, negotiated, and evaluated.

The growth of digital religious practices is accompanied by transformation in the structure of participation. Interactive features such as comment sections and live discussions enable ongoing exchanges between religious actors and audiences, making religious communication increasingly participatory. Users actively contribute to the circulation and interpretation of religious knowledge by posing questions, sharing experiences, and engaging in peer-to-peer interactions [11]. For example, comment sections under widely viewed videos often include users debating interpretations, offering additional explanations, or citing religious sources, effectively extending the discussion beyond the original content. In some cases, users respond directly to one another's questions, creating peer-to-peer exchanges alongside the original message. This aligns with

broader dynamics of participatory culture, in which audiences play an active role in shaping meaning within mediated environments [12]. In religious contexts, such participation extends engagement while redistributing interpretive practices across networks of users.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings demonstrate that the expansion of digital religious practices entails both increased accessibility and structural transformation. Digital platforms enable engagement with diverse religious sources while maintaining connections to institutional frameworks that shape legitimacy and interpretation. This dynamic provides empirical support for the concept of constrained pluralization of religious authority, as the diversification of religious knowledge occurs within boundaries defined by institutional and regulatory contexts. Digital environments do not displace traditional authority; they reorganize the conditions under which it is accessed, negotiated, and enacted in everyday life.

Transformation of Religious Authority

The findings reveal a significant transformation of religious authority within Kazakhstan's digitally mediated context, where authority is increasingly produced through visibility, interaction, and mediation rather than formal institutional status. Drawing on perspectives from digital religion, mediatization, and networked communication, authority can be understood as a relational and negotiated process shaped by platform dynamics and audience engagement [13].

Drawing on digital ethnographic observations and interview data, the analysis shows that religious authority is closely tied to communicative practices within platform environments. Religious actors who effectively adapt their messages to platform-specific formats, such as short-form videos, interactive question-and-answer sessions, and visually structured explanations, tend to achieve greater visibility and audience engagement. For example, one widely followed Instagram preacher regularly posts one-minute videos answering everyday religious questions, often accompanied by captions that invite further discussion in the comments section. Their posts frequently generate hundreds of responses, with users asking follow-up questions and seeking clarification. This suggests that authority is increasingly linked to communicative competence, including the ability to simplify complex theological concepts, respond to audience concerns, and

maintain a consistent digital presence. As one interview participant noted, "If the explanation is clear and short, I trust it more and I follow that person". Such dynamics align with broader processes of mediatization, in which media logics shape not only how messages are transmitted but also how authority itself is constructed and recognized [14].

Interview data also show that audiences actively assess and negotiate religious authority. Participants often reported consulting multiple digital sources when seeking guidance, comparing interpretations, and choosing those they consider credible or relevant. One participant remarked, "I don't rely on a single imam online – I review several pages and decide which explanation is most convincing". Another added, "I sometimes read the comments as well, since users discuss issues and correct one another". Such behavior points to a movement away from singular, institutionally anchored authority toward a more plural, process-oriented arrangement in which legitimacy is continually evaluated. Authority, therefore, is not merely asserted by religious figures but is co-produced through interaction, recognition, and audience endorsement [15]. The findings support the relational character of authority in digitally networked settings, where influence depends on sustained engagement and responsiveness.

Importantly, the diversification of authoritative voices does not imply the erosion of institutional authority. Instead, the findings suggest a hybrid configuration in which institutional and non-institutional forms of authority coexist and intersect. Many prominent digital religious figures draw on institutional credentials, formal training, or references to established traditions to reinforce their legitimacy. For instance, several Telegram channels observed during the ethnography explicitly highlighted the educational background of their administrators, including training in recognized Islamic institutions. Participants also emphasized the importance of such credentials. As one respondent stated, "I prefer to follow those who studied officially, not just bloggers." Institutional affiliation therefore continues to function as a key marker of credibility, even as authority is increasingly enacted through digital practices. Digital platforms do not displace traditional authority structures but reconfigure the conditions under which they operate by embedding them within new circuits of visibility and interaction.

The role of platform affordances is particularly significant in shaping this trend. Algorithms

that prioritize engagement, visibility metrics such as views and likes, and the interactive features of social media contribute to the amplification of certain voices over others. Digital ethnographic observations show that videos with higher engagement, measured through likes, shares, and comments, are more frequently recommended and circulated across platforms. Authority thus becomes partially dependent on platform-driven forms of recognition, where visibility and reach influence perceptions of credibility. This introduces a competitive dimension to religious communication, as actors must continuously adapt their content to maintain audience attention and relevance [16].

Within the context of Kazakhstan, these transformations are further shaped by institutional and regulatory frameworks that define the boundaries of legitimate religious expression. While digital platforms enable the participation of a wider range of actors, state oversight and institutional structures continue to influence which forms of authority are recognized and sustained. Participants frequently referred to the importance of verifying the credentials of online religious figures, indicating an ongoing orientation toward institutional legitimacy. As one interviewee explained, "There is a lot online, but you have to be careful – some are not approved, so I try to follow official sources". The diversification of authority therefore unfolds within a structured environment in which institutional recognition and regulatory conditions remain central.

The convergence of digital affordances, institutional structures, and audience practices gives rise to a configuration in which authority is both distributed and structurally grounded within broader regimes of legitimacy. Authority is thereby reconstituted as a dynamic and negotiated process shaped by communicative performance, platform logics, and institutional validation [17]. This necessitates moving beyond binary conceptualizations of digital religion and toward an understanding of authority as emerging through complex and contextually situated interactions in digitally mediated environments.

Emergence of Hybrid Religiosity

Religious engagement in Kazakhstan is increasingly characterized by hybrid forms of religiosity, where online and offline practices are integrated into interconnected aspects of everyday religious life. Participants reported that their routines extend across institutional contexts, such as mosque attendance and religious gather-

ings, as well as digitally mediated environments, including social media, messaging platforms, and video-sharing services. For instance, several interviewees reported attending Friday prayers while also regularly engaging with religious content on Instagram or YouTube during the week, using digital platforms to revisit or complement topics encountered offline [18]. This trend signals a re-configuration of religious practice across diverse settings, allowing individuals to navigate fluidly between offline and digitally mediated environments in their engagement with religious knowledge and experience.

Digital ethnographic observations further demonstrate that online practices are embedded within daily religious routines in ways that extend and reinforce institutional participation. Social media platforms provide access to sermons, scriptural interpretations, and short-form educational content that complement offline activities. For instance, Telegram groups frequently function as spaces where users share recorded sermons following mosque attendance, often accompanied by brief summaries or personal reflections that invite discussion among members. Messaging applications thus serve as environments for the circulation of religious materials and the facilitation of collective interpretation. Digital environments reshape the temporal and spatial dimensions of religious engagement by enabling continuous interaction with religious content beyond fixed institutional settings [19].

Interview data further highlight how individuals combine different modes of participation in practice. Many participants described attending mosque services while also engaging with online lectures, short videos, and discussion threads throughout the week. One participant explained, "I go to the mosque, but during the week I watch lectures online to understand things better". Another noted, "Sometimes I hear something at the mosque, and then I search for more explanations on YouTube". A third participant remarked, "After Friday prayers, I often look up the topic online to see different interpretations". Similarly, another respondent stated, "If I don't fully understand something from a sermon, I check short videos or posts that explain it more simply". One participant added, "I follow several pages, so when I learn something offline, I compare it with what others say online". These accounts illustrate a layered process of religious learning in which institutional teachings intersect with digitally mediated interpretations. Religious knowledge is produced through continuous interaction across these environments, resulting in forms of engagement

that adapt to everyday routines and individual circumstances.

Hybrid religiosity also reshapes experiences of religious belonging and community. Online platforms facilitate connections that extend beyond local congregations, enabling participation in broader networks of interaction. Comment sections, discussion groups, and shared content streams create communicative spaces where individuals collectively interpret religious teachings and relate them to everyday concerns. Digital ethnographic observations show that users often respond to one another's questions in comment threads, offering advice, interpretations, or references to religious texts, thereby forming distributed communities of practice. These interactions contribute to the formation of networked forms of belonging that coexist with, rather than replace, local institutional affiliations [20].

The structure of hybrid religiosity is closely linked to the communicative affordances of digital media, which enable sustained engagement, rapid circulation of content, and interactive participation. Religious content becomes embedded within everyday communication practices, appearing alongside other forms of digital media and encouraging continuous, low-intensity engagement. Participants frequently described encountering religious content incidentally while scrolling through social media feeds, noting that such exposure maintains a constant awareness of religious ideas even outside formal contexts. Engagement with religion thus becomes less episodic and more persistent, reflecting a shift toward ambient forms of religiosity sustained through routine interaction with digital media [21].

In Kazakhstan, hybrid religiosity is shaped by the interaction between digital media and institutional structures operating under state regulation. Digital platforms expand opportunities for access and participation, yet institutional religious organizations remain central in structuring ritual practice and communal identity. Several participants emphasized that while they rely on online sources for learning, they still consider mosque attendance and officially recognized teachings as essential for "correct" practice. This coexistence produces a functional differentiation of religious life, where institutions retain authority in ritual and formal domains, while digital environments serve as spaces for interpretation, discussion, and individualized learning [22].

Youth and Digitalization of Faith

Younger generations occupy a pivotal position in the digital transformation of religious life in Kazakhstan, as religious engagement increasingly takes place within digitally mediated environments rather than within institutional or familial contexts. For many young participants, social media platforms function as primary entry points into religious discourse, shaping early encounters with religious ideas and practices [23]. Several interviewees described first engaging with religious content through platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, where short videos introduced basic concepts related to prayer, fasting, and everyday ethics. As one participant noted, "I started learning more about religion from TikTok videos – they are simple and easy to understand". Religious content appears alongside entertainment, news, and lifestyle material within algorithmically curated feeds, embedding exposure to religious themes within routine digital activity. For instance, another participant explained, "Sometimes I see short religious clips while scrolling, even when I'm not searching for them – it just comes up". Similarly, one respondent noted, "I often save videos about prayer or fasting and watch them later when I have time". Religious content thus becomes integrated into everyday digital routines and normalized as part of ordinary media consumption.

This mode of engagement reflects a significant shift in the conditions under which religious learning takes place. Rather than following structured and institutionally guided pathways, young users often encounter religious knowledge in fragmented and exploratory forms. Short videos, motivational reflections, and concise explanations introduce key concepts in accessible formats, encouraging episodic yet repeated interaction [24]. Digital ethnographic observations show that religious content is frequently encountered incidentally, as users scroll through feeds where religious videos appear alongside unrelated content, contributing to repeated but brief exposures to religious ideas. Such patterns align with broader transformations in digital learning environments, where knowledge acquisition becomes non-linear, user-driven, and shaped by platform dynamics [25].

Peer networks also play a significant role in shaping how religious knowledge circulates among younger users. Messaging applications and group chats function as spaces where religious content is shared, discussed, and collectively interpreted. For example, WhatsApp and

Telegram groups observed during the study were used to share short religious videos, voice messages, and links to lectures, often followed by discussions regarding their meaning or relevance. One interviewee explained, "We send each other videos and then talk about them in the group—it helps to understand better". These practices create communicative environments in which religious ideas are negotiated through interaction rather than passively received. Authority within these spaces emerges not only from recognized religious figures but also through peer validation and shared interpretation [26].

The communicative style of digital religious content further reinforces this pattern. Content directed at younger audiences frequently adopts concise, visually engaging, and interactive formats that correspond to broader dynamics of digital media consumption. These formats facilitate rapid circulation and accessibility while encouraging sustained engagement. For instance, short videos often incorporate subtitles, visual cues, and direct forms of address to engage viewers, while comment sections invite immediate feedback or questions. Religious messages become integrated into the flow of everyday communication, shaping how individuals encounter and interpret religious ideas [27].

Engagement among younger users does not result in purely individualized forms of religiosity, despite the autonomy afforded by digital platforms. Collective interpretation and discussion remain central, as individuals rely on peer networks to assess and contextualize religious information [28]. Digital ethnographic observations show that users frequently ask peers for clarification or confirmation after encountering religious content online, indicating that interpretation remains socially embedded rather than purely individual. This tendency challenges the assumption that digital religion primarily fosters individualized belief systems and instead suggests the emergence of socially grounded forms of religiosity structured through interaction and shared meaning-making.

In Kazakhstan, generational differences in religious engagement reflect the intersection of post-Soviet transformation and digitalization. Older generations often experienced limited access to religious education during the Soviet period, whereas younger individuals have come of age in an environment characterized by both religious revival and widespread digital connectivity [29]. Participants frequently contrasted their experiences with those of their parents, noting that "our parents learned differently, mostly offline,

but we have everything online now". This shift has expanded opportunities for engagement while transforming the pathways through which religious knowledge is accessed and interpreted.

At the same time, young users demonstrate an awareness of the challenges associated with digital religious content, particularly regarding credibility and reliability. The abundance of available information requires individuals to assess sources, compare interpretations, and distinguish between authoritative and questionable content [30]. As one participant explained, "There is a lot of information online, but not all of it is correct, so I try to check who is speaking and where they studied". This introduces a reflexive dimension to digital religious engagement, as users actively evaluate trust and legitimacy within increasingly complex information environments.

Conclusion

This study has examined how digital technologies are reshaping contemporary religiosity in Kazakhstan through the transformation of religious practices, authority structures, and forms of community engagement within digitally mediated environments. Drawing on digital ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and qualitative content analysis, the findings demonstrate that digital platforms have become deeply embedded within everyday religious life, functioning not only as channels of communication but also as infrastructures through which religious knowledge, interaction, and interpretation are continuously produced and circulated.

The study shows that religious engagement in Kazakhstan increasingly unfolds through hybrid interactions connecting online and offline environments. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Telegram enable continuous access to religious content beyond traditional institutional settings, particularly among younger generations whose religious learning is closely integrated into routine digital media consumption. Religious participation therefore becomes more flexible, interactive, and embedded within everyday communication practices. At the same time, digital environments facilitate participatory forms of religious interaction in which users actively discuss, compare, and negotiate religious meanings through peer-based networks and platform-mediated communication.

The findings further demonstrate that digitalization significantly transforms the structure of religious authority. Authority

is increasingly shaped by communicative visibility, accessibility, audience engagement, and adaptation to platform-specific media logics rather than deriving exclusively from formal institutional hierarchy. Nevertheless, the study also shows that digital pluralization does not produce unrestricted decentralization of authority. Institutional legitimacy, formal religious education, and state regulation continue to play a central role in shaping credibility and defining acceptable religious interpretation. In the Kazakhstani context, digital religious authority therefore develops within structured institutional and regulatory boundaries.

To explain these dynamics, the article introduced the concept of constrained pluralization of religious authority. This concept captures how digital media simultaneously expand the range of religious actors, interpretations, and communicative practices while remaining embedded within systems of institutional governance and legitimacy. The study therefore challenges assumptions that digital religion necessarily leads to fully democratized or fragmented religious authority. Instead, digital religiosity in Kazakhstan emerges as a negotiated and contextually conditioned phenomenon shaped by the interaction of technological affordances, institutional authority, audience practices, and regulatory structures.

More broadly, the article contributes to ongoing efforts to expand the sociology of digital religion beyond predominantly Western analytical frameworks. The Kazakhstani case demonstrates that processes of mediatization and digital religious transformation develop differently within post-Soviet contexts characterized by religious revival, state regulation, and historically shaped institutional structures. Digital media do not simply replace traditional forms of religiosity but reorganize the conditions under which religious knowledge, belonging, and authority are experienced and negotiated.

Future research could further examine the role of gender, regional inequality, language, and algorithmic recommendation systems in shaping digital religious engagement across Central Asia. Comparative studies involving other post-Soviet societies may also help clarify how varying political and institutional contexts influence the development of digitally mediated religiosity. As digital communication technologies continue to evolve, understanding the relationship between religion, media, and governance will remain increasingly important for analyzing contemporary transformations of faith and social life.

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