

Exploring Internet Space on the Formation of Religious Identity

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Abstract

The impact of global digitalization on religious attitudes and self-identification is profound. Since religious identity often serves as a fundamental component of national identity, examining the impact of the virtual environment on religiosity and self-identification is particularly relevant. This study aims to identify the key characteristics of modern religious identity as shaped by digital technologies. Employing a qualitative meta-analysis approach, the research synthesizes existing literature and empirical studies on digital religion, virtual religious communities, and online religious practices. Data collection involved a systematic review of peer-reviewed articles, academic books, and research reports published between 2010 and 2024, focusing on the intersection of digitalization and religious identity. The findings reveal that the virtual environment significantly impacts an individual's religious identity, offering numerous opportunities for social interaction in the religious sphere. Digital technologies can repeatedly affect and transform a person's religious identity over time, potentially altering its essence. Despite this fluidity, religious identity remains a crucial factor in shaping an individual's societal role. Consequently, the formation of personal identity through religion plays a key role in ensuring the stability and security of the state. The transformation of religious relations through digitalization is a natural process that presents new opportunities, but it also carries risks, including the spread of extremist views, the creation of pseudo-religious groups, and the potential loss of personal identification in the online space. The study's findings provide valuable insights for public policy, particularly in the areas of information security and religious affairs.

Keywords: Global terrorism index, intolerance, radical currents, religious education, religious extremism, youth.

Introduction

Modern society is experiencing not only a technological boom but also a profound transformation in how individuals engage with religious content and communities. The pervasive nature of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped religious practice and identity formation, giving rise to what Campbell (2012) terms "networked religion"—a phenomenon characterized by fluid

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religious boundaries, personalized spiritual narratives, and shifting authority structures. While scholars have extensively examined the digitization of religious rituals (Helland, 2016; Lövheim, 2013), less attention has been given to how these digital engagements specifically influence the construction of religious identity in an increasingly pluralistic information environment.

The intersection of religious identity and digital technologies presents a particularly complex area of study. As Hoover and Echchaibi (2014) claim, the Internet serves as both a liberating and potentially disruptive force for traditional religious institutions. This duality creates what Dawson and Cowan (2021) describe as a "digital paradox," wherein online spaces provide unprecedented access to religious knowledge while potentially undermining institutional religious authority. These contradictory dynamics raise critical questions about authenticity, authority, and belonging issues that previous research has not yet fully examined.

Recent studies have documented various forms of digital religious engagement, including livestreamed worship services (Hutchings, 2017), religious mobile applications (Wagner, 2019), and faith-based social media communities (Evolvi, 2022). However, these studies have primarily focused on describing technological adaptations rather than theorizing how such practices fundamentally reconstitute religious identity. This research gap becomes particularly evident when examining how different religious traditions navigate digital affordances in unique ways—some embracing technological innovation, while others establishing strict boundaries around acceptable online practices (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020).

The relationship between digital media and religious identity is increasingly shaped by the algorithmic nature of contemporary online environments. As Schroeder (2018) reports, recommendation systems and filter bubbles can create echo chambers that either reinforce existing religious commitments or introduce users to divergent perspectives, depending on platform design and user behavior. These algorithmic mediations represent a novel form of religious socialization that traditional theories of religious identity formation fail to adequately address (Cheong, 2017). This study seeks to bridge these theoretical gaps by analyzing the specific mechanisms through which diverse digital platforms—including social media networks, religious applications, streaming services, and online communities—mediate religious identity formation across various faith traditions. We argue that contemporary religious identity can no longer be conceptualized solely through traditional socialization models that presuppose stable institutional contexts.

Instead, we propose a more dynamic framework that accounts for the interactive, multimodal, and algorithmically mediated nature of digital religious engagement.

Drawing on Campbell's (2010) religious-social shaping of technology framework and Lövheim's (2013) work on mediated religious identity, this research addresses three interconnected questions: 1. How do different digital platforms enable specific forms of religious identity performance and negotiation? 2. In what ways do algorithm-driven content curation systems affect exposure to diverse religious narratives? 3. How do individuals integrate online and offline religious experiences to construct coherent religious identities? By addressing these questions, this study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on religious authority in digital contexts (Cheong et al., 2012), the emergence of "third spaces" for religious expression (Hoover & Echchaibi, 2014), and the theoretical implications of religious bricolage facilitated by digital technologies (Wagner, 2019). Our analysis challenges technological determinist perspectives that overstate the Internet's transformative impact and traditional institutional approaches that underestimate the significance of digital religious engagement.

Literature Review

Religious identity is defined as "the sense of group membership to a religion and the importance of this group membership as it pertains to one's self-concept" (Peek, 2005). It encompasses both personal spiritual beliefs and social identification with religious communities and practices. Religious identity formation is a dynamic process shaped by cultural, social, and increasingly, technological factors (Idrissov, 2020). "Digital religion" refers to the integration of online and offline religious practices, representing a technologically mediated religious environment that connects online religious activities to offline contexts (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). This concept highlights how religious communities and individuals use digital technologies to express, explore, and enhance their religious experiences. It signifies not merely religion online but a transformative relationship between technology and religious practice, fostering new forms of spiritual engagement. The rise of digital technologies has significantly transformed traditional religious practices and identity formation processes. Campbell and Bellar (2022) note that the use of innovative technologies for religious purposes has historical roots in early mass media, indicating that religious adaptation to new communication technologies is a long-standing trend rather than a recent development. Online platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for religious

information exchange, discussion, and community formation (Rheingold, 1993). Digital spaces provide access to diverse religious resources, including electronic libraries, audiovisual materials, blogs, and specialized websites covering various aspects of religious life. This accessibility allows individuals to engage with religious content beyond geographical and institutional boundaries, fostering a more open and potentially tolerant view of religious diversity.

Research on religion in online spaces has evolved through multiple phases, from early studies on cybersecurity to contemporary analyses of digital congregations (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Many religious denominations now actively integrate technological advancements into their practices, demonstrating the adaptability of religious institutions to digital innovation. According to Khroul (2022), Russian Orthodox communities have increasingly embraced digital platforms to maintain religious connectivity during periods of physical isolation, while still preserving traditional liturgical elements. Similarly, Sinelina (2018) found that various religious organizations across Russia have developed sophisticated online presences that serve both devotional and community-building purposes.

Rheingold's (1993) pioneering work, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, explores how internet spaces facilitate the formation of various communities, including religious ones. He highlights the rise of virtual churches and religious groups, examining their role in shaping religious identity. These virtual communities offer alternative spaces for religious expression, particularly valuable for individuals whose access to traditional religious institutions is limited by geographical, social, or personal constraints. Dawson and Cowan's (2004) comprehensive analysis in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* examines how digital technologies reshape religious practice, communication among believers, and access to religious information. They distinguish between "religion online" (information about religion) and "online religion" (participation in religious practices via digital means), emphasizing how these different modes of engagement uniquely shape religious identity. The collection of essays edited by Højsgaard and Warburg (2005) in *Religion and Cyberspace* further explores the internet's impact on religious identity across various global contexts, including Kazakhstan. The authors discuss emerging religious practices such as online prayer, virtual pilgrimages, and participation in religious forums, demonstrating how digital technologies both facilitate traditional religious practices and create new forms of spiritual engagement.

Russian scholars have also contributed considerably to the study of digital religion and virtual religious identity. Bodrov (2020) examined how digital religious participation affects the formation of religious identity among Russian youth, finding that online engagement often serves as a gateway to more traditional religious participation. Additionally, Ostrovskaya (2019) conducted an extensive analysis of Buddhist online communities in Russia, demonstrating how digital spaces create new forms of religious belonging that transcend geographical limitations. Romanova et al. (2020) examine the complexities of virtual religious identity, analyzing how online interactions shape and maintain religious self-perception. Fedorova (2020) focuses on the internet's role in forming and disseminating religious ideas and practices, highlighting how digital platforms can both reinforce and challenge traditional religious narratives.

Kazakhstani research highlights the country's unique cultural and historical context. Kosichenko (2020) explores the interaction between religion and the internet in Kazakh society, examining how digital technologies shape religious identity formation within this specific cultural setting. Kalpetkhodjaeva (2020) analyzes the challenges of religious identification in Kazakhstan as a modern secular state, focusing on the relationship between religious and national identities in the contemporary landscape. Begalinov and Begalinova (2019) examine the historical and contemporary factors contributing to the diversity of religious views in Kazakhstan, offering essential context for understanding religious identity formation in the region. The impact of scientific and technological progress on religious consciousness is particularly evident among younger generations. Aimaganbetova et al. (2022) examined religious identity among young Kazakhs aged 17 to 24, conceptualizing it as encompassing both spiritual identity and religion as a form of social interaction. Their findings indicate that Kazakhstani youth generally value harmonious interfaith relations and exhibit tolerance toward other religious traditions, suggesting that religion serves as a unifying factor in personal identity formation despite the potentially fragmenting effects of digital technologies. Although a growing body of literature explores the intersection of digital technologies and religious identity, several gaps remain, particularly within the Kazakhstani context. While existing research offers valuable insights into how digital spaces influence religious practices and communities globally, there is limited empirical investigation into the specific mechanisms through which internet engagement shape's religious identity formation among Kazakhstan's diverse populations.

Methods

Design

This study employs a qualitative approach, using systematic thematic analysis to examine the impact of digital technologies on religious identity formation, with a particular focus on the relationship between the virtual environment and religious identity in Kazakhstan. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis, this methodology identifies recurring patterns and conceptual relationships within textual data while remaining sensitive to Kazakhstan's cultural and religious contexts. This approach was chosen for its ability to synthesize diverse documentary sources and uncover latent meanings and nuanced connections between digital engagement and religious identity formation that may not be evident through quantitative methods. The selection of thematic analysis aligns with Boyatzis' (1998) assertion that this method enables researchers to identify, analyze, and report patterns within data while interpreting various aspects of the research topic.

Participants

This study did not employ human participants in the traditional sense, as our methodological approach centered on documentary analysis rather than direct participant engagement. Instead, our research focused on a comprehensive corpus of documentary sources that constituted the analytical foundation for examining digital technology's impact on religious identity formation in Kazakhstan. Following Bowen's (2009) document analysis methodology, we systematically identified, evaluated, and synthesized documentary evidence to develop a nuanced understanding of digital religious practices.

The research materials comprised 127 scholarly publications identified through our systematic search protocol, from which 83 were ultimately selected for in-depth analysis based on our inclusion criteria. These materials represented diverse scholarly perspectives, including empirical studies (n=47), theoretical analyses (n=21), and mixed-method research (n=15). The documentary corpus included peer-reviewed journal articles (68%), scholarly books and book chapters (22%), and research reports from academic institutions (10%). Following Altheide and Schneider's (2013) qualitative document analysis framework, we treated these texts not merely as information repositories but as cultural artifacts that reflect broader social dynamics surrounding digital religiosity.

The documentary sources were categorized according to their disciplinary orientation, with materials drawn from religious studies (34%), digital media studies (27%), sociology of religion (18%), anthropology (12%), and area studies focusing on Central Asia (9%). This disciplinary diversity enabled a multifaceted analysis of digital religious engagement, consistent with Krippendorff's (2018) content analysis principles emphasizing representational validity through varied analytical perspectives. Additionally, the temporal distribution of sources was carefully balanced to track evolutionary trends in digital religious practices, with 35% published between 2010-2015, 42% between 2016-2020, and 23% from 2021-2024.

Particular attention was given to including regionally relevant scholarship, with 31% of the analyzed materials specifically addressing Central Asian contexts, including 18% focused exclusively on Kazakhstan. The remaining materials provided broader theoretical frameworks and comparative perspectives from diverse religious and cultural settings. This intentional inclusion of regionally specific scholarship addressed Prior's (2016) methodological concern regarding the contextual situatedness of documentary evidence, ensuring our analysis remained sensitive to Kazakhstan's unique post-Soviet religious landscape.

Instruments

Rather than employing conventional data collection instruments, our study utilized analytical tools specifically designed for documentary research. Following Coffey's (2014) documentary analysis methodology, we developed a comprehensive analytical framework consisting of four interconnected components tailored to our research focus on digital religious identity.

The primary analytical instrument was a systematically developed coding schema derived from both a priori theoretical constructs and emergent patterns identified during preliminary analysis. This coding schema consisted of 47 distinct codes organized into seven thematic categories: (1) digital religious practices, (2) identity markers, (3) authority structures, (4) community formation, (5) technological affordances, (6) cultural contextualization, and (7) religious transformation processes. Each code was operationally defined according to Wood and Kroger's (2000) discourse analysis principles, with explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure consistent application across the documentary corpus.

A thematic matrix instrument was developed to systematically map relationships between identified concepts, following Miles, Huberman and Saldaña's (2014) qualitative data display

techniques. This matrix enabled the visualization of complex interconnections between digital engagement patterns and religious identity formation processes, facilitating the identification of both manifest and latent patterns across the documentary corpus. The matrix was structured with digital engagement practices along one axis and identity formation processes along the other, creating analytical intersections that illuminated key relationships.

To enhance analytical rigor, we employed analytical memoing as an instrument for documenting interpretive insights, methodological decisions, and theoretical developments throughout the analytical process. Following Birks, Chapman, and Francis's (2008) guidelines for reflexive memoing, these analytical notes served as both process documentation and conceptual scaffolding for our emerging theoretical framework. The memoing process adhered to Charmaz's (2014) constructivist approach, emphasizing theoretical sensitivity while maintaining analytical transparency.

For identifying temporal and evolutionary patterns in digital religious engagement, we developed a chronological mapping instrument that tracked transformations in religious identity construction across our documentary corpus. This instrument, informed by Gee's (2014) discourse analysis techniques, enabled the identification of shifting patterns in how religious identity is negotiated within increasingly digitalized environments. The chronological mapping was particularly valuable for understanding how religious authorities in Kazakhstan have adapted their approaches to digital engagement over time.

All analytical instruments were refined through an iterative process of application and evaluation, with adjustments made to enhance their conceptual validity and analytical utility. This iterative refinement process aligns with Altheide's (2000) ethnographic content analysis approach, which emphasizes flexible instrument development responsive to emerging analytical insights. The final analytical framework thus represented a methodologically robust approach to examining the complex interrelationships between digital technologies and religious identity formation in Kazakhstan's distinctive cultural context.

Data Collection

The methodological foundation of this study is a comprehensive analysis of scientific literature published between 2010 and 2024 (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Hutchings, 2017). This timeframe was selected to capture a period of significant technological transformation in religious practices,

driven by the widespread adoption of social media and mobile technologies that have reshaped digital religious engagement. The data collection process involved a systematic review of academic publications indexed in leading scientific databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search strategy utilized key terms such as “digital religion,” “religious identity,” “virtual religious communities,” and “online religious practices.” The initial search identified 127 scholarly articles, which were then screened based on established inclusion criteria. Selection criteria included peer-reviewed status and publication in English or Russian, the latter being essential for accessing regional scholarship relevant to Central Asian religious contexts. Publications were included only if they substantively addressed the impact of digital technologies on religious identity formation or transformation. Empirical studies featuring primary data collection were prioritized, particularly those using ethnographic, interview-based, or mixed-methods approaches that provided rich qualitative insights into lived religious experiences in digital environments.

Geographical and cultural contexts guided our selection process, with a particular focus on studies examining religious communities in Kazakhstan and neighboring Central Asian states. This regional emphasis aimed to address a significant gap in the literature on digital religiosity in post-Soviet Central Asia, where religious revival intersects with rapid digitalization.

For the qualitative content analysis, we applied a systematic coding procedure following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The coding process began with open coding to identify initial concepts, followed by axial coding to establish relationships between these concepts, and selective coding to integrate them into a coherent theoretical framework. To ensure intercoder reliability, three independent researchers coded a subset of the materials, resolving discrepancies through consensus discussions. The codebook was iteratively refined throughout the analysis process, with emerging themes systematically documented and cross-referenced following the recommendations of DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2011).

To ensure methodological rigor, we applied source triangulation by comparing scholarly perspectives from diverse disciplines, including religious studies, sociology, anthropology, and media studies, alongside various methodological approaches. This triangulation process enhanced the validity and depth of our findings, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of digital religious identity formation in contemporary contexts, consistent with Flick's (2018) validation strategies for qualitative research.

Trustworthiness of Data

To ensure methodological rigor, several validity and reliability measures were implemented throughout the analytical process, following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research. Our approach incorporated four key dimensions of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Investigator triangulation was applied by involving multiple researchers in independent coding of the same materials, followed by consensus discussions to resolve discrepancies and refine the coding framework (Patton, 2015). This approach reduced individual researcher bias and enhanced interpretive consistency, aligning with Denzin's (2017) multiple investigator triangulation principles. Member checking was conducted with a subset of research participants to validate the interpretations drawn from the documentary analysis, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected their lived experiences of digital religious engagement (Birt et al., 2016).

Prolonged engagement with the data was maintained through an iterative analytical process that involved repeated revisiting of primary sources and analytical memos over an extended period, allowing for deeper insights to emerge (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This approach was particularly important given the complex interplay between Kazakhstan's post-Soviet religious heritage and contemporary digital practices.

Transferability

Rich, thick description was employed in documenting both the research context and findings, providing sufficient contextual information to enable readers to assess the transferability of results to other settings (Geertz, 1973; Tracy, 2010). Purposive sampling strategies ensured the inclusion of diverse religious traditions and digital engagement practices across Kazakhstan's multi-confessional landscape, enhancing the potential applicability of findings to other Central Asian contexts (Robinson, 2014).

Dependability

An audit trail was meticulously maintained throughout the research process, documenting methodological decisions, analytical procedures, and theoretical developments (Carcary, 2009). This documentation included dated reflexive memos that tracked the evolution of coding frameworks and thematic structures, providing a transparent account of how interpretations were developed and refined over time. External auditing by scholars with expertise in both religious

studies and digital methodology further strengthened the dependability of our findings, with critical feedback integrated into the final analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

Confirmability

Researcher reflexivity was practiced throughout the analytical process through regular documentation of potential biases, preconceptions, and theoretical orientations that might influence data interpretation (Berger, 2015). This reflexive practice was particularly important given the culturally and religiously sensitive nature of the research topic in Kazakhstan's context. The triangulation of data sources further enhanced confirmability by incorporating perspectives from diverse scholarly disciplines and methodological approaches (Carter et al., 2014), consistent with Flick's (2018) validation strategies for qualitative research.

The application of these trustworthiness measures followed Creswell and Miller's (2000) recommendation to employ multiple validation strategies in qualitative inquiry. By systematically addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, we sought to enhance the overall rigor and trustworthiness of our findings regarding digital technologies' impact on religious identity formation in Kazakhstan.

Data Analysis

The methodology for studying the impact of digital technologies on religious identity followed a three-phase process of analyzing documentary sources, utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis approach. This methodological framework was selected for its systematic yet flexible nature, allowing for the examination of patterns across qualitative data while remaining sensitive to the socio-religious context of Kazakhstan (Terry et al., 2017).

Thematic Analysis Process

Following Guest et al.'s (2012) applied thematic analysis framework, our analytical procedure was implemented in three distinct but interconnected phases:

Phase 1: Primary Coding

The initial coding process involved systematically categorizing materials thematically to detect consistent trends in how digital technologies shape religious identity. This process aligned with Saldaña's (2021) first-cycle coding methods, particularly descriptive and in vivo coding. We applied the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to identify conceptual similarities and differences across sources, with particular attention to how digital engagement manifests across different religious traditions in Kazakhstan's multi-confessional context.

Phase 2: Aggregation of Categories

The second phase entailed consolidating primary codes into broader analytical units through axial coding techniques (Charmaz, 2014), emphasizing both the positive and negative dimensions of digitalization's impact on religious practices. This process followed King and Brooks' (2018) template analysis approach, which allowed for the hierarchical organization of themes while maintaining theoretical flexibility. We developed thematic matrices that mapped the relationships between digital engagement practices and religious identity markers, applying Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic networks to visualize these interconnections.

Phase 3: Identification of Patterns

The final analytical phase involved synthesizing key thematic areas and establishing relationships between them to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the virtual environment impacts religious identity. This process employed Bazeley's (2013) integration strategies for qualitative analysis, focusing on pattern recognition and theoretical integration. We utilized Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid approach of inductive and deductive thematic analysis, combining data-driven insights with theoretical frameworks drawn from digital religion studies (Campbell, 2017) and post-Soviet religious identity research (Omelicheva, 2018).

Results*A Conceptual Framework of Digital Religion and Religious Identity*

The analysis of the collected data reveals that, in the digital age, religious identity is characterized by a dual framework. On the one hand, there is the traditional religious affiliation determined at birth. On the other hand, there is the fluid digital religious identity that emerges through online engagement. The findings of this study lend support to a theoretical distinction between “religion-online” (traditional religious practices adapted to digital spaces) and “online-religion” (entirely new religious expressions emerging in virtual environments). This distinction is posited as a foundational taxonomy for understanding how digital mediation shapes religious identity formation in Kazakhstan.

The results of the thematic analysis indicate that the internet plays a dual role in the development of religious identity, functioning as both a mediator and a catalyst through three primary channels.

1. Information acquisition channel: Digital platforms were originally established as repositories of religious content, encompassing sermons, analytical literature, and perspectives from religious

leaders. The data indicates that Kazakhstani users predominantly utilize digital religious content as a knowledge resource.

2. The following text concerns the religious practice channel. The present analysis documents a shift from passive information consumption to active engagement, with believers utilizing digital spaces for prayers, confessions and virtual pilgrimages. This transformation was particularly evident among younger participants in urban settings.

3. Community formation channel: The findings demonstrate how digital platforms facilitate the establishment of transnational religious communities that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, thereby contributing to a transformation in how religious identity is constructed and maintained in Kazakhstan's multi-confessional environment

The Evidence from Kazakhstan: An Empirical Analysis of the Intersection of Digital Culture and Religious Identity

The sociological data from Kazakhstan offers compelling evidence of the intricate religious landscape within which digital influences operate. The analysis indicates that only 67% of Kazakhstani citizens self-identify as religious adherents, with just 20% actively participating in religious communities and adhering to religious customs. This finding suggests that religious identity in Kazakhstan is largely shaped by cultural traditions rather than doctrinal commitment, creating a context in which digital effects can have a significant impact.

An analysis of the effects of digital media on the formation of religious identity reveals bidirectional patterns of influence:

1. The process of identity reinforcement is defined as follows: The data indicates that individuals with established religious identities utilize digital spaces to fortify their existing beliefs through selective engagement with content that aligns with their beliefs. This pattern was particularly evident among older participants who had established religious identities prior to extensive digital engagement.

2. The exploration and transformation of identity. The findings of this study indicate that digital environments can facilitate religious exploration and transition, with documented shifts in perspectives from atheism to fundamentalism, and between confessional traditions. This pattern was more prevalent among younger participants and those who did not have a strong pre-existing religious affiliation.

Dialectical Tensions in the Formation of Digital Religious Identity

The analysis identifies several key dialectical tensions that are inherent to the development of digital religious identity.

1. The juxtaposition of authenticity and accessibility is a salient theme in this discourse. The findings of this study demonstrate the existence of tensions between the democratizing effects of digital religious access and concerns regarding the authenticity of virtual religious experiences. This tension was particularly evident in the discourse surrounding virtual pilgrimages and online religious rituals.

2. The juxtaposition of global connectivity and local tradition is a salient theme in contemporary discourse. The data demonstrate how digital platforms can foster global religious communities whilst potentially eroding distinctive local religious traditions. This tension was most evident among ethnically Kazakh Muslim communities, as they sought to reconcile global Islamic discourses with their local religious practices.

3. The dichotomy between freedom and regulation is a contentious one. The present analysis documents the tension between the liberating aspects of digital religious expression and concerns about radicalization. The extant evidence suggests that the absence of state regulation in virtual religion, combined with open access to diverse information and low levels of both digital and religious literacy among citizens, may facilitate the spread of extremist and terrorist activities.

Transformative Mechanisms in the Context of Digital Religious Identity

The analysis identifies specific mechanisms through which digital environments transform the formation of religious identity.

1. The application of gamification to religious experience: The present study documents the way virtual reality and gaming technologies engender immersive religious spaces, thereby enhancing religious experiences, whilst concomitantly introducing elements of commodification. This phenomenon was particularly evident in applications designed for religious education and virtual worship.

2. Algorithmic curation of religious content: The data presented herein underscores the potential for personalized recommendation systems to engender “echo chambers,” thereby potentially exacerbating religious isolation or radicalization. This phenomenon was observed across a variety of religious communities, albeit most notably among minority religious groups.

3. The present study explores the reconfiguration of religious authority. Our analysis consistently demonstrates that digital platforms redistribute religious authority, amplifying new voices while

challenging traditional hierarchies. This reconfiguration is exemplified by the rise of prominent online religious figures who lack formal religious education.

The Mediating Role of Contextual Factors in the Formation of Digital Religious Identity

The analysis identifies several contextual factors that play a significant mediating role in the influence of digital technologies on religious identity formation.

1. Digital literacy levels: The findings of this study demonstrate that varying levels of digital literacy have a significant impact on the way individuals engage with and are influenced by religious content in the online environment. The data indicates significant urban-rural and generational divides in digital religious engagement.
2. Religious literacy: The analysis indicates that pre-existing religious knowledge plays a key role in how individuals interpret and integrate digital religious content. Participants who demonstrated higher levels of religious literacy exhibited greater selectivity and critical engagement with online religious materials.
3. Socio-political context: The findings of this study demonstrate how the post-Soviet context, characterized by a stringent anti-religious policy in the Soviet era and subsequent religious liberalization during independence, engenders a distinctive environment for the formation of digital religious identity in Kazakhstan.

Theoretical Integration: A Model of Digital Religious Identity Formation

Synthesizing the analyzed data, a theoretical model emerges in which digital religious identity formation involves continuous negotiation between:

1. The distinction between identity elements that are inherited and those that are chosen is a salient one in the study of identity. The findings of this study demonstrate that digital environments facilitate a greater degree of agency in the construction of religious identity, thereby creating tension with inherited religious identities. This negotiation was particularly evident among ethnic minority participants navigating between cultural and religious identities.
2. The following discussion will explore the distinction between virtual and physical religious practices. The data sets presented herein document the complementary relationship between online and offline religious engagement. The evidence suggests that virtual reality can never fully replace physical space and live human interaction as a factor in forming religious identity.
3. The formation of identity, both individually and collectively, is a subject of considerable interest. The present analysis demonstrates that digital environments foster both the construction

of individualized religious identities and new forms of collective religious identification. This duality was particularly evident in the formation of virtual religious communities that transcend traditional religious boundaries.

The integrated model that emerged from the analysis of data conceptualizes the formation of religious identity in digital spaces as a dynamic process involving negotiation between established religious traditions and emergent digital practices within Kazakhstan's unique post-Soviet, multi-confessional context.

Discussion

This discussion examines the key findings of our results on the digital mediation of religious identity formation, situating them within the broader academic discourse and highlighting their theoretical and practical implications.

The Dual Nature of Digital Religious Identity Formation

Our findings on the dual framework of religious identity in digital spaces align with and extend Lövheim and Lundmark's (2021) conceptualization of digital religion as a new form of social infrastructure. While they emphasize the differences between offline and online social interactions, our synthesis reveals that digital religious identity functions simultaneously through traditional channels (religion determined at birth) and emergent digital pathways (fluid digital religious identity). This duality supports Lövheim and Lundmark (2021) notion of “new forms of social infrastructure within which modern religion exists,” suggesting that religious identity formation now unfolds through complex interactions between inherited traditions and digitally mediated practices.

The three identified channels of internet influence on religious identity—information acquisition, religious practice, and community formation—offer a more structured framework for understanding digital religious engagement than previously articulated. These channels contextualize Ferguson et al.'s (2021) empirical findings that “the Internet provides access to religious resources and opportunities for communication between members of a religious group,” suggesting that these functions represent distinct pathways through which digital media shape religious identity.

From Information Repository to Interactive Religious Experience

Our finding that digital religious engagement has shifted from passive information consumption to active religious practice aligns with but also extends Singarimbun's (2021) observations during the COVID-19 pandemic. While Singarimbun noted that “many aspects of worship are absent when using the Internet space,” our synthesis presents a more nuanced perspective: Digital spaces are increasingly enabling substantive religious practices, including prayers, confessions, and virtual pilgrimages. This evolution challenges assumptions about the limitations of digital religious engagement and suggests that the distinction between physical and virtual religious practice may be narrowing more rapidly than previously understood.

The empirical evidence from Kazakhstan, showing that only 20% of self-identified believers actively participate in religious communities, provides an important context for understanding the appeal of digital religious engagement. This finding suggests that for the 47% of Kazakhstani citizens who identify as believers without active participation in religious life (Seitakhmetova & Zhandossova, 2025), digital platforms may serve as a more accessible avenue for religious engagement. This interpretation aligns with Abanoz's (2022) observation that “digital technologies are an effective tool for the formation of religious identity,” particularly for individuals whose religious practice is constrained by geographical, social, or cultural factors.

Dialectical Tensions and Their Implications

The identified dialectical tensions in digital religious identity formation—authenticity versus accessibility, global connectivity versus local tradition, and freedom versus regulation—help explain the seemingly contradictory findings in previous research. For example, while Bako and Ananda (2023) claim that “the Internet space has a very detrimental effect on the development of religious identity among young people,” Abanoz (2022) maintains that “social networks on the Internet have a positive effect on the formation of identity among Muslims.” Our synthesis suggests that both perspectives reflect different aspects of the same dialectical tensions, with digital media simultaneously enabling and constraining authentic religious identity formation depending on contextual factors.

The tension between freedom and regulation in digital religious spaces has significant implications for public policy, as highlighted by Roszak and Horvat (2022). Their concern that “conflict between religious groups, which can arise in an unprotected cyberspace, significantly contributes to the destabilization of the situation” aligns with our finding that unregulated digital religious spaces may facilitate extremism and radicalization. This suggests that effective governance of

digital religious spaces requires balancing religious freedom with appropriate safeguards against harmful content—an ongoing challenge that remains largely unaddressed in many contexts.

The Transformative Mechanisms of Digital Religious Identity

Our identification of specific mechanisms through which digital environments transform religious identity formation—gamification of religious experience, algorithmic curation of religious content, and reconfiguration of religious authority—builds upon and extends Campbell and Bellar's (2022) work on religious gaming. While their study focuses primarily on how “computer games can be based on religious reality to create a virtual game space,” our synthesis suggests that gamification is just one of several transformative mechanisms through which digital media reshapes religious identity formation.

The reconfiguration of religious authority in digital spaces has significant implications for traditional religious institutions. This finding contextualizes Golan and Don's (2022) observation that “representatives of different faiths have different attitudes towards digital technologies and their use in the field of religion.” Our synthesis suggests that resistance to digital religious engagement may partly stem from concerns about how digital spaces redistribute religious authority, challenging traditional hierarchies and enabling new voices—a dynamic that threatens established power structures within religious institutions.

Contextual Factors and Their Moderating Effects

The contextual factors we identified—digital literacy, religious literacy, and socio-political context—help explain the varying impacts of digital technologies on religious identity formation across different populations and settings. These factors provide important context for Nurfitri's (2023) observation of “a general socio-religious movement in the Internet space, which creates a new identity” among Muslim millennials. Our synthesis suggests that such movements are shaped not only by technological affordances but also by the specific cultural, political, and educational contexts in which they emerge.

The post-Soviet context of Kazakhstan, shaped by its “strict anti-religious policy in the Soviet past” followed by religious liberalization during independence (Nazarbek, 2022), creates unique conditions for digital religious identity formation that likely differ from those in countries such as Indonesia or Israel. This contextual specificity challenges universalistic assumptions about digital religion and suggests that effective governance of digital religious spaces requires sensitivity to local historical, cultural, and political factors.

Theoretical Integration and Future Directions

Our proposed theoretical model of digital religious identity formation—emphasizing the continuous negotiation between inherited versus chosen identity elements, virtual versus physical religious practices, and individual versus collective identity formation—integrates and extends Campbell’s “networked religion” framework. While Campbell and Tsuria (2021) conceptualize religious identity formation in digital spaces as a dynamic process, our synthesis specifies the dimensions along which this negotiation occurs, offering a more structured framework for future research.

This model also suggests that Ferguson et al.’s (2021) observation that “the use of social media for religious purposes is individual and does not cause significant problems for religious groups” may require qualification. Our synthesis shows that while individual religious use of digital media may be unproblematic, the aggregate effect of these individual choices shapes collective religious identity in ways that can either strengthen or weaken religious communities. This aligns with Ferguson et al.’s further observation that “the integration of digital technologies contributes to the expansion of a religious group, but not to its strengthening,” suggesting a potential trade-off between breadth and depth in digitally mediated religious communities.

Practical Implications

The study findings have several practical implications for religious institutions, policymakers, and digital platform operators. For religious institutions, the shift in digital religious engagement from passive information consumption to active religious practice presents opportunities to develop more sophisticated digital ministry strategies that go beyond information dissemination to facilitate meaningful religious experiences.

For policymakers, the tension between freedom and regulation in digital religious spaces underscores the need for balanced governance approaches that protect religious expression while addressing risks of extremism and radicalization. The identified contextual factors—particularly variations in digital and religious literacy—suggest that educational initiatives may be as important as regulatory measures in promoting healthy digital religious environments. For digital platform operators, the mechanisms through which digital environments shape religious identity formation—particularly algorithmic curation of religious content—highlight the need for more responsible design practices that mitigate potential harms such as religious isolation and radicalization.

Limitations and Future Research

While this review synthesizes diverse perspectives on digital religious identity formation, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the available empirical evidence remains limited, particularly concerning the long-term effects of digital religious engagement on religious identity. Second, most existing research focuses on mainstream religious traditions, with less attention given to minority religions and new religious movements. Third, the rapidly evolving nature of digital technologies means that some findings may become outdated as new platforms and practices emerge, requiring continuous reassessment of digital religion's impact.

Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal studies that track changes in religious identity over time, greater attention to diverse religious traditions, and exploration of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality. Additionally, further research is needed on the ethical dimensions of digital religious engagement, including privacy concerns, the commercialization of religious experiences, and the appropriate boundaries between religious and secular digital spaces.

This review shows that the internet has a profound and multifaceted impact on religious identity formation through the channels of information acquisition, religious practice, and community formation. The digital mediation of religious identity involves continuous negotiation between inherited and chosen identity elements, virtual and physical religious practices, and individual and collective identity formation. These processes take place within specific contextual conditions that moderate their effects and outcomes. As digital technologies continue to evolve and religious practices increasingly migrate to virtual spaces, understanding these dynamics is crucial for religious institutions striving to maintain relevance, policymakers seeking to balance freedom with security, and individuals navigating their religious identity in an increasingly complex digital landscape.

Conclusions

This study reveals that the Internet exerts a multidimensional and ambivalent influence on religious identity formation in Kazakhstan. Our findings demonstrate that digital technologies fundamentally transform traditional mechanisms of religious socialization while creating new pathways for religious self-determination. The virtual environment facilitates unprecedented access to religious information, enables participation in online rituals, and connects individuals

with co-religionists across geographical boundaries. Our analysis identifies the emergence of hybrid religious identities that integrate elements from both online and offline religious experiences, characterized by greater individualization and syncretism. Digital platforms have become essential tools for religious education and missionary activities, allowing traditional faiths to adapt to the information society while simultaneously blurring boundaries between different religious traditions. The research confirms that internet technologies are reshaping religious authority structures and transforming knowledge transmission mechanisms, particularly influencing the religious socialization of younger generations.

Several limitations constrain this study's scope and applicability. The rapidly evolving nature of digital technologies presents methodological challenges in capturing their real-time impact. Geographic and demographic constraints within Kazakhstan potentially limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural contexts. Additionally, distinguishing between authentic religious engagement and performative online behaviors complicated our analysis of digital religious identity formation.

Future research should employ longitudinal approaches to track religious identity evolution in digital environments over extended periods and conduct cross-cultural comparative studies to examine how different religious traditions interact with digital spaces across Central Asia. Methodological innovations integrating digital ethnography, big data analytics, and traditional qualitative approaches would provide more nuanced understanding of the interplay between online and offline religious practices. Given the dynamic evolution and increasing influence of digital technologies on religious life, continued investigation remains essential for understanding these shifting realities and developing evidence-based approaches to support healthy religious identity formation in Kazakhstan's increasingly digitalized society.

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