



MEDİAD

Medya ve Din Araştırmaları Dergisi | Journal of Media and Religion Studies

ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Aralık 2023, 6(2), 137-166

Geliş: 20.09.2023 | Kabul: 04.12.2023 | Yayın: 28.12.2023

DOI: 10.47951/mediad.1363608

Framing the Study of Digital Religion: Waves of Academic Research, Theoretical Approaches and Themes*

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Abstract

The phenomenon of “digital religion” has emerged as a research field over the past quarter century as religious experiences integrate into the digital sphere. Within this field, researchers have adopted various theoretical frameworks and empirical methodologies to illuminate the complex dynamics that arise from the interaction between digital culture and religion. However, the existing literature on this topic is characterized by fragmentation, which makes a comprehensive understanding of its trajectory difficult. This fragmentation is particularly noticeable in the absence of a coherent narrative that outlines the field’s development. This study aims to provide a scholarly framework for understanding the trajectory of Digital Religion Studies (DRSs), encompassing successive waves of academic research, theoretical paradigms, and thematic foci. This study provides a qualitative assessment of existing literature on the relationship between digital culture and religion through a comprehensive review. A thorough literature review reveals that research in the field of digital religion can be classified into four distinct phases: descriptive, categorical, theoretical, and integrative. The prominent theoretical frameworks that have emerged media ecology, mediation, mediatization, religious-social shaping of technology (RSST), and hypermediation. Finally, the thematic categorization of research primarily revolves around topics, such as rituals, authenticity, identity, community, authority, and embodiment.

Keywords: Digital Religion, Research Waves, Theoretical Approaches, Themes

Dijital Din Çalışmalarını Çerçevelemek: Akademik Araştırma Dalgaları, Teorik Yaklaşımlar ve Temalar

Öz

Dini yaşamın dijital bir hüviyete bürünmesiyle birlikte dijital din olgusu oluşmaya başlamıştır. Son çeyrek asırda gelişim kaydederek olgunlaşan bu olgunun aynı zamanda akademik bir araştırma sahasına dönüştüğü de aşîkârdır. Bu sahada çalışma yürüten araştırmacılar dijital kültür ve din etkileşiminden doğan problemlerin çözümüne yönelik çeşitli araştırmalar yürüterek teorik ve ampirik yaklaşımlar ile farklı temalar geliştirmişlerdir. Ne var ki konuyla ilgili mevcut literatür, yörüngesinin kapsamlı bir şekilde anlaşılmasını zorlaştıran bir parçalanma ile karakterize edilmektedir. Bu parçalanmışlık, özellikle alanın gelişimini özetleyen tutarlı bir anlatının yokluğunda kolaylıkla fark edilmektedir. Buradan hareketle bu makale, birbirini takip eden akademik araştırma dalgalarını, teorik paradigmaları ve tematik odakları kapsayan dijital din çalışmalarının yörüngesini anlamak için bilimsel bir çerçeve sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda makalede, dijital kültür ve din ilişkisini inceleyen mevcut literatürün kapsamlı bir incelemesi yapılarak niteliksel bir değerlendirme gerçekleştirilmiştir. Literatürün kapsamlı incelemesi sonucunda, söz konusu sahadaki araştırmaların tanımlayıcı, metodolojik, teorik ve bütünlük olmak üzere dört ayrı dalga halinde kategorize edildiği sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Ortaya çıkan kayda değer teorik yaklaşımlar arasında medya ekolojisi, dolayım, medyatikleşme, teknolojinin dini-toplumsal şekillenmesi ve hiperdolayım yeri almaktadır. Son olarak, araştırmaların tematik kategorizasyonunun ağırlıklı olarak ritüel, otantiklik, kimlik, topluluk, otorite ve somutlaşma olmak üzere altı tema etrafında irdelendiği tespit edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital Din, Araştırma Dalgaları, Teorik Yaklaşımlar, Temalar

ATIF: Ergen, Y. (2023). Framing the study of digital religion: Waves of academic research, theoretical approaches and themes. *Medya ve Din Araştırmaları Dergisi (MEDİAD)*, 6(2), 137-166.

* This article has been derived from the doctoral thesis titled "Postmodern Dijital Kültürde Dini Topluluklar ve Otorite," completed in 2022 at Selçuk University Institute of Social Sciences.

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Introduction

With the continuous integration of emerging digital technologies into daily life, the widespread adoption of digital media, and the ascendancy of digital culture as the prevailing societal ethos, individuals' daily routines have undergone significant transformation, assuming a distinctly digital character. Presently, for the majority of people, routine activities encompass tasks such as accessing the Internet via portable digital devices, checking email communications, seeking information on topics of interest, engaging in social interactions with friends, utilizing digital navigation tools for travel, streaming music or podcasts through digital platforms during journeys, regular engagement with social media platforms, monitoring follower counts, and evaluating post-engagement metrics, all of which have become commonplace. Consequently, it can be posited that digitization has become an ordinary facet of everyday life (Karaarslan, 2021, p. 51). This routine extends to religious life. To such an extent that contemporary individuals frequently access religious knowledge through digital media, engage in digital religious discussions, participate in digital religious communities, perform religious rituals digitally, and cultivate religious beliefs or develop digital religious identities through involvement in a digitalized process of religious socialization. As a result, it can be asserted that religious life now assumes a digitalized identity. This phenomenon underscores the notion that religion is undergoing digitization.

Certainly, the digitalization of religion, in its most comprehensive interpretation, can be characterized as the process of integrating religious practices and all facets of religious discourse with digital technologies. This transformative phenomenon can be traced back to the 1980s, a period concurrent with the widespread adoption of the Internet. During this formative era, when web technologies were still in their infancy, the Christian community initially ventured into the realm of disseminating religious content through digital means. Initially, this religious content adopted a primarily text-based structure, akin to the broader array of content available on the burgeoning internet. However, as the 1990s unfolded, there has been a notable surge in the proliferation of religious content, coinciding with the emergence and growth of online religious communities and e-mails. Concurrently, this period bore witness to the establishment of dedicated religious websites and the inception of online or cyber churches, primarily within Christian tradition. Notably, other institutional religions, including but not limited to Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam, also found their foothold in the digital realm during this time. Consequently, the Internet has unveiled new avenues for individuals to explore and engage with their religious beliefs and experiences, offering an ever-expanding array of websites, chat rooms, and e-mail discussion groups dedicated to a myriad of faith-related topics (Campbell, 2006, pp. 4–5, Campbell, 2010, p. 22).

Between the years 1980 and 2000, the discourse surrounding the interplay of religion and digital technologies predominantly revolved around conceptual frameworks such as “electronic religion,” “online religion” and “cyber religion.” Among these, the term “cyber religion” gained prominence. Cyber religion, as defined by Højsgaard (2005), is characterized as any form of religious content disseminated through the Internet. This concept emerged from the prevailing notion that cyberspace constitutes an alternate realm, detached from the mundane aspects of individuals' daily lives (p. 50). The concept of cyber religion, however, carries inherent complexities as it conjures both utopian and dystopian visions of cyberspace as a mythical domain that liberates individuals from conventional societal and physical constraints while simultaneously ensnaring them within a “false” reality experienced behind the screen. A similar predicament arose with the term “virtual religion,” which was proposed as an alternative to “cyber religion” in the mid-2000s. This term aimed to underscore the distinctive features of online spaces in contrast to their offline counterparts but was marred by its close association with the concept of “virtual reality.” During this period, the notion of virtual reality primarily referred to digitally simulated environments, often perceived as diverging from the authentic physical world, thereby creating an impression of faith

and religiosity that was incomplete, artificial, or counterfeited. Therefore, the utility of the term “virtual religion” in academic discourse has dwindled over time (Campbell, 2013a, p. 2; Campbell and Tsuria, 2022b, pp. 2–4).

One of the most noteworthy conceptual debates revolves around the distinctions between “online religion” and “religion online”. Coined by Christopher Helland (2000, 2005), this differentiation aims to discern whether religious content and communities heavily draw upon offline sources and practices, or whether they manifest unique forms of engagement stemming from digitally originated religious content and communities. In this respect, “religion online” pertains to the utilization of the internet as a unidirectional communication tool by religious entities, while “online religion” describes the deployment of the Internet and digital media as avenues for interactive engagement within religious communities. This categorical demarcation proves instrumental in elucidating the existence of religious communities that concurrently inhabit both the online and offline realms. It also underscores the significant role played by the Internet and digital technologies in giving rise to novel forms of religious practices. In subsequent years, the terms “online religion” and “religion online” have been employed divergently in scholarly discourse and are subject to varied debates (Campbell, 2012; Campbell and Lövheim, 2011; Cheong et al., 2009; Frost and Youngblood, 2014; Rahman, 2016; Young, 2004). Notably, the term “online religion” has gained prominence for providing a comprehensive technical and sociological framework to explicate networked religious practices (Eken, 2020; Eken, 2021).

In the 2010s, the ongoing relationship between religion and the Internet, as well as computer-based digital technologies, underwent a paradigm shift and began to be examined within the framework of “digital religion”. Particularly since 2012, the concept of digital religion has gained widespread currency across international conferences, symposiums, research centers, research projects, and the titles of scholarly books and articles (Campbell, 2013a, p. 2; Campbell and Tsuria, 2022b, pp. 2–4). This concept continues to serve as a focal point for contemporary discussions on the subject. In recent scholarship, the term digital religion has been frequently employed to delineate established institutional religions, including digital Islam, digital Christianity, digital Judaism, digital Buddhism, and digital Hinduism (Choong, 2023; Golan, 2022; Haidi, 2023; Lengauer, 2018; Ostrovskaya and Badmatsyrenov, 2022; Zaid et al., 2022; Zeiler, 2022b). This usage underscores the examination of how traditional religious frameworks engage in digital technology. Moreover, there is a preference for characterizing religious holy books, rituals, and practices within the digital realm. Instances of this include the study of the digital Quran, digital Bible, digital church, digital pilgrimage, digital hadith, and related subjects, all of which have become focal points in scholarly investigations of digital religion (Campbell and Dyer, 2022; Golan and Martini, 2018; Hakak et al., 2018; Hakak et al., 2022; Hutchings, 2017).

Naturally, the concept of digital religion has been established within the scholarly arena in tandem with the progression of academic investigations. The maturation of this concept over time has catalyzed its evolution into a distinct research field. Presently, it is evident that the conceptualization of DRSs have ascended to a prominent status within the realm of academic inquiry. This field has undergone a maturation process that spans approximately quarter century. From a broader perspective, DRSs have undergone substantial changes in recent decades. Existing research and reviews addressing the evolution of DRSs have exhibited a range of focal points. While some studies have exclusively concentrated on theoretical approaches (Campbell, 2017b; Çiçek, 2022; Hjarvard, 2011) within the field, others have delved into methodological advancements (Campbell and Altenhofen, 2016; Dereli, 2022a)¹. A subset of research endeavors incorporates an examination of both theoretical frameworks and methodological developments, further augmented by an exploration of the field’s chronological development. However, the segmentation of these studies presents a challenge for researchers aiming to conduct comprehensive investigations in the field, as disparate perspectives may not offer a sufficiently holistic outlook. Compounding this issue, many studies tend to adopt a singular viewpoint, whether

it emphasizes theoretical approaches or methodological orientations, resulting in a lack of well-rounded assessment of the field's multifaceted nature.

Acknowledging the challenges in the existing literature, it is worth noting that there are notable attempts to address these shortcomings. Two studies particularly stand out as pivotal in framing the current landscape of DRs. The first of these is a review article by Campbell and Evolvi (2019). In this seminal study, the authors scrutinized the evolution of the DRs field across successive waves of academic research, delineating theoretical approaches and highlighting certain thematic issues. However, it is discernible that not all prominent theoretical frameworks are comprehensively covered in this study, and some research areas within the broader spectrum of DRs themes are not exhaustively addressed. The second noteworthy study in the realm of DRs is a research paper authored by Haberli (2020), which appeared just a year after Campbell and Evolvi's study. Haberli's contribution can be viewed as an introductory exploration seeking to offer a holistic perspective of the DRs field. However, a notable characteristic of this research lies in its methodological focus assessing theoretical approaches within DRs from a methodological standpoint. Despite this approach, the study fails to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the theories that have been employed in the field of DRs and for specific purposes. In other words, the theories used in the field of DRs are not addressed in this study. Moreover, this article does not cover the full range of current thematic issues in the field of DRs. Thus, while Haberli's article constitutes a valuable step towards a more comprehensive understanding, it requires further research endeavors to provide a more thorough examination of the theoretical implications and thematic dimensions within the evolving landscape of DRs.

Although there are various studies in the literature that attempt to frame the development process of the DRs field, it is difficult to say that these studies are large-scale and current. In fact, as mentioned above, while some studies deal with the development of the field from a single aspect (for example, only theoretical approaches or methodological orientations), some studies do not provide a holistic perspective that shows the development of the field in all aspects. Furthermore, the existing body of literature often falls short of drawing attention to thematic issues within the realm of DRs, and there is a notable absence of up-to-date assessments of these concerns. Addressing these lacunae in the scholarly discourse contributes future research endeavors to adopt a more integrated and comprehensive approach. From this point of view, this study aims to address these scholarly gaps by advocating for a more integrated and comprehensive approach. In doing so, it aspires to contribute to future research initiatives by providing a thorough and contemporary foundation for the exploration and understanding of DRs. Another aim of this study is to illuminate the reflections of this transformation and shed light on DRs as a comprehensive discipline.

To achieve these aims, an extensive literature review is conducted, entailing a qualitative assessment of DRs across the dimensions of academic research waves, theoretical frameworks, and thematic developments. Within this framework, the initial step entails chronologically delineating the development of DRs, thereby discerning the trajectories of academic inquiry. This analysis seeks to identify not only the temporal evolution, but also the broader trends that have shaped the field. Subsequently, attention will be directed towards the salient theoretical paradigms that serve as the foundation for DRs, accompanied by an exploration of the contextual domains in which these frameworks find applications. Finally, the study undertakes a categorization of the dominant themes in the field and assesses the ways in which these themes have emerged in the landscape of DRs, and in what ways they have been addressed in current work.

The Development of Digital Religion Studies: A Brief Overview

As an academic research field, DRs delve into the intricate intersections of digital media, digital culture, and religion. This multidisciplinary domain encompasses a wide array of topics,

including the examination of how religious communities engage with the Internet, the modes through which religiosity is expressed in digital media, and the degree to which digital engagement can be perceived as a spiritual endeavor. With a history spanning nearly quarter century, this field has been referred to by various names, such as cyber religious studies, which serve to describe the novel manifestations of religious practices that emerge through computer networks and virtual religious studies, underscoring the inherent tensions within these practices. The term DRSs have been employed to characterize the examination of the technological and cultural sphere, particularly as scholars have contemplated the blending or blurring of online and offline religious spaces. This convergence gives rise to a hybrid landscape, in which offline religious contexts intersect with newly emerging online spaces (Campbell, 2017a, p. 228; Campbell, 2017b, pp. 16–17; Campbell and Altenhofen, 2016, p. 1). In this context, DRSs have emerged as a burgeoning interdisciplinary research field driven by the objective of understanding the extent to which traditional religious practices adapt to digital environments. In addition, it seeks to elucidate how digital culture informs the religious activities of offline religious groups within the tapestry of everyday life. In this respect, DRSs seek to explore the intricate connections and interrelationships between online and offline religious experiences while acknowledging how these contexts evolve, merge, coalesce ambiguously, and occasionally transgress traditional boundaries over time (Campbell and Evolvi, 2019, p. 6).

DRSs at their core highlight the increasing recognition that digital media and digital culture have become integral aspects of daily life, serving as a common platform for religious engagement. In this context, it is frequently asserted that digital culture presents a distinct phenomenon within the realm of religion. This distinct nature prompts an examination across various scientific disciplines. DRSs, primarily situated at the intersection of media and communication studies and theology studies, facilitate the convergence of diverse academic fields, including sociology (especially the sociology of religion), psychology, philosophy, and economics, within scholarly discourse. From this perspective, DRSs have an interdisciplinary framework (Campbell and Tsuria, 2022b, p. 7).

DRSs, which have developed simultaneously with Internet studies, include a wide range of research strategies, technological approaches, and studies that examine the effects of digital media on culture from a religious perspective (Campbell and Evolvi, 2019, p. 5). The first examples of studies in the field can be found in the mid-1990s. The articles written at this time are seen as the starting point of DRSs. For example, Gregory P. Grieve (1995), who investigated the interaction of neo-Pagans with the Internet, drew attention to the fact that religious communities could use the Internet as a space. A year later, Stephen D. O’Leary’s *Cyberspace as Sacred Space* (1996) and *The Unknown God of the Internet* (1996), co-authored by O’Leary and Brenda E. Brasher, were the first quality works in the literature on the Internet and religion. Both studies focused on the ways in which Christianity is presented on the Internet and argued that religious practices can also be practiced online. These early studies emphasized the rise of religion from paganism to Christianity on the Internet (Campbell and Tsuria, 2022b, p. 2).

The field of Internet and religion studies experienced significant growth until the mid-2000s and was predominantly referred to as cyber religion studies. In fact, up to that point, the terms Internet and cyberspace were often used interchangeably (Campbell, 2012b, p. 681; Campbell and Evolvi, 2019, p. 6). Cyber-religion was employed to depict religious practices, congregations, and manifestations of community that emerged within online platforms. This phenomenon gave rise to various concepts such as cyber-faith, cyber-church, and cyber-temple. Research in this domain has focused on examining the process of articulating religious practices and religious content in the cyberspace, as well as its potential impacts on religious expression and belief (Campbell and Tsuria, 2022b, p. 3). In the subsequent years, the study of cyber-religion expanded its scope beyond institutional religions, including Islam², Judaism, and Buddhism, to encompass new religious movements. Indeed, inquiries into how different religions are represented or negotiated online,

the ethical and moral challenges posed by digital technologies, whether the Internet can serve as a means to reconnect individuals with spirituality in postmodern societies, and how traditional forms of religiosity are reflected in online environments have all emerged as central themes within the field of cyber religion (Campbell, 2012b, p. 681).

By the mid-2000s, with the advent of the Internet ushering in a proliferation of technologies collectively referred to as new or digital media, it became increasingly apparent that constraining the study of the intersection between religion and technology solely to the realms of the Internet or cyberspace was overly limiting. Consequently, there emerged a conceptual expansion aimed at encompassing novel subject matter and research domains. Initially, the term “virtual religion” was favored over the designation of “cyber religion studies”, although the former proved somewhat problematic due to its association with virtual reality. Subsequently, scholars adopted the term “digital religion” as a more comprehensive framework for delineating and investigating the interplay between digital media, digital culture, and religion (Campbell, 2021b, p. 8; Campbell and Evolvi, 2019, p. 6). With the introduction of the term “digital religion”, the field of research concerned with the Internet and its relationship with religion underwent a broad redefinition, coming to be widely known as DRs. Since the 2010s, this academic domain has evolved to prioritize the development of research theories and methodologies (Campbell, 2021b, p. 10; Campbell and Tsuria, 2022b, p. 11). However, in tandem with the proliferation of social media platforms and the ascendancy of digital media as the most prominent means of communication, the focus of DRs have significantly shifted towards these platforms. Over the subsequent decade, this field has burgeoned and enriched by the contributions of scholars from diverse perspectives and academic disciplines.

As the decade ended, the examination of digital religion underwent a transformative process in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Historically, numerous religious communities had been hesitant to engage with technology or to recognize the significance of comprehending digital culture. However, the advent of lockdowns in the year 2020 compelled many of these communities to transition to online platforms, necessitating their acquisition of digital literacy for religious purposes and prompting them to contemplate the synchronization and equilibrium of online and offline religious practices. This sudden shift provided a considerable impetus to the field of DRs. Presently, DRs have become a prevalent topic of exploration across diverse academic domains, including traditional ones such as media and communication studies, philosophy of technology, and theology, as well as emerging disciplines like mobile media studies and information science (Campbell, 2021b, p. 11). The DRs continues to evolve as a dynamic research field, encompassing a broad spectrum of subjects. These include ethical inquiries arising from technology-influenced worldviews like artificial intelligence and transhumanism, ethnographic investigations into how religious communities employ social media, explorations of virtual reality, and the exploration of emerging facets of digital culture such as the Internet of things and big data (Campbell and Tsuria, 2022b, p. 2).

As the field of DRs have evolved within the academic sphere, it has given rise to a plethora of research trends, each aligning with distinct perspectives on the Internet from both the general public and scholarly circles. These evolving trends have been systematically categorized into discrete waves by researchers dedicated their efforts to this domain, and their examination has been delineated into four distinct thematic categories.

Waves of Academic Research in Digital Religion Studies

Morten T. Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg (2005) have characterized the development of academic research on the early relationship between religion and the Internet into three research waves. In subsequent years, Mia Lövheim and Heidi A. Campbell (2017) attempted to add a fourth wave to this categorization. Accordingly, in the field of DRs, the first wave is described as

descriptive, the second wave as categorical, the third wave as theoretical, and the fourth wave as integrative (Campbell, 2006, p. 8; Campbell and Altenhofen, 2016, p. 3; Campbell and Sheldon, 2022, p. 76; Campbell and Tsuria, 2022b, p. 10).

In the initial wave of research, commonly known as the descriptive phase, academic investigations into the religious utilization of the Internet approached the surreal potential of the digital communication medium with either utopian fascination or dystopian apprehension (Højsgaard and Warburg, 2005, p. 5). These early studies were primarily concerned with the inquiry of whether the Internet constituted an emancipatory utopia, leading towards a global village, a forum devoid of oppression and a liberation of humanity, or conversely, a bleak dystopia that estranged individuals from society, ultimately thrusting them into the “wasteland of reality” (Grieve, 2022, pp. 33–34). In this context, the inaugural wave of research, commencing in the mid-1990s, predominantly sought to define and chronicle online religious practices within the paradigms of utopian and dystopian frameworks. Indeed, most of this research was founded upon ethnographic and textual analyses of online religious activities, documenting the emergence of novel forms of community and ritual (Campbell, 2021a, p. 11; Campbell and Evolvi, 2019, p. 6; Tsuria et al., 2017, p. 79). Moreover, the majority of investigations during this first wave were centered on individual case studies, aiming to comprehensively elucidate and scrutinize these cases from all angles (Campbell and Altenhofen, 2016, p. 4). Therefore, it can be posited that the first wave of research exhibited analogous characteristics to early studies in computer-mediated communication (Campbell, 2011, p. 236), and this pattern persisted until the onset of the new millennium.

In the second wave of research, which commenced in the 2000s and was structured categorically, researchers began to acknowledge the crucial role of computer networks and digital technologies. This period witnessed a shift towards a more pragmatic approach, wherein it became evident that the Internet, while a potent technological tool, did not operate in isolation as the sole determinant of religious evolution. Instead, scholars began to recognize the substantial influence of individual experiences on this transformative process (Højsgaard & Warburg, 2005, p. 9). In essence, second wave research underscored that technology, by itself, lacked the capacity to unilaterally shape the trajectory of religion. It underscored the active roles played by individuals and institutions that harnessed technology, fostering the development of what we now understand as digital religion. This perspective ushered in a more intricate and nuanced comprehension of digital religion (Campbell and Altenhofen, 2016, p. 12; Campbell and Evolvi, 2019, p. 6). As a matter of fact, research efforts pivoted towards a heightened examination of how individuals and communities engaged in religious practices within the digital realm. One of the prominent questions that emerged was the exploration of how online digital communities either aligned with or challenged traditional offline communities (Campbell, 2011, p. 240). To address inquiries of this nature and others like it, researchers devised specific typologies to categorize digital religious practices, employing various methodological approaches such as online surveys and online ethnography (Campbell, 2021a, p. 11; Tsuria et al., 2017, p. 79). With the advancement of web technologies during this second wave of research, the proliferation of online worship spaces became conspicuous, giving rise to the emergence of virtual temples and cyber churches. Additionally, personal blogs experienced a significant surge in usage for religious purposes during this period. This development prompted researchers to acknowledge that relying solely on data from single-case studies was inadequate for making comprehensive claims about digital religious practices. For this reason, there was a growing need for conducting more comparative case studies (Campbell and Altenhofen, 2016, p. 6).

The third wave of research is distinguished by a shift towards theoretical and interpretive endeavors, in which scholars’ endeavor to identify methodologies and instruments for scrutinizing data and assessing discoveries within the broader framework of theoretical paradigms. In this wave, online studies pertaining to rituals, communities, and identities have been scrutinized in

greater depth, and novel qualitative-oriented approaches have been employed to explore how the integration of the Internet into everyday life influences and shapes digital religious practices. Within this context, scholars have drawn deductions regarding the manifestation of online religious practices, such as religious rituals, communities, and identities. Furthermore, a fresh line of research has emerged, centering on the impact of the Internet on religious authorities, the empowerment of new religious leaders, and the opportunities it provides for traditional leaders to reassert their influence in the online sphere. This has also given rise to novel theoretical and methodological frameworks. For instance, some scholars have sought to furnish systematic interpretive tools for analyzing the negotiation patterns between offline religious communities and digital media, as well as for obtaining a nuanced comprehension of online authority negotiations (Campbell and Altenhofen, 2016, p. 7; Evolvi, 2021, p. 4; Tsuria et al., 2017, p. 79). With the advent of a third wave of research, the field of DRSs have experienced growth in terms of both quantity and quality. The advancements brought about by Web 2.0, technology, and social media have played significant roles in this development. In this way, third wave research has extended beyond mere attempts to chart the landscape of online religious life and has instead delved into how online-offline religious interaction and integration have evolved concerning the themes of ritual, identity, community, and authority. (Campbell, 2011, p. 241; Grieve, 2022, p. 34).

The ultimate phase of DRSs, identified as the fourth wave, places greater emphasis on examining ritual, identity, community, and authority, while delving into the utilization of digital media in everyday life. Research within this fourth wave, encompassing contemporary DRSs, delves into more specialized subjects such as mobile religious applications, digital religious video games, digital religious symbolism, and digital religious memes/caps. This wave is characterized as an integrated or convergent stage, as it consolidates the insights gained from the previous three waves, culminating in a more mature field of study (Campbell and Tsuria, 2022b, p. 10). Over the past decade, the concept of digital religion has taken center stage in this wave. Within this framework, refined methodological approaches³ have emerged, leading to the development of new typologies for classification and interpretation, with a particular focus on the hybrid or blended aspects of digital religion that bridge the online-offline divide. In addition to addressing existential, ethical, and political dimensions of digital religion, this wave has also brought attention to issues of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality (Campbell, 2021a, p. 11; Campbell and Altenhofen, 2016, p. 12; Campbell and Evolvi, 2019, p. 7).

As can be seen, DRSs have been categorized into four research waves. Although each of these waves offers an important perspective on the development of DRSs, it is possible to say that all waves, although they have a chronological aspect, are currently continuing their development or that the new wave does not negate the previous wave. This is because the methodological orientations present in the first wave are also preferred in current DRSs. Similarly, it cannot be said that the theoretical orientations of the second wave were completely rejected or ignored. Therefore, it would be more accurate to consider all research waves as part of the DRSs process.

In addition to the four established waves (descriptive, categorical, theoretical, and integrated) that delineate the evolutionary trajectory of DRSs, there is a growing recognition in the literature that a fifth wave is emerging (Phillips et al., 2019). This nascent wave is characterized by its convergence with various disciplines, including musicology, race studies, and feminist studies, within the domain of DRSs (Campbell and Tsuria, 2022b, p. 10). Given the ceaseless advancements in digital technologies, it is inevitable that new waves will continue to manifest. Therefore, it can be anticipated that the fifth wave will further mature in the forthcoming years as diverse academic disciplines increasingly engage with the field of DRSs.

Theoretical Approaches in Digital Religion Studies

The progression of research within the field of DRs have given rise to the exploration of distinct inquiries, guided by a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. As the field continues to expand, these approaches are interlinked and serve as influential points of reference. To address these questions, certain theoretical frameworks have been employed and new theories have been formulated. The prominent theoretical perspectives on DRs are media ecology, mediation, mediatization, religious social shaping of technology (RSST), and hypermediation. Each of these approaches provides a distinct lens through which to comprehend the intricate relationship between religion, media, and culture, facilitating diverse assessments of how religion operates within the domain of digital media and digital culture (Campbell, 2017b, pp. 17–18; Campbell and Evolvi, 2019, p. 7; Lundby and Evolvi, 2022, p. 235). Notably, many of these approaches initially found their roots in conventional studies on media and religion, subsequently undergoing adaptation for the context of DRs. For instance, mediation and mediatization theories were originally devised to frame the interplay between traditional media and religion. However, there are also approaches like the RSST and hypermediation, which were developed explicitly to address the examination of digital religion. Each of these approaches is profoundly context dependent. For this reason, it is more meaningful to briefly highlight their significance within the realm of DRs rather than delve into exhaustive details for each.

The concept of media ecology, which centers on the impact of media and communication technologies on individuals, was initially formulated by the renowned media theorist Neil Postman. However, it was through the seminal contributions of Marshall McLuhan that this concept truly acquired its depth and significance (Strate, 2004, pp. 3–4). McLuhan, celebrated for his notion of electronic networks constituting a “global village,” revitalized the field of media and communication studies with his famous assertion that “the medium is the message” during the pre-digital, or traditional media, era. These conceptualizations, propositions, or ideas that McLuhan developed for comprehending media, particularly focusing on television, exerted considerable influence on the evolution of media ecology as a theoretical framework and facilitated its adaptation to the digital media landscape in subsequent years. Media ecology theory underscores that media serves as a medium and should be examined as such, while also acknowledging its formative influence on individuals. This presumption subsequently gave rise to the concept of technological determinism, which was significantly informed by McLuhan’s studies. The recognition that media ecology and the resultant technological determinism perspectives could be applied to the realm of digital media has become increasingly evident over time. Within this context, the media ecology theory employed in studies related to digital religion has been shaped by strategies developed primarily for religious institutions, especially the Church, to effectively harness media for the dissemination of religious messages to adherents (Lundby and Evolvi, 2022, pp. 236–237). Thereby, religion has become an integral component of the media ecology, evolving substantially in consonance with the dynamics of this ecological milieu. As a result, research endeavors investigating the interplay between digital media and religion have benefited immensely from the insights and principles advanced by this ecological approach.

Mediation is an additional concept and theoretical framework that finds frequent application in the field of media and communication studies. In essence, mediation pertains to the tangible acts of communication conducted through a medium within a specific social context (Hjarvard, 2011, p. 124). To put it differently, it does not denote the direct enactment of the communication act but rather its realization through an intermediary medium. From a theoretical standpoint, mediation centers on the communication processes that revolve around the relationship between individuals and culture. This theory posits that media serve as vehicles for the creation and expression of cultural meanings. In the context of media and religion studies, scholars such as Gordon Lynch, Birgit Meyer, and Stewart Hoover have adapted mediation theory, primarily guided by the notion

that media constitutes an intrinsic component of religious practice rather than merely a tool for influencing religion (Campbell and Evolvi, 2019, p. 7; Lundby and Evolvi, 2022, p. 237). Within the realm of DRSs, this theory has primarily been employed to explore the mediation of religious content or meaning. The mediation of meaning provides a vantage point for investigating individuals' religious experiences through the narratives, symbols, and cultures propagated via digital media. This approach aids researchers in discerning how digital media can mold religious identities and in pinpointing the contexts and mechanisms through which religion is constructed or disseminated within the digital cultural milieu (Campbell, 2017b, pp. 19–21).

Mediatization theory is another prominent theoretical framework frequently employed in the study of digital religion. It centers on the process through which transformations in media and communication disseminate across and reshape other societal domains, including politics, religion, and consumption. Regarded as a quintessential postmodern phenomenon, mediatization is not only a prevalent lens in traditional media research but also a salient framework in digital media studies (Lövheim and Hjarvard, 2019, p. 207; Morgan, 2011, pp. 137–138). Mediatization denotes an enduring process in which societal and cultural institutions, as well as modes of interaction, undergo transformation owing to the escalating influence of the media. It scrutinizes the dynamics of change within media and communication while simultaneously adopting a critical perspective toward the societal and cultural shifts engendered by the media (Couldry and Hepp, 2013, p. 197; Hjarvard, 2011, p. 124).

The theory of the mediatization of religion aims to provide insight into the mechanisms by which changes in religion manifest themselves at both the structural level and in the realm of social interaction (Lövheim & Hjarvard, 2019, p. 208). With the integration of religion into the media landscape, a process of mediatization has also been set in motion. This process is marked by several discernible stages. First and foremost, the media has assumed a pivotal, if not the predominant, role as a source of information pertaining to religious matters. Functioning as both a producer and disseminator of religious experiences, the media has emerged as a significant platform for the expression and dissemination of individual beliefs. However, it is important to acknowledge that religious content and experiences are molded to align with the demands of popular media genres. Established religious symbols, rituals, and beliefs are repurposed as the raw material for the media's storytelling, addressing issues that span the secular and sacred spectrum (often referred to as the "post-secular"⁴ context). Ultimately, the media, as a cultural and social medium, has assumed numerous cultural and social functions that were traditionally the domain of institutionalized religions. It now provides spiritual and moral guidance while fostering a sense of community and belonging (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 24; Hjarvard, 2011, p. 124). Concurrently, mediatization theory emphasizes the role of the Internet as a media institution that shapes popular conceptions of religion and consequently molds religious discourses within the public sphere. In this regard, the theory proves instrumental in analyzing the interactions between religious institutions and digital media and how these interactions shape perceptions of religious authority. Indeed, mediatization theory underscores the novel public spaces created by digital media where individuals or groups can express their opinions in ways that were previously unattainable within their religious contexts (Campbell, 2017b, pp. 19–21). Consequently, the theory is increasingly employed in the study of digital religion to probe the religious implications and impacts of digital media.

The concept of the religious-social shaping of technology (RSST⁵), also known as "negotiation theory," represents a relatively recent addition to the field of DRSs, offering a comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing how individuals and religious communities make decisions regarding their interactions with digital media. This approach endeavors to uncover the processes that influence a user's religious engagement with any given technology and to identify the specific conditions that may result in changes in technology use or belief because of such engagement. Fundamental to this approach is the underlying assumption that the success,

failure, or adaptation of a particular technology within a specific user group is contingent not only upon the inherent attributes of the technology itself but also on the users' capacity to socially construct the technology in accordance with their moral and spiritual objectives (Campbell, 2012a, pp. 84–85; Campbell, 2017b, p. 20). What sets the RSST approach apart is its commitment to delving deeper into the intricate ways in which spiritual, moral, and theological practices guide the negotiation of technology. As such, it strives to encapsulate a more profound understanding of the role that history and tradition play in the deliberative processes of religious communities. In essence, this approach entails not merely scrutinizing how contemporary values and beliefs influence motivations for technology use, but also uncovering the historical origins and rhetorical foundations of these discourses within a given religious community (Campbell, 2010, p. 59). Originally formulated for application in the study of digital religion, it serves to elucidate the nature of religious communities' engagement with digital media by examining their traditions and histories, their core values and principles, their decisions concerning the adoption, rejection, or adaptation of technology, and their discourses concerning technology utilization (Campbell, 2017b, p. 21; Campbell and Evolvi, 2019, p. 7).

The final approach used in DRSs is hypermediation. The development of the Internet and the proliferation of digital media has enabled the expansion of mediation in the context of online spaces. For this reason, media theorist Carlos Scolari (2015) conceptualized the online mediation of communication as hypermediation. Rather than referring to a specific product or media genre, Scolari frames the concept as referring to the complex web of social processes of production, consumption and exchange that take place in environments characterized by multidimensional and multi-actor media technologies and languages. In contrast, hypermediation is understood more as the mediation of cognitive, social and cultural processes generated by digital technologies. This is because hypermediation processes make sense with digital media and digital culture characterized by multimedia or transmedia environments (wikis, blogs, social media, etc.), hypertextual structures and generators (pp. 1098–1099). The concept of hypermediation has been adapted to digital religion by scholars at the Center for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado Boulder (Evolvi, 2021, p. 12). In particular, Giulia Evolvi (2018) used the concept as a theoretical approach in her research on digital religion, framing it as “hypermediated religious spaces” characterized by rapid and emotional exchanges between online and offline spaces (p. 15). As such, hypermediation has been interpreted as a critique of classical secularization theory and religious change has been contextualized through hypermediated spaces, taking into account the propositions of post-secular theory (Evolvi, 2021, p. 17). According to Evolvi (2018), who states that religious change usually takes place through spaces, hypermediated spaces function as digital spaces where the trajectories of today's religious change can be traced. As a matter of fact, digital spaces increase religious acts that occur in physical spaces, enable the formation of digital religious communities, and help people discuss their religiosity (p. 4). Therefore, in terms of DRSs, it is understood that hypermediation is perceived as mediated digital spaces that enable the realization of religious experiences and are used functionally in tracing the trajectories of religious changes occurring in these spaces.

Each of the previously mentioned approaches has been employed in diverse ways within the field of DRSs and remains relevant to this day. In addition to these approaches, various theories are also applied in the DRSs (Çiçek, 2022). Nevertheless, these extensively utilized approaches, which have formed a substantial citation network, are deemed significant for framing the contexts in which DRSs are investigated.

Themes in Digital Religion Studies

DRSs have evolved over time, delving into themes, topics, and context. Communication scholar Heidi A. Campbell (2013b), who played a pioneering role in defining and establishing DRSs as an academic research field that focuses on the relationship between digital media, digital culture,

and religion, categorized this field into six themes in her edited work titled *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. Her categorization was based on her previous research and discussions with other researchers in the field. These themes are ritual, identity, authenticity, community, authority, and, in the broadest sense, religion⁶. In the second edition of the book, *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in digital media*, which she co-edited with Ruth Tsuria (2022a), Campbell added a new theme called embodiment. While each of these themes can be considered a separate research area within DRs, it is also possible to examine them collectively in a comprehensive study.

Ritual

The dynamic nature of digital culture enables individuals to engage in and encounter religious rituals beyond traditional settings. In this way, the structure of these traditions, along with the meanings attributed to them, can undergo transformation. For instance, memorialization rituals have expanded to encompass a wide spectrum of practices within the digital landscape. These practices range from the establishment of digital cemeteries, allowing individuals to commemorate their pets or loved ones, to the emergence of online temples that blend secular and sacred (post-secular) elements (Campbell, 2012, p. 78). Moreover, the realm of digital religious rituals extends beyond these examples. It encompasses activities such as individuals reading, watching, listening to, discussing, or writing about religious content on digital media, as well as the acquisition of religious materials like books and movies. Furthermore, participation in virtual tours of religious sites, such as the Kaaba or the Vatican, the utilization of digital tools to locate religious centers like mosques and churches, and engagement in collective religious practices such as hatim groups and prayer chains, all constitute forms of digital religious rituals (Dawson, 2005, p. 15). The digital landscape, with its evolving capabilities and interconnectedness, provides a platform where traditional religious practices coexist with innovative expressions of spirituality, thus reshaping the landscape of religious engagement and participation.

The exploration of the theme of ritual holds a pivotal position within the realm of DRs. In these scholarly inquiries, religious rituals have frequently been scrutinized, particularly through the lens of authenticity. Helland (2013), contends that a substantial portion of the predominant issues pertaining to digital rituals has revolved around the twin pillars of authenticity and authority within the broader context of digital religion. Indeed, several pressing questions have crystallized from these inquiries, encompassing queries such as:

“Are online rituals authentic expressions of religious rituals? Can a virtual pilgrimage genuinely constitute a sacred journey? Is it imperative for participants, creators, or hosts of online rituals to possess some form of religious accreditation? Does physical presence hold no significance in the participation of religious rituals conducted online? Do online rituals possess the efficacy to facilitate genuine spiritual transformations, or are they perceived as superficial and lacking in transformative potential? Are online rituals acknowledged as genuine rituals within the confines of religious traditions?” (p. 25).

These and akin questions have been explored across diverse contexts throughout the successive waves of research in DRs. In more recent studies, the focus has shifted towards an examination of digital media itself and its structural role within the sphere of digital religious rituals. Consequently, scholars have delved into the concept of media as a religious space, scrutinizing the rituals enacted within this space, which encompass facets such as nationality, identity, and politics (Helland and Kienzl, 2022, p. 49). The evolving landscape of DRs continues to offer fresh insights into the multifaceted relationship between technology, ritual, and spirituality, thereby enriching our comprehension of the intricate dynamics at play in the digital age.

Contemporary ritual studies within the field of DRs exhibit a diverse range of focuses. Recent investigations have delved into the manifestation of material religion online, exploring digital religious practices, and artifacts (Campbell and Connelly, 2020; DeWall and Van Tongeren,

2022; Wolf et al., 2022). Furthermore, more specialized inquiries provide insights into the execution of religious rituals through social media platforms (Åhman & Thorén, 2021; Anwar & Mujib, 2022; Eken, 2020; Ferguson et al., 2021). However, the predominant trend in recent years within digital ritual studies in DRS has been an exploration of how religions grapple with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ben-Lulu, 2021; Cornejo-Valle and Martin-Andino, 2023; Huygens, 2021; Jacobi et al., 2022; Kapoor et al., 2022; Lorea, 2020). This predominant thematic orientation towards COVID-19 can be understood as a response to the limitations imposed by lockdown periods, wherein individuals are deprived of physical spaces to engage in their religious rituals. The exigency of the pandemic has prompted a surge in scholarly inquiries focused on the adaptation of religious rituals to the digital realm, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between technology and spirituality during a period of unprecedented global challenges.

Authenticity

Authenticity in online Internet research generally focuses on whether social actions have the same quality as their offline counterparts. This focus is also followed in DRSS. In these studies, authenticity is mainly examined in terms of religious rituals and answers are sought to questions such as “why are online rituals not considered as real as offline rituals?”, “can we talk about a sharp distinction between real (offline) and virtual (online), is this distinction an analytical and correct distinction?”, “can people’s presence and experiences in virtual environments be considered real and authentic?”, “can digital space be considered as a real and authentic space?”. While the phenomenon of authenticity, which is examined around such questions, was frequently discussed in the early years of DRSS, with the maturity of the field as a research field, the assumption that authenticity already exists has become widespread (Radde-Antweiler, 2013, pp. 88–89). In other words, there seems to be a consensus on the idea that religious content and rituals in digital media are authentic and real and can be considered authentic in this respect.

The idea of seeing digital religious content and actions as authentic poses some challenges. Given the relationship between online and offline through the human body, the dichotomy of the virtual and the real plays an important role in judging the online space as authentic or as mere simulation. Much of the research on digital religion has criticized this dichotomous relationship in various ways. However, trustworthiness is also cited as one of the issues that arise with the acceptance of digital media as authentic. In digital media, users are confronted with huge data sets that they need to categorize and evaluate. This leads to deepening skepticism about which data is trustworthy or not. Given the sheer volume of digital religious data, the problem of trustworthiness also arises for digital religious content (Radde-Antweiler, 2013, p. 98). Therefore, it can be said that in order to ensure authenticity, the reliability of the source of digital religious content is also important.

On the other hand, in digital religion research, the question of what makes religious content and ritual authentic is no longer a matter for theologians or theologians to decide but has evolved into a phenomenon shaped by the digital religious idioms of users themselves. In other words, the authenticity of religious contents, practices or rituals is not only determined by religious experts, but also by the producers who produce religious contents and at the same time consume them by experiencing them. This is because producers free religious contents and rituals from a static objectivity, mediatize and mediatize them in a more subjective way, and thus give them a different authentic structure (Alıcı, 2021, pp. 88–89). The intensity of this authenticity varies in line with the beliefs and orientations of individuals and is relative.

Given its inherently relative nature, authenticity is one of the less-explored themes in the realm of DRSS. Nevertheless, despite their relatively understudied status, contemporary research on DRSS has continued to address the theme of authenticity. Current authenticity inquiries in the DRS literature have concentrated on several key aspects. Notable among these are explorations into whether online visitation of sacred sites can be deemed authentic, the authenticity of online

practices within religious communities, and the assessment of authenticity in the online broadcasting of sacred worship and rituals (Golan and Martini, 2019; Iqbal, 2020; Przywara et al., 2021). These studies have contributed to a growing body of work aimed at understanding the nuanced dimensions of authenticity in the context of digitally mediated religious experiences.

Identity

The impact of digital culture on the formation and presentation of identity has been and continues to be one of the main topics and research areas of DRSs. In today's societies, the circulation of different beliefs and worldviews and the technical mediation of social interaction that challenges the traditional role of religion in individual and collective identity formation are increasingly mediated by digital technologies. Thus, identity as an important theme in the study of digital religion offers important clues to help understand how digital culture is transforming religion (Lövheim, 2013, p. 41; Lövheim and Lundmark, 2022, p. 56). In fact, with the increase in the social prevalence of Internet and computer technologies, the areas of representation of identity have expanded and digital identities have started to form. The possibilities and consequences of using the Internet, which provides opportunities such as gaming, entertainment, social sharing and self-representation, have brought new issues such as changes in the understanding of authentic identity. Digital media, which increases individuals' expectations of openness and intimacy, allows them to reflect their private moments in a public space through texts and visuals. In addition, individuals who develop the ability to represent themselves and to monitor and regulate this representation through digital media have the opportunity to have more control over their representative identities (Lövheim, 2013, pp. 44–45). This is also the case for the formation process of religious identities. Individuals' participation in religious rituals in digital media, their involvement in religious communities and their participation in religious interaction through these communities affect the process of shaping their religious identities. The contexts in which this process develops has been one of the main issues that DRSs focus on.

In DRSs, religious identity has generally been addressed in the context of the relationship between online and offline identities. Indeed, the focus of early research in the field was on the question of how traditional, i.e., offline, forms of religious identity are constructed in the digital, i.e., online space. This question has been attempted to be answered by focusing on various religious minority groups and sects in subsequent waves of DRSs (Campbell and Evolvi, 2019, p. 8; Lövheim, 2013, pp. 45–47). Most of the studies focusing on the theme of identity in current DRSs show that the formation of religious identities in digital culture takes place differently from traditional and modern cultures. This is because religious identities are shaped by a process that is integrated into the discursive, social, economic and technological possibilities of digital culture, rather than maturing by following a specific tradition based on a geographical location as in the traditional and modern period. In this respect, digital religious identities can be said to be mediatized individual autobiographies. This increases the possibility of individual representation and expression of religion. Thus, it shows that religious identity in digital culture has evolved as a social process that is deeply connected to the individuals' need to stay connected, find meaning and take action in everyday life (Lövheim and Lundmark, 2022, pp. 66–67). However, today, the online and offline contexts of religious identity are not sharply demarcated and are fluid. In this context, it can be said that religiosity, which is a reflection of religious identity, has started to be experienced simultaneously in both physical and digital environments and complement each other (Dereli, 2020).

Even today, studies of religious identity in the field of DRSs, which function as a complement to religious identity and have a fluid structure, are being addressed in the context of theories of secularization (Guzek and Bobkowski, 2023). However, research has also focused on specific issues. Among the various foci are the changing religious identities of Muslim women in online

environments (Agbarya and John, 2023); the role of religious symbols shared on social media in the formation of religious identities (Alif, 2023; Amir, 2019); the online religious identity formation of contemporary youth under the influence of postmodern cultural phenomena (Khlysheva et al., 2020); the relationship between sectarian online hate speech and religious identity (Siegel and Badaan, 2020); and how students, teachers, and parents use social media platforms to incorporate religious identity into the educational space, learning experiences, and classroom exchanges (Bhatia, 2021). From this perspective, the theme of identity emerges as one of the most intensively studied aspects in the field of DRSs, reflecting a rich and diverse scholarly landscape that explores the dynamic intersections between digital technologies and religious identity formation.

Community

Communities are a prominent theme in DRSs as one of the most important areas of research. Digital religious' communities correspond to the collective relations formed by individuals who come together in digital media for purposes such as reinforcing religious beliefs, performing religious rituals, exchanging ideas or participating in discussions on religious issues, and solving religious problems through digital media. The digitalization of religious communities' dates to the 1980s, the first years of the social use of the Internet. These communities, which first emerged based on the Christian religion, have started to be seen around other celestial and institutional religions since the 1990s. Since then, there has been an academic interest in studying the structure of digital religious communities (Campbell, 2006, p. 6; Campbell, 2013a, pp. 59–60). This interest can be seen in all waves of academic research in DRSs.

Much of the early research on digital culture focused on questions such as what happens in digital space, how social clusters in this space can be seen as communities, and how digital life affects individual and collective identities. The first studies to investigate the appearance of religious communities in digital media have generally attempted to understand and define the structure of these communities. Within this framework, researchers have attempted to identify, conceptualize and explain the rise of digital religious communities. By the late 1990s, research on digital communities became more specific, becoming more descriptive rather than descriptive of the phenomenon. As excitement about the transformative nature of the Internet began to wane, and a more realistic view of its positive and negative impacts on society emerged, research gained momentum towards critical forms of analysis. In the ensuing years, research has moved towards a theoretical and interpretive focus, developing around the online-offline dichotomy and focusing on the religious experiences of community members. Current research on digital religious communities, on the other hand, emphasizes the transcendence of the online-offline dichotomy and frames individuals' interactions with religious communities in both online and offline spaces as part of everyday life. Today, many different and new fields of research on digital religious communities have emerged, ranging from artificial intelligence to robotics, big data to metadata (Campbell, 2013a, pp. 60–64; Campbell and Sheldon, 2022, p. 104).

Contemporary studies on digital religious communities span the spectrum of institutional and non-institutionalized religious organizations or beliefs. This broad range of studies delves into the diverse ways in which religious communities navigate and operate in digital space. The studies investigate a spectrum of topics, including strategies employed by these communities for the establishment and maintenance of authority within the digital realm (Berger and Golan, 2023; Dozan and Hadi, 2020; Foulidi et al., 2020; Neumaier, 2019; Okun and Nimrod, 2020; Rizka, 2019). In the DRSs field, specific inquiries on the theme of community have addressed a range of nuanced issues. Some studies have delved into specific religious denominations and examined the digital dynamics within these particular religious communities (Badmatsyrenov et al., 2022; Okun and Nimrod, 2017; Rizvi Jafree, 2022). Additionally, gender differences within digital religious communities have become a focal point of investigation, shedding light on how diverse gender identities engage and contribute to these online religious spaces (Andok, 2019). Furthermore,

similar to other themes within DRSs, there is a discernible influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, evident in contemporary studies on digital religious communities (Oxholm et al., 2021; Shiba et al., 2023; Sukamto & Parulian, 2020). Scholars have explored the ways in which digital platforms have been utilized by religious communities to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between technology, communities, and the broader socio-religious landscape.

Authority

The concept of authority is at the center of debates about how religious communities are shaped within digital culture and how digital religious content producers influence or interact with traditional religious leaders. It can be argued that authority has become a framework for considering the ability of certain individuals or structures to gain or maintain influence over a particular group of people in digital culture. However, it is possible to say that the basic characteristics of authority are often not well defined. Indeed, the concept of religious authority suffers from the same lack of definition when used in DRSs. In other words, authority in digital religious studies brings with it an ambiguity as it is used as an inclusive term rather than evoking a clearly defined category (Campbell, 2021a, p. 18). Despite this ambiguity, the phenomenon of authority has been examined in various contexts since the first wave of research in digital religious studies. While the role of religious authority received relatively little attention in the early stages of DRSs, it has gained popularity in recent years, with research being conducted across a wide range of disciplines, including anthropology, theology, sociology, media and communication (Cheong, 2022, p. 87).

Early research focusing on the relationship between religious authority and digital culture has predominantly developed around two orientations. The first is the view that digital media challenge traditional religious authorities, while the second is that digital media reinforce or co-exist with traditional religious authorities. Based on these perspectives in digital religious authority research, it is possible to say that digital media have strengthening and weakening effects on religious authority, while it can also be stated that existing traditional religious authorities are maintained in digital media or that digital media serve a complementary function to these authorities. Therefore, when the question is asked, “does digital media median religious authority or strengthen it?”, the answer can be said to be positive in both respects (Campbell, 2021a, p. 48; Cheong, 2022, p. 96). This is because individuals or communities that contribute to the production of religious content in digital media can gain authority by following the content they produce. Moreover, traditional religious leaders may have the authority to establish their offline influence online as they adopt digital tools and platforms (Campbell, 2021a, p. 49). On the other hand, the lack of authority research in DRSs compared to other themes (Cheong, 2013, p. 73) makes it difficult to draw a clear framework on how the structure of religious authority is shaped in digital media.

Despite these inherent challenges, the discourse on authority within the DRSs field has achieved considerable volume. Research on authority predominantly centers on the strategies employed by representatives and leaders of Abrahamic religions in digital spaces (Giorgi, 2019; Kolodziejska and Neumaier, 2017; Selby and Sayeed, 2023; Tsuria and Campbell, 2021; Whyte, 2022; Yunus et al., 2023). Nevertheless, there are ongoing debates on how various religious communities and sects establish and sustain digital religious authority (Dozan and Hadi, 2020; Evolvi, 2020; Tabti, 2019). The examination of gender roles and women's identity within the context of authority constitutes an additional dimension of scholarly dialogue (Çelebioğlu, 2022; Muttaqin, 2020). Furthermore, the theme of authority was investigated as an integral component of the religious learning process within DRSs (Berger and Golan, 2023; Fakhruroji, 2019; Rizka, 2019; Solahudin and Fakhruroji, 2020). Studies on authority in the field of DRSs predominantly utilize online platforms, such as websites, social media, and mobile applications, as focal points for exploration. This

research landscape underscores the significance of digital spaces in shaping and contesting religious authority and illuminating the multifaceted dynamics at the intersection of technology, religion, and leadership in the contemporary digital era.

Embodiment

Embodiment refers to the reciprocal relationship between the body and its performances or the experiences as interactions that constitute it (Radde-Antweiler, 2022, p. 104). Accordingly, embodiment is understood to have a direct relationship with the human body. From a religious perspective, it can be said that embodiment is related to religious activities and rituals that people perform with their bodies. Religious practices and rituals often have a bodily, that is, a concrete aspect. In fact, being physically present in religious rites or rituals is of vital importance for religious communication and interaction. For example, individuals use their bodies to move in worship spaces, open their hands in prayer, move their gestures and facial expressions, touch the bodies of others, light candles, sing, etc. These and similar bodily engagements are the main means of worshipping the Creator, performing spiritual practices, sharing faith with others and building a community of believers. The more the senses and bodily activities are used in worship, the more opportunities there are to connect individually and collectively in rituals and rites whose main purpose is to enter the presence of the divine (Gasser, 2021, p. 182). In this respect, it can be said that the very presence of the body as a tangible entity in religious rituals determines the value of these rituals. However, with the digitalization of religion, the way has opened for religious rituals to be performed independently of the body. The realization of these rituals independent of the physical body and in “intangible” environments has led to discussions of embodiment that question the role of the individual’s body in digital religious studies.

It can be said that embodiment debates in DRs have developed in an ambivalent structure. It is often seen that religious activities performed in real and digital environments are evaluated separately from each other. It is stated that religious activities performed in the digital space as an abstract and disembodied space will not replace religious practices in the physical environment based on concrete and body but can only increase them as an additional activity. In this respect, it is seen that the phenomenon of embodiment in DRs focuses more on the real-virtual dichotomy, examines the context of the digital as a space, and develops by linking various issues such as mediatization and the problem of materiality (Radde-Antweiler, 2022, p. 104). Embodiment research, which is seen as a relatively new and undiscovered field of DRs, has a more linguistic and visual communication-oriented orientation (Gasser, 2021, p. 190). Especially with the conduct of research on video games and religion, the phenomenon of embodiment has become more evident (Zeiler, 2022a). However, the relationship between the digital afterlife and the body is also discussed around the phenomenon of embodiment (Lagerkvist, 2022). Nowadays, artificial intelligence is being examined and developed within the framework of new approaches to human beings such as post-humanism and transhumanism (Mercer and Trothen, 2021).

Conclusion

The examination of the digital religion phenomenon has undergone transformative evolution over the past twenty-five years, establishing itself as a distinct and intellectually robust field of inquiry known as Digital Religious Studies (DRs). Throughout its developmental trajectory, this emergent field has experienced successive waves of research, evolved theoretical approaches, and shifted its thematic foci. Scholars within DRs have rigorously investigated the intricate interplay between religious experiences and the digital environment, endeavoring to unravel the multifaceted dynamics that emerge from the intersection of digital culture and religious phenomena. Nevertheless, the current body of literature grapples with the conspicuous challenge of overarching fragmentation that impedes a comprehensive and cohesive comprehension of the field's developmental trajectory. This fragmentation is exacerbated by the lack of a unified

narrative that elucidates the field's evolutionary nuances. Thus, this study endeavored to bridge this gap by providing a scholarly framework that delineates the trajectory of DRSS.

Through an exhaustive qualitative assessment, this study identified four distinct phases in the evolution of research in the field of DRSS: descriptive, categorical, theoretical, and integrative. The trajectory of this evolution is further expounded by examining prominent theoretical frameworks that have crystallized within the discourse, including media ecology, mediation, mediatization, religious-social shaping of technology (RSST), and hypermediation. Moreover, a meticulous thematic categorization of existing literature underscores the extensive terrain covered by scholars in this field. Themes such as ritual, authenticity, identity, community, authority, and embodiment have emerged as pivotal focal points, illuminating the diverse dimensions explored within the DRSS landscape.

Concerning the chronology of academic research waves, this study delineated distinct phases in the evolution of DRSS. The initial stages primarily revolved around understanding the influence of technology on religious practices. However, subsequent waves have shifted their focus towards investigating how digital media fundamentally reconfigures the essence of religion itself. This evolutionary perspective has the potential to guide future researchers in the exploration of DRSS. In terms of theoretical approaches, this study surveyed various theoretical frameworks that engage with the multifaceted dimensions of digital religion encompassing social, cultural, and psychological facets.

Given the intricate nature of digital religion, the diversity of these approaches is paramount. This study underscores the necessity for further theoretical development to elucidate the way religion acquires meaning in the digital realm and how individuals interpret these novel experiences of digital religion. Particularly, considering the distinct ontological frameworks characterizing each institutional or non-institutional religion, along with their diverse sources of influence (such as sacred texts and authoritative figures), disparate teachings, and distinctive ritualistic practices, the imperative of tailored theoretical frameworks to understand the intricacies of each religious belief system and organizational structure becomes evident. Essentially, it can be posited that individualized theoretical approaches are required for comprehending the intricate interplay between each religion and its engagement with digital media and culture. This stems from the challenge of asserting that any singular theory can universally provide a nuanced perspective on the processes of digitalization within the realm of all religions.

When digital religious themes were examined, it was determined that each theme stood out as a separate research field. The discussions carried out within the framework of these themes have multidimensional and comprehensive depth. However, it can be said that the issues shaping the field are mostly shaped around the themes of rituals, identity, community, and authority. It is easy to see that there is voluminous academic literature centered on these themes. In the meantime, new themes such as embodiment will reveal the different contexts of DRSS. I believe that it would be meaningful for researchers who conduct studies in the field to pay special attention to these themes according to their areas of interest or the issues they problematize. In fact, I think that one of the prerequisites for bringing a more privileged perspective to the current problems in the field is to focus on these themes in more detail.

On the other hand, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Specifically, a deeper understanding can be attained by focusing on specific temporal periods or examining particular geographic regions. Additionally, by adopting a broader historical perspective to explore the development of digital religion, a more comprehensive understanding of long-term trends can be achieved. Future researchers can significantly contribute to the advancement of DRSS by extending the scope of work in this arena and offering diverse perspectives.

In conclusion, this study synthesized the existing body of knowledge in this field and provides guidance for future research endeavors by dissecting the developmental trajectory of DRSS. Comprehension of how the digital landscape shapes religion is a significant concern for contemporary societies, and this study has made substantive contributions towards a more profound understanding. Within the contours of this framework, it becomes evident that the maturation of DRSS contributes to a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the intricate interplay between digital and religious realms. The successive waves of research outlined in this study illuminate the chronological development of the field, whereas the identified theoretical approaches serve as indispensable conceptual tools, enabling a deeper analysis of the intersection between digital and religious phenomena. Furthermore, thematic categorization underscores the expansive scope of research in this burgeoning field.

Moving forward along the trajectory of DRSS, it has become imperative to cultivate the integration of diverse perspectives and sustain interdisciplinary collaboration. Such efforts are essential to ensure scientific enrichment and foster a holistic understanding of this dynamic field. Embracing this inclusive approach will undoubtedly contribute to the continued advancement and depth of knowledge within the evolving landscape of DRSS.

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Dijital Din Çalışmalarını Çerçevelemek: Akademik Araştırma Dalgaları, Teorik Yaklaşımlar ve Temalar

Yunus ERGEN*

Genişletilmiş Özet

Dini yaşamın ve pratiklerin dijital teknolojilerle birleşmesi ve internet ortamında dolaşıma girmesiyle, internet ve din ilişkisi akademik tartışmaların da odağına oturmuştur. İnternetin henüz çok yaygın olmadığı ilk dönemlerde daha çok metin tabanlı dini içeriklerin dolaşımında olduğu bir evreden, internetin ve paralel bir şekilde dijitalleşmenin toplumsal yaygınlığının artmasıyla birlikte hemen her türden dini içeriğe rastlanan “dijital” bir evreye geçilmiştir. Dahası artık kurumsal dinlerin yanı sıra akla gelebilecek her türlü dini yapılanmanın internetin ve dijital teknolojilerin sunduğu imkândan istifade etmeye başladığı görülmüştür. Böylelikle dini pratikler, dini kimlikler, dini topluluklar ve dini otoriteler internette farklı veçhelerde gün yüzüne çıkmaya ve bireyler tarafından deneyimlenmeye başlamıştır. Söz konusu bu veçhelerin nasıl bir görünüm arz ettiği, hangi bağlamlarda çerçvelendiği ve hangi problemleri doğurduğu gibi sorular araştırmacıların odaklandığı temel meseleler haline gelmiştir.

Erken dönem internet ve din ilişkisini inceleyen araştırmacılar, yürütmüş oldukları çalışmaları daha çok elektronik din, çevrimiçi din, siber din gibi kavramsallaştırmalar etrafında ele almıştır. Ancak dijital teknolojilerde yaşanan radikal gelişmeler neticesinde artan dijitalleşmenin etkisiyle söz konusu çalışmalar, daha çok “dijital din çalışmaları” adı altında yürütülmeye başlamıştır. Elbette sahanın böylesi bir kavramsallaştırmayla anılmasında dijital medyanın ve dijital kültürün uluslararası ölçekte hızlı gelişimi ve dönüşümü de etkili olmuştur. Yanı sıra dijital medyanın önemli bir parçasını oluşturan sosyal medya platformlarının geniş halk kesimleri tarafından kullanılmasıyla birlikte dini yaşamın bu platformlarda deneyimlenmesinin de yolu açılmıştır. Böylelikle dijital din çalışmaları, bir araştırma sahası olarak rüştünü ispat etmeye başlamış, kapsamı ve odaklandığı hususlar ise oldukça genişlemiştir.

Akademik bir araştırma sahası olarak yaklaşık çeyrek asırlık bir zaman diliminde gelişim kaydeden dijital din çalışmaları, bu süreç içerisinde çeşitli araştırma dalgaları, teorik yaklaşımlar ve temalar etrafında irdelenmiştir. Kronolojik bir yönü haiz olan sahadaki bu çalışmalar, dört araştırma dalgasına ayrılarak kavramsallaştırılmıştır. Bu dalgaların her birinde çeşitli disiplinlerden araştırmacılar, farklı bağlamlarda, farklı teorik yaklaşımlar ve temalar odağında araştırmalar yürüterek oldukça yüksek hacimli sayılabilecek ciddi bir alanyazının oluşmasına katkı sağlamıştır. Bu makale, söz konusu yazının nasıl bir görünüm arz ettiğini çerçevelemek ve sahada çalışma yürütecek araştırmacılara bir rehber oluşturmak amacıyla kaleme alınmıştır. Bu itibarla, makalede öncelikli olarak akademik bir araştırma sahası olarak dijital din çalışmalarının gelişimine yönelik kısa bir değerlendirme gerçekleştirilmiştir. Böylelikle sahanın gelişim sürecine bir projeksiyon tutulmuştur. Daha sonra, dijital din çalışmalarının olgunlaşma evrelerini ortaya koyan mevcut araştırma

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dalgalarına yer verilmiştir. Ardından, dijital din çalışmalarında öne çıkan teorik yaklaşımlar ele alınmış ve son olarak dijital dini temaların neler olduğuna değinilmiştir.

Tanımlayıcı, metodolojik, teorik ve bütünlük şeklinde belirginleşen araştırma dalgalarının her biri dijital din çalışmaları sahasının zamansal açıdan ayrı bir yönüne ışık tutmaktadır. Sözelimi tanımlayıcı dalgada, erken dönem internet ve din ilişkisi irdelenmiş, detaylı analizler ve değerlendirmelerden ziyade sahada “ne oluyor?” sorusuna yanıt aranmıştır. Bu bağlamda sahadaki ilk araştırmaların ana hedefi, mevcut durumun analizi ve tanımlanması olmuştur. Tanımlayıcı ekseninde gelişim kaydeden araştırmalar zamanla metodolojik açıdan farklılaşmaya başlamış ve geleneksel araştırma yöntemlerine çevrimiçi bir hüviyet kazandırılarak sahadaki uygulama gayreti içerisinde olunmuştur. Bu dalgayla birlikte söz konusu araştırmalar artık “ne oluyor?” sorusunun ötesine geçerek, “neden ve nasıl oluyor?” sorularını odağına almıştır. İnternet ve din ilişkisinden doğan problemlerin altında yatan gerekçeleri tespit etmeye çalışan metodolojik araştırmalara aynı zamanda teorik çerçeveler de oluşturulmuş ve araştırmaların odağı bu düzlemdeki tartışmalarla yoğunlaşarak zenginleşmiştir. Özellikle çevrimiçi ritüel, topluluk ve kimlik çalışmaları daha ayrıntılı olarak araştırılmış ve internetin günlük yaşamdaki yerleşikliğinin dijital dini pratiği nasıl etkilediği ve şekillendirdiği, nitel ağırlıklı yeni yöntemlerle incelenmiştir. Bu çerçevede araştırmacılar, dini ritüeller, topluluklar ve kimlikler gibi dijital din örneklerinin nasıl tezahür ettiğine yönelik çıkarımlarda bulunmuşlardır. Dahası internetin ve dijitalleşmenin dini otoritelere nasıl meydan okuduğu, yeni dini liderleri nasıl güçlendirdiği ve geleneksel liderlerin çevrimiçi etkilerini yeniden öne sürmeleri için ne gibi fırsat sunduğuna yönelik otorite temalı yeni araştırmalar da ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu durum, yeni teorik ve metodolojik çerçeveleri de şekillendirmiş ve araştırmalar daha “bütüncül” bir bakış açısıyla yürütülmeye başlamıştır. Dijital din çalışmalarının bu son dalgasında ritüel, kimlik, otantiklik, topluluk ve otoriteye daha yoğun bir biçimde odaklanılarak dijital medyanın ve kültürün gündelik hayattaki dini kullanım biçimleri -çevrimiçi-çevrimdışı dikotomisi de aşılarak irdelenmeye çalışılmıştır.

Dijital din çalışmalarının ikinci araştırma dalgasından itibaren öne çıkmaya başlayan teorik yaklaşımların, zaman içerisinde olgunlaşarak alandaki problemlerin çözümüne yönelik ciddi katkılar sağladığı anlaşılmaktadır. Çoğunluğu medya ve iletişim disiplini çerçevesinde geliştirilen bu teorik yaklaşımlar arasında medya ekolojisi, dolayım, medyatikleşme, teknolojinin dini-toplumsal şekillenmesi ve hiperdolayımın ön plana çıktığı ve önemli bir atfı oluşturduğu görülmektedir. Bu teoriler, her ne kadar medya ve iletişim disiplini çerçevesinde ortaya çıkmış olsalar da multidisipliner ve interdisipliner bir yönü bulunan dijital din çalışmalarının gelişimini etkilemiştir. Bununla birlikte sahadaki mevcut sorunların tespit edilmesine ve bu sorunlara yönelik çözüm önerilerinin geliştirilmesine hizmet etmiştir.

Dijital din çalışmalarının hangi konuları odağına aldığı ve bu konuların hangi bağlamlarda irdelendiği ise daha çok dijital dini temaların şekillendirilmesiyle açıklığa kavuşmuştur. Bu temalar sahadaki ilk araştırmaların gerçekleştirilmesiyle birlikte ortaya çıkmaya başlamıştır. Zamanla farklı disiplinlerden araştırmacıların sahaya girerek çeşitli araştırmalar yürütmesi sonucunda söz konusu temalar kategorik bir ayrıma tabii tutularak kavramsallaştırılmıştır. Böylelikle bu temalar ritüel, otantiklik, kimlik, topluluk, otorite ve somutlaşma şeklinde belirginleşmiştir. Her biri dijital din çalışmalarının farklı bağlamlarına ışık tutan bu altı temanın yürütülen araştırmalarda bütüncül bir yaklaşımla aynı anda ele alınabildiği görülürken, bir veya birkaç temanın söz konusu araştırmalara konu edinildiği de görülmektedir. Dijital din çalışmalarındaki temaların kavramsallaştırılması, bu alanda çalışmayı düşünen araştırmacılara ise problematize edecekleri meselelerin sınırlarını çizebilmeleri açısından büyük kolaylık sağlamıştır.

Netice itibarıyla bu çalışma, parçalı ve karmaşık bir görüntü arz eden dijital din çalışmalarını araştırma eğilimleri, teorik perspektifler ve tematik odaklar ekseninde çerçeveyerek, sahadaki yürütülecek sonraki araştırmalara panoramik bir bakış sağlamaya çalışmıştır. Gündelik hayatın

hemen her alanına sirayet eden dijitalleşmeden payına düşeni büyük ölçüde alan dini yaşamın ve deneyimlerin günümüzde nasıl şekillendiği ve dijitalleşmenin söz konusu yaşama ve deneyimlere ne gibi etkilerinin olduğunu farklı veçhelerden ortaya çıkarmak adına hem teorik hem de pratik düzlemde daha fazla araştırmaya ihtiyaç duyulduğu açıktır.

Araştırmacıların Katkı Oranı Beyanı/ Contribution of Authors

Araştırma tek bir yazar tarafından yürütülmüştür.

The research was conducted by a single author.

Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı / Conflict of Interest

Çalışma kapsamında herhangi bir kurum veya kişi ile çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of the study.

İntihal Politikası Beyanı / Plagiarism Policy

Bu makale bir benzerlik taramasından geçirilmiştir ve dergi beklentilerini karşılamaktadır.

This article has undergone a plagiarism check and meets the expectations of the journal.

Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Beyanı / Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Statement

Bu çalışmada "Yükseköğretim Kurumları Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Yönergesi" kapsamında uyulması belirtilen kurallara uyulmuştur.

In this study, the rules stated in the "Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive" were followed.

Notes

¹ It is crucial to underscore the noteworthy aspects of Dereli's (2022a) study. In this study, Dereli introduced a comprehensive methodological perspective within the field of sociology of religion, which has evolved into a distinct sub-discipline within theology. While Dereli's focus is more on digital methods and techniques, the objective is to provide insights into the functional application of these digital tools. This is valuable not only for researchers delving into DRSs but also for those investigating diverse topics within the broader discipline of sociology of religion. Although Dereli's study may not directly frame the methodological development of the DRSs field, its significance lies in providing a robust understanding of how digital methods and techniques can be effectively employed. Consequently, while not explicitly mapping the methodological evolution of DRSs, Dereli's study remains important for researchers seeking to embark on studies within the DRSs domain and for those engaged in broader inquiries within the sociology of religion. A parallel observation holds true in Çiçek's (2022) study. In this research, Çiçek examined theories and approaches related to digitalization from the vantage point of the sociology of religion. The merit of this study lies in its comprehensive exploration of theories employed within the DRSs domain, considering them within their historical context. However, as Çiçek herself acknowledges, the theoretical approaches covered in this study do not encompass the entirety of theories utilized in the field of DRSs. Notably, the theory of hypermediation has been excluded from Çiçek's analysis. It is evident, then, that the scope of the study is somewhat limited, both in terms of providing an assessment solely from the perspective of sociology of religion and in not analyzing all prominent theories within the broader DRSs landscape. Despite this limitation, Çiçek's study remains valuable for its contribution to understanding digitalization theories within the sociology of religion, serving as a foundational resource for researchers engaging in DRSs inquiries and related areas.

² Research on cyber-Islam began in the late 1990s, initiated by the pioneering study of anthropologist Jon W. Anderson. In addition to Anderson, it is noteworthy to mention Gary R. Bunt as a prominent and prolific figure in the field of cyber Islam (Rozehnal, 2022, pp. 7–8). In its early stages, this research primarily centered on online Islamic forums, blogs, websites, and the issuance of fatwas within these digital spaces. However, with the evolution of the Internet and the widespread adoption of web 2.0 applications, the research focus shifted towards more specialized domains, including e-jihad, e-ummah, e-dawa, and e-dawah. In recent years, a discernible trend has emerged within the realm of DRSs, where various investigations have delved into specific facets of this multifaceted field. Notably, there has been a proliferation of studies concentrating on aspects such as digital religious identities, religious rituals, and forms of religious narratives, with a particular emphasis on Islam and the Muslim community.

³ Online text analysis, online interviewing, digital ethnography, etc. stand out as frequently used methods in the fourth wave of digital religion research (Tsuria et al., 2017).

⁴ For a comprehensive assessment of post-secular theory, see Dereli's (2022b) review.

⁵ The RSST is rooted in the theory of the Social Shaping of Technology (SST). The SST is a research field and theoretical framework that investigates technological change and user innovation as intrinsically social processes. SST is closely affiliated with academic disciplines such as Science and Technology Studies, the Sociology of Technology, and Media Studies. This theory has evolved through the deliberate challenge it poses to techno-determinist paradigms, which assume that technology represents an inexorable force governed by its internal technical logic. In stark contrast to these techno-determinist paradigms, SST regards technology as an outcome arising from the dynamic interplay between technical and social factors during both its design and usage phases. In essence, technology is perceived as a social process. This perspective underscores the capacity of diverse social user groups to influence and shape technologies to align with their distinct purposes and needs (Campbell, 2005, pp. 2–3, 2010, p. 50).

⁶ The religion theme explains the contexts in which digital religion develops and how religious practices are operationalized in digital media. In this respect, it is possible to say that the theme of religion is an introduction to the other themes of digital religion. Since the historical depth of how digital religion has been shaped has been explained in detail in the previous sections, this theme is not included in the rest of the study.