ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

Religious Digital Creatives in Türkiye: A Research on the Axis of Algorithmic Authority[*]

Türkiye'de Dini Dijital İçerik Üreticileri: Algoritmik Otorite Ekseninde Bir Araştırma

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the amount of religious digital content in Türkiye. This trend is fueled by the contributions of various content creators and the flexibility of social media platforms. The quantitative density of digital content enables content creators to be perceived as authorities in their respective fields. The most recent approach for understanding authority derived from the content generated in digital media is algorithmic authority. This approach is also employed to analyze the structure of religious digital content creators and the content they create. This study aims to reveal who creates religious digital content in Türkiye, to classify the structure of the content created, and to evaluate the level of authority of these creators in the focus of algorithmic authority. To achieve this, 176 YouTube channels that create religious content were indexed and analyzed using content analysis. These channels were classified into five categories: algorithmic authority, structure of channel, structure of content, type of content, and monetization. The study found that algorithmic authority varied based on the number of subscribers, videos, and total views, but the vast majority of channels had the highest algorithmic authority in terms of total views. Most of the content was created by religious communities, and the theme of fundamental religious sciences was prevalent. The majority of channels generate income through content monetization. The research indicates that religious digital creatives in Türkiye have high algorithmic authority, continue their activities with different organizations, and have diverse content.

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Öz

Son yıllarda Türkiye'de dini dijital içeriklerin sayısında belirgin bir artış gözlenmektedir. Bu artış, çeşitli içerik üreticilerinin katkılarıyla her geçen gün pozitif bir ivme kazanmaktadır. Sosyal medya platformlarının esnekliği ve sınırsız içerik potansiyeli, bu çeşitliliği desteklemektedir. Dijital içeriklerin niceliksel yoğunluğu içeriği üretenlerin kendi alanlarında otorite olarak görülebilmelerine imkân tanımaktadır. Dijital medyada üretilen içeriklerle elde edilen otoritenin yapısını çerçevelemek amacıyla geliştirilen en güncel yaklaşımın ise algoritmik otorite olduğu söylenebilir. Bu yaklaşım, dini dijital içerik üreticilerinin ve ürettikleri içeriklerin yapısını incelemek için de kullanılmaktadır. Türkiye'de dini dijital içeriklerin kimler tarafından üretildiğini ortaya çıkarmayı ve üretilen içeriklerin yapısını tasnif ederek söz konusu üreticilerin otorite düzeylerini algoritmik otorite odağında değerlendirmeyi amaçlayan bu araştırmada, YouTube'da dini içerik üreten kanallar çeşitli arama kriterlerine göre indekslenerek kayıt altına alınmış ve toplamda 176 kanaldan oluşan bir dini içerik üretici envanteri çıkarılmıştır. Envanterde yer alan kanallar içerik analizi yöntemiyle incelenmiş ve beş farklı kategoride kodlanarak tasnif edilmiştir. Kategoriler, algoritmik otorite, kanalların yapısı, içeriklerin yapısı, içeriklerin türü ve parasallaştırma şeklinde belirlenmiştir. Algoritmik otorite düzeyleri abone, video ve toplam görüntülenme sayılarına göre farklılık gösterse de kanalların büyük çoğunluğunun en çok toplam görüntülenme metriğinde algoritmik otoritelerinin yüksek olduğu tespit edilmiştir. İçerikler daha çok dini topluluklar tarafından üretilirken, özgün bir hüviyete sahip oldukları ve daha çok temel din bilimlerine yönelik bir temanın hâkim olduğu saptanmıştır. Kanalların büyük çoğunluğu ise ürettikleri içerikleri parasallaştırarak gelir elde etmektedir. Araştırma Türkiye'de dini dijital içeriği üretenlerin yüksek bir algoritmik otoriteye sahip olduklarını, farklı yapılanmalarla faaliyetlerini sürdürdüklerini ve özgün sayılabilecek heterojen içerikler ürettiklerini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital Din, Dini Dijital İçerik Üreticileri, Algoritmik Otorite, YouTube, Türkiye

Introduction

In 1996, Bill Gates (1996), the renowned billionaire entrepreneur and founder of the globally recognized technology giant Microsoft, penned an article titled *Content is King!* This seminal piece emerged during the nascent stages of Internet and digital technologies. At a time when widespread utilization of the Internet had yet to reach its zenith across all regions, Gates's article exhibited remarkable foresight. Over the past quarter of a century, it has become unequivocally evident that content reigns supreme. Today, the pervasive integration of digital technologies into everyday life has profound significance for societal dynamics. The Internet and its digital counterparts have become omnipresent, enveloping various facets of social existence. Each moment witnesses the circulation of new content in the digital sphere, underscoring its intrinsic value.

On the other hand, the process of content creation has become significantly more accessible than in the past, leading to a transformation in which individuals who were once solely consumers of content have transitioned into both producer (creators) and consumers. The demographics of producer-consumer individuals, commonly referred to as prosumers, are steadily expanding (Bunt, 2009; Chayko, 2018; Lupton, 2015). Currently, digital content creators span virtually every

conceivable domain (Campbell, 2016; Kannan, 2013; Meyn et al., 2023; Miozzo et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2023). Content creation has evolved into a mature business or profession, as exemplified by the emergence of roles, such as YouTubers, Podcasters, and TikTokers. Hence, similar to other social structures and institutions, the proliferation of content in the religious domain is increasing. The process of producing religious content has transitioned into a commercial or professional endeavor (Andok et al., 2023; Campbell, 2021; Chesnavage, 2021). Undoubtedly, the digitization of religion and the emergence of digital religion as both a phenomenon and an academic research field have played pivotal roles in this evolution.

The phenomenon of digital religion, characterized by the transcending of the online-offline dichotomy and the integration of various aspects of religious life into digital realms, has emerged as a vibrant field of academic inquiry, marked by its multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary nature (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Tsuria, 2022a). Scholars engaged in this area explore the diverse contexts of digital religion from a multitude of perspectives. Studies on digital religion are broadly categorized into six themes: ritual, identity, community, authority, authenticity, and embodiment, each approached through a variety of theoretical and methodological frameworks (Campbell, 2017; Campbell & Altenhofen, 2016; Dereli, 2022; Ergen, 2023b; Lundby & Evolvi, 2022). Research within these themes delves into the experiences of both the content existing in digital spaces and individuals involved in their creation. Consequently, the content again assumes a pivotal role, underscoring the significance of understanding who creates the content in question.

This study endeavors to explore the question of "who are religious digital creatives (RDCs) in Türkiye and what kind of authority appearance they represent with the contents they create?" using an algorithmic authority (AA) approach, which is typically assessed through the digital visibility of an individual or community and the significance of the content created in search engine rankings. As such, this study aimed to categorize and evaluate religious digital content creators on YouTube based on various themes. Although there has been considerable development in the field of digital religion studies (DRSs), the number of studies utilizing the AA approach remains relatively limited. Most of these studies have primarily focused on the Christian faith, leaving a conspicuous gap in research within the context of Islam and Muslim culture. In this context, the absence of a comprehensive study that contextualizes digital religious authority by focusing specifically on Islam and Muslims through the lens of AA represents a notable gap. Furthermore, the extent to which various aspects, such as the structure of Muslim digital religious in Türkiye, the nature of the content they create, the objectives behind the dissemination of this content, and whether their authority is bolstered by the quantitative value of the created content, have been sufficiently examined or researched remains unclear. Therefore, this study is expected to contribute significantly to filling this gap in the literature. From this point of view initially, the study provides a brief overview of the DRSs and defines RDCs within this context. Subsequently, the research elucidates the concept of AA, a theoretical approach. Finally, the study includes fieldwork conducted on YouTube to identify RDCs in Türkiye through the lens of AA.

Digital Religion Studies (DRSs) and Religious Digital Creatives (RDCs)

The convergence of religious life and practices with digital technologies, along with their proliferation on the Internet, has placed the relationship between the Internet and religion at the forefront of the academic discourse. In the early stages, when the Internet was not yet widespread, text-based religious content began to circulate. However, as the internet's social prevalence and digitalization increased in tandem, a "digital" phase emerged, characterized by the widespread availability of various forms of religious content. Furthermore, it has become evident that in addition to institutional religions, virtually every imaginable religious organization has begun to leverage the opportunities presented by the Internet and digital technology. Consequently, religious practices, identities, communities, and authorities have begun to manifest on the Internet in diverse forms, offering experiences to individuals. In my previous research, I have observed that researchers have increasingly focused on questions such as the nature of these manifestations, the contexts in which they are framed, and the challenges they pose (Ergen, 2023a; 2023b).

DRSs stemming from this context primarily underscore the realization that digital media and culture have become integral components of daily life by providing a shared platform for religious engagement. In this context, digital media is often recognized as a unique religious phenomenon. The distinctiveness of this phenomenon necessitates an examination across various scientific disciplines. DRSs, predominantly situated within the realms of media and communication studies and theology, facilitate interdisciplinary engagement with fields such as sociology (particularly the sociology of religion), psychology, philosophy, and economics in the academic literature. Hence, DRSs inherently possess an interdisciplinary structure (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022b).

Over the past quarter century, DRSs have advanced significantly, evolving through four distinct research waves: descriptive, methodological, theoretical, and integrated (Campbell & Altenhofen, 2016; Campbell & Evolvi, 2019; Campbell & Sheldon, 2022). Theoretical approaches have played a pivotal role in addressing challenges within the field. Theories rooted in the domain of media and communication have tackled issues such as media ecology, mediatization, the social shaping of technology, and hypermediatization. DRSs have revolved around key themes, including rituals, authenticity, identity, community, authority, and embodiment. While these themes are often explored within a comprehensive framework, some studies have delved into specific themes in depth. The conceptualization of these themes has enabled researchers to delineate the parameters of their studies, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between digital media, technology, and religious phenomena (Campbell & Altenhofen, 2016; Campbell & Evolvi, 2019; Çiçek, 2022; Dereli, 2022; Ergen, 2023b; Haberli, 2020; Hjarvard, 2011).

Campbell (2021, p. 4), a trailblazer in operationalizing DRSs as an academic research field, has made substantial contributions to the discipline through her writings. Campbell introduced the concept of RDCs to characterize Christian religious content creators in digital media. She notes that she derived the term from "digital creative," which typically refers to web and software designers or social media innovators engaged in producing digital content and tools within the realm of digital marketing and public relations. RDCs are recognized as "individuals who hold a distinctive status and wield influence

within their religious communities by virtue of their digital media endeavors and expertise" (Campbell, 2021, p. 5). In a broader sense, RDCs are delineated as "individuals possessing specialized skills in producing and managing digital resources and/or content" (Campbell, 2021, p. 48).

In contrast, while RDCs originated within the context of Christianity, it is conceivable that the conceptual framework can be extrapolated to encompass other religions, considering the escalating presence of religious content in digital media today. Campbell (2021, p. 17) acknowledged that she developed the concept of delineating spheres engaged in producing Christian religious digital content. However, throughout this process, she also observed the dynamics of religious digital content creation, particularly within Jewish and Muslim communities, suggesting that the concept is equally applicable to both faiths. Therefore, in this study, the concept of RDCs was employed to characterize individuals who create Islamic religious content on YouTube.

Digital Religious Authority and Algorithmic Authority Approach

The phenomenon of authority has been examined in various contexts since the inception of DRSs. While the role of religious authority has received relatively little attention in the early stages of this field, it has gained prominence in recent years, with research spanning a broad spectrum of disciplines, including anthropology (Hefner, 2022), theology (Mohiuddin, 2023; Rizka, 2019; Selby & Sayeed, 2023; Whyte, 2022), sociology (Akmaliah, 2020), media and communication (Berger et al., 2023; Evolvi, 2020; Tsuria & Campbell, 2021; Zaid et al., 2022), and political science (Buckley et al., 2023). However, it is challenging to assert that a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding digital religious authority has been fully developed (Cheong, 2013). While various theoretical approaches can be found in the literature addressing the phenomenon of authority, theoretical frameworks specifically dedicated to digital religious authority remain relatively limited.

Early research into digital religious authority continues to offer crucial frameworks for understanding this phenomenon. A seminal study on this topic was conducted by Campbell. In her foundational work on online religious authority, religious authority was delineated into four distinct layers, derived from interviews with adherents of various faith communities, including Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. These layers are: i) *religious hierarchy* (the roles and perceptions of recognized religious leaders), ii) *religious structure* (the organizational frameworks, practices, or formal institutions within the community), iii) *religious ideology* (generally accepted beliefs, ideas, or shared identities), and iv) *religious texts* (authoritative and revered religious teachings or scriptures) (Campbell, 2007, p. 1048). These categorizations are instrumental in elucidating the ways in which digital religious authority is manifested and operationalized. Essentially, each category provides insight into the contexts and mechanisms through which religious authority is constructed and negotiated within digital cultures.

On the other hand, authority is typically approached from two perspectives in media and communication studies. One perspective is Max Weber's conception of authority as "role," while the other is Michel Foucault's understanding of authority as "power" (Campbell, 2021). Max Weber (2005, pp. 39–40; 2017, p. 332), in his analysis of authority through the lens of legitimacy, identifies three

"pure" types of authority: legal, traditional, and charismatic. Legal authority is grounded in a system of established laws and norms, and legitimacy is derived from adherence to these formalized rules. Conversely, traditional authority is rooted in the veneration of established customs and the legitimacy of those who uphold these time-honored traditions. Charismatic authority arises from an individual's extraordinary personal qualities, such as revelatory insight, heroism, or exemplary characteristics, which inspire devotion and allegiance. Weber's framework delineates three distinct manifestations of authority: one based on adherence to legal systems, another on the sanctity of established traditions, and the third on an individual's personal magnetism and perceived extraordinary qualities.

Foucault, who approached authority from a distinct perspective compared to Weber, conceptualized authority as a form of power or power relations, emphasizing the capacity of structures to exert control over individuals. Foucault's analysis is characterized by a political orientation and framing authority within the contexts of power, politics, and political systems. Rather than viewing authority as dependent on specific social institutions, rules, or systems, Foucault examined it as a structural condition that influences human interaction through power dynamics and reciprocal responses. This perspective, which defines authority in terms of power relations and the resultant social conditions, offers a framework for understanding how authority impacts individuals and communities across various contexts, both online and offline. However, the Foucauldian approach has been infrequently applied in the study of digital religion (Campbell, 2021, p. 22).

These perspectives provide scholars with distinct avenues for examining authority structures within contemporary religious institutions and actors both online and offline. However, these theoretical perspectives are limited in their ability to provide a comprehensive framework for exploring how authority is constituted within a digital culture. This is because they tend to focus on a single or centralized individual or layer of discourse within religious institutions, which is not sufficient for understanding the complex dynamics of digital culture. Moreover, conceptualizing authority as either role-based or power-based often directs attention toward a singular or centralized figure or discourse within religious institutions. Such perspectives may overlook the fact that authority within these institutions is frequently dispersed among multiple actors and that appointed religious authorities may lack prominent visibility or social capital in digital environments. Additionally, these approaches may not adequately address the complex multilayered nature of authority structures and dynamic online negotiations. Generally, these frameworks adhere to traditional assumptions of authority, which are rooted in offline reality characterized by clearly identifiable roles and well-defined hierarchical systems. This conventional logic may not fully capture the nuanced and fluid nature of authority in digital contexts where authority is often more diffuse and less explicitly structured. Therefore, alternative perspectives on the conceptualization of authority are needed. To address this need, Campbell (2021, p. 28) adapted two novel approaches, relational and algorithmic authority, to examine digital religious authority. These approaches elucidate the constitution of authority within the digital cultural milieu and engage with pivotal facets of authority frameworks.

Relational authority views authority as a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between individuals rather than as a static role or position of power. This perspective emphasizes the decision-making dynamics of individuals and communities within a given social framework. According to this approach,

authority is derived solely from communicative exchanges between actors. This perspective has been instrumental in the study of religious authority in online discourse and communications. Scholars in the field of DRSs have employed this approach to examine how digital texts shape social relations and foster structures of attention and influence (Cheong et al., 2011; Lövheim & Lundmark, 2019). From a relational perspective, authority is not tied to a single absolute figure or structure, but rather fluctuates based on the relational processes inherent within the realm of authority (Campbell, 2021, pp. 26–27).

The most recent approach employed to contextualize the manifestations of religious authority within digital culture is the algorithmic authority (AA) approach. Debates surrounding AA have garnered increasing attention, particularly within Internet research circles, aimed at delineating the contours of authority phenomena in digital media (Dörr & Hollnbuchner, 2017; Farber, 2017; Lopes, 2023; Lustig et al., 2016; Lustig & Nardi, 2015; O'Hara, 2021; Ståhl et al., 2021). This burgeoning interest is mirrored in the realm of DRSs. AA is defined as the reliance on algorithms to direct human actions and validate information, rather than placing trust or preference in human authority figures (Lustig & Nardi, 2015). This approach, centered on authoritative knowledge structures for discerning accurate or dependable data, is predominantly associated with the media scholar Clay Shirky (2009). He underscores that AA has evolved within a distinct framework compared with individual or institutional authority. According to him, algorithms that facilitate the organization and utilization of digital data through web technologies rather than human intervention garner trust from individuals by streamlining individual access, thereby establishing authority by facilitating the dissemination of presented data to large audiences.

In the realm of AA, algorithms are endowed with authority through a digital coding system. Accordingly, individuals or institutions boasting the largest following, friends list, content output, posts, likes, views, comments, or citations, are perceived as possessing the most authoritative voice and consequently rise to prominence (Aust, 2018; Peeters & Schuilenburg, 2020; Rutz, 2016). This dynamic provides crucial insight into discerning who garners recognition as an authority within specific domains such as religious content creation. Within digital culture, attaining prominence, authorization, or recognition as an authority is contingent on visibility and quantitative metrics. In essence, what holds significance in digital culture is not the nature of the content created by content creators but rather the frequency and volume of their output. Hence, AA in digital media is shaped by the quantitative value of the contributions provided by viewers and followers, rather than by the entity or individual from which it originates. Therefore, it can be argued that AA diverges from classical authority paradigms, and even challenges them (Campbell, 2021). This dynamic provides crucial insight into discerning who garners recognition as an authority within specific domains such as religious content creation. Within digital culture, attaining prominence, authorization, or recognition as an authority is contingent on visibility and quantitative metrics. In essence, what holds significance in digital culture is not the nature of the content created by content creators but rather the frequency and volume of their output. Hence, AA in digital media is shaped by the quantitative value of the contributions provided by viewers and followers, rather than by the entity or individual from which it originates. Therefore, it can be argued that AA diverges from classical authority paradigms, and even challenges them (Campbell, 2021).

The rise of digital literacy and the resulting specialization have empowered individuals without formal religious education, institutional affiliation, or official positions to form their own religious communities and emerge as influential voices. With the widespread use of digital and social media by diverse groups, individuals with advanced digital literacy can easily engage in content creation processes. As a result, creating religious content has become more accessible, leading to increased visibility for content creators, who often become the public face specific beliefs. This has also resulted in content creators being perceived as religious authorities owing to the numerical and quantitative values of their generated content (Campbell, 2021; Dereli, 2020; Ergen, 2023a).

Method and Research Design

This research aims to reveal who creates religious digital content in Türkiye, to classify the structure of the content created, and to evaluate the level of authority of these creators in the focus of AA. In line with this purpose, the questions answered in the research were as follows:

RQ1: Can RDCs in Türkiye be categorized on YouTube?

RQ2: How do these creatives manifest themselves in terms of AA?

RQ3: What is the structure of YouTube channels that creates religious digital content?

RQ4: What is the authenticity structure of content featured in these channels?

RQ5: What types of content are created through these channels?

RQ6: Do these channels carry out monetization based on the content they create?

To address these inquiries, a content analysis methodology was employed. Content analysis is a research approach used to derive reproducible and reliable inferences from textual materials concerning their contextual and substantive dimensions (Krippendorff, 2019). It is utilized for the objective, systematic, and either quantitative or qualitative depiction of a significant substance within communications (Drisko et al., 2015). In the content analysis, textual material was gathered and scrutinized. Content encompasses lexical elements, semantics, visual representations, symbols, ideas, motifs, or any form of communicative message. Text denotes any written, visual, or oral artifact that serves as a communication vehicle. Materials subject to analysis encompass literary works, newspapers or periodical articles, advertising materials, speeches, official records, cinematic or video creations, song lyrics, photographs, attire, websites, and artistic creations (Neuman, 2020). Considering this perspective, to access religious digital content slated for analysis along with its creators, a digital platform was initially identified.

The inherent vastness of digital space, with its seemingly infinite content, poses a challenge in analyzing all creators of religious content within this domain. Therefore, the research scope was narrowed and confined to YouTube. YouTube was selected as the research platform because it is the second most utilized search engine after Google, the most frequently downloaded and used mobile application, and one of the most widely employed social media platforms, both globally and in Türkiye (Kemp, 2024a; Kemp, 2024b). Another reason for choosing YouTube was its facilitation of content creation within the framework of religious narratives. A pool of keywords was created to

access religious content on YouTube and identify prominent religious digital content creators with significant AA on the platform. The selection of keywords was informed by notable studies in the literature on DRSs and key encyclopedia articles in the "Branches of Science" section of the TDV Encyclopedia of Islam (TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi, n.d.).

For each of the 139 keywords in the pool, YouTube was searched using an independent internet browser. Various filters were applied to the results and the channels that met the criteria were recorded. The filters applied were as follows:

- Channels that created the first 30 videos that appeared in YouTube search results were considered.

- Channels must have been actively producing religious content for at least three years; therefore, the channels created after 2021 were excluded.

- Channels must have uploaded videos within the last three months to ensure that they are currently active.

- The channel's "About" section must indicate that they create religious/Islamic content or include religious/Islamic content in their videos.

- Channels must have a minimum of 50,000 subscribers; channels with fewer subscribers were excluded[3].

- Islamic music channels (e.g., hymns, melodies, anthems, or raps) were excluded from the search results.

- Only channels producing religious content in Turkish were recorded.

- The registration process was conducted between March 11-21, 2024, and the information for the channels was updated on March 22, 2024.

As a result of the search and filtering process, an inventory of RDCs comprising 176 YouTube channels was compiled. The channels in this inventory were subjected to content analysis and were categorized into five groups. Information about these categories and the coding chart used to create them are as follows:

A. Algorithmic Authority: In this category, the AA levels of the channels in the inventory are determined using metrics based on the number of subscribers, videos, and total views. While establishing these metrics, both the general structure of YouTube as a digital medium and the specific structure of the channels in the inventory were considered. Within this framework, the AA levels of the channels were coded as low, medium, or high according to their quantitative values (Table 1).

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3   The primary rationale for selecting channels based on this criterion is rooted in the theoretical framework of this study, which is predicated on the concept of AA. According to this framework, AA is determined by the prominence and influence of digital channels, as indicated by metrics, such as the number of subscribers or followers, friend lists, content output, posts, likes, and comments. Channels with higher engagement and larger audiences are perceived as possessing greater authoritative voices. This principle extends to the realm of religious content creation. Consequently, this study selects channels with a minimum of 50,000 subscribers under the assumption that such a threshold indicates the level of authority and competence. In the context of Türkiye's digital cultural landscape, 50,000 subscribers can be regarded as a marker of significant authoritative presence.

Table 1. Metrics Based on AA Levels of Channels[4]

AA Level	Number of Subscribers (k)	Number of Videos	Total Views (mill.)
Low	50-100	0-300	0-10
Medium	101-300	301-600	11-30
High	301-above	601-above	31-above

B. Structure of the Channels: In this category, the general structure of the channels producing religious digital content was coded in three different ways: individual, community, and traditional media extension. The following criteria were considered during coding:

- **Individual:** The channel owner is known by name or the content on the channel is created by only one person.
- **Community:** The channel has a corporate structure or the content on the channel is created by more than one person.
- **Traditional Media Extension:** The channel is an extension of traditional media (e.g., television channels, radio stations, newspapers) that are currently broadcasting.

C. Structure of Content: In this category, the general structure of the content of the channels in the inventory was coded in two ways: original content and stock content. The following criteria were considered while coding:

- **Original Content:** Content created by the founders/owners of the channel, including channel owners' narratives.
- **Stock Content:** Content consisting solely of stock images without the narratives of channel owners or content created by collaging videos from different channels that create religious digital content.

D. Type of Content: In this category, the content created by the channels included in the inventory was coded in eight different ways: basic religious sciences, prayer-zikr-parable, Qur'an, mystery-secret-eschatology, children, pill information, travel-vlog, and meditation. The following criteria were considered while coding:

- **Fundamental Religious Sciences:** Content emphasizing subjects such as Tafsir, Hadith, Kalam, Islamic Law, Fiqh, and Islamic Sects, which constitute the epistemic aspects of Islam.
- **Prayer-Zikr-Parable:** Content that includes prayers, supplications, or stories recommended for specific days and times, and life stories of religious personalities.
- **Qur'an:** Qur'an recitations and Qur'an teaching (recitation of suras, tajweed, qiraat, etc.).
- **Mystery-Secret-Eschatology:** Content that includes mysterious and enigmatic events in religious subjects and narratives about the end of the world and afterlife.

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4 The absence of existing literature specifically addressing the measurement of AA levels among RDCs poses a significant challenge for the researcher in establishing these levels. Despite this gap, a metric was developed by examining the general characteristics of the channels listed in the RDCs inventory, which was compiled by using various search criteria. This metric was constructed by considering the overall structure and attributes of the channels analyzed in this study. It is anticipated that future research could refine and enhance this metric to provide a more precise and comprehensive assessment of AA levels.

- **Children:** Content that includes basic religious teachings (animations, cartoons, religious children's music, etc.) specifically for children.

- **Pill Information:** Religious information with precise and strict quantitative statements (e.g., "doing these 5 things will enter paradise," "reciting this prayer will get rid of all your troubles") and answers to religious questions.

- **Meditation:** Content that includes meditations containing psychological and spiritual therapies with religious content.

- **Travel-vlog:** Content consisting of vlogs with trips to religious or sacred places.

E. Monetization: This category was created to identify the political economic aspect of the content created by the channels in the inventory. In this respect, the "advertisement" or "join" status of the channels, which are the two features of YouTube that allow monetization, were coded as "on" or "off." The activation of the monetization feature was determined by separately checking the monetization settings for each channel. During the coding process, checks were conducted on two different websites to verify the monetization status (Is This Channel Monetized, n.d.; YouTube Large, n.d.)

Results

The number of YouTube channels create religious digital content, and their opening dates are illustrated in Figure 1. Although the launch dates of the 176 channels varied, the inaugural channel that started producing Islamic/religious content was an individual-type channel that debuted in 2006. The year 2017 is noteworthy for having the highest number of channel launches, with 21 channels opening, representing the highest proportion of 11.93% of the total number of channels. The years 2013 and 2017 also showed significant increases. Since 2018, the number of new channels has declined.
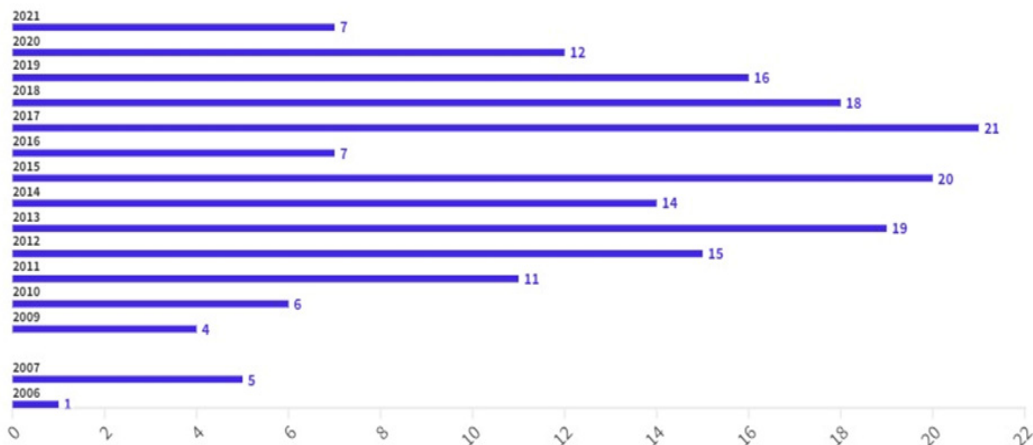

Figure 1. Annual Chart of The Opening Dates of The Channels

A. Algorithmic Authority

Figure 2 shows the AA levels of YouTube channels creating religious digital content analyzed according to metrics determined by the number of subscribers, videos, and total views. Approximately one-third of the channels have low authority in terms of the number of subscribers, whereas there are almost equal proportions of channels with medium and high authority. This distribution indicates that in terms of AA levels, channels producing religious digital content have a balanced structure in terms of subscriber acquisition. In terms of the number of videos, channels with high authority constituted a significant majority (57.95%). This can be considered an indication that channels with high authority create more content and, therefore, have the potential to be recommended more by algorithms. The proportions of channels in the low and medium categories were similar, totaling 42.04%. In terms of the total views, channels with high authority represented the majority (48.86%). Medium channels also had a significant percentage (38.64%), indicating that channels with medium authority attract a considerable audience. The AA level of the low-level channels was 12.5%.
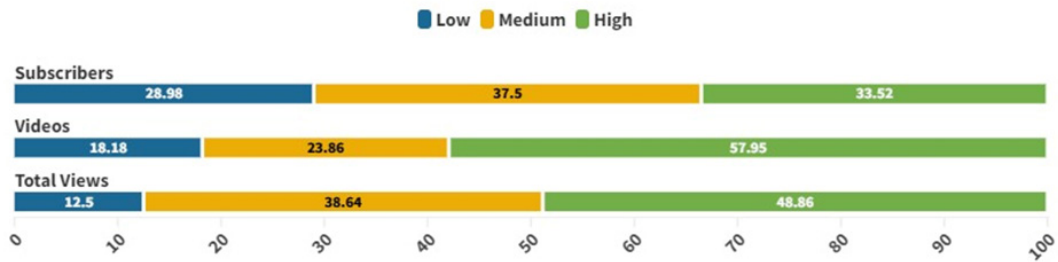

Figure 2. AA Levels of Channels

Among the channels that create religious digital content, those with high authority dominate both video creation and number of views. However, there is a more balanced distribution in terms of the subscriber acquisition. This indicates that channels with high authority gain algorithmic advantage by producing more content and attracting more viewers. Channels with medium authority also appeal to significant audiences. Conversely, channels with low authority are less preferred or less prominent, particularly in terms of the number of views. Examining AA levels provides insights into how religious digital content creators gain a place in the YouTube algorithm, and how their authority levels are distributed on the platform. These findings are likely to contribute to future research by enabling further analyses and strategic development. However, a more comprehensive evaluation should consider other factors affecting AA, such as content quality, audience profile and interaction, comments, likes, and other engagement metrics.

A general overview of the first five channels with high AA levels is presented in Table 2. According to the analyses, Kanal 7, Hayalhanem, Sözler Köşkü, and İyi Fikir have high AA in terms of the number of subscribers, videos, and total number of views, while DiyanetTV shows high authority

in the number of videos and views. Kanal 7's higher authority level than the others can be attributed to its diverse content creation, not limited to religious content. Although Nurettin Yıldız has high authority in video creation, it is at a medium level in terms of the number of subscribers and views. Fussilet Kuran Merkezi and Rehber TV have medium authority but vary in their content creation and viewing strategies. This reveals that the frequency and quality of content creation are crucial for determining the AA.

Table 2. Overview of The Top Five Ranked Channels with High AA Levels

According to Subscribers							
Channels	Opening Date	Subscribes (S)	Videos (V)	Total Views (TV) approx.	AA-S	AA-V	AA-TV
Kanal 7	2012	4.510.000	22.136	2.300.000.000	High	High	High
Hayalhanem	2013	4.030.000	1.183	771.000.000	High	High	High
Sözler Köşkü	2011	3.900.000	1.013	735.000.000	High	High	High
fussilet Kuran Merkezi	2011	2.300.000	443	357.000.000	High	Medium	High
İyi Fikir	2016	2.210.000	1.763	879.000.000	High	High	High
According to Videos							
DiyanetTV	2013	1.510.000	36.385	551.000.000	High	High	High
Kanal 7	2012	4.510.000	22.136	2.300.000.000	High	High	High
Nurettin Yıldız	2012	969.000	9.908	208.000.000	High	High	High
Rehber TV	2018	120.000	9.703	42.000.000	Medium	High	High
islam ve ihsan – ilamtv	2011	518.000	9.609	203.000.000	High	High	High
According to Total Views							
Kanal 7	2012	4.510.000	22.136	2.300.000.000	High	High	High
İyi Fikir	2016	2.210.000	1.763	879.000.000	High	High	High
Hayalhanem	2013	4.030.000	1.183	771.000.000	High	High	High
Sözler Köşkü	2011	3.900.000	1.013	735.000.000	High	High	High
DiyanetTV	2013	1.510.000	36.385	551.000.000	High	High	High

B. Structure of the Channels

The structural analysis of YouTube channels creating religious content on digital platforms is based on various categories (Figure 3). According to the data obtained from the analyses, community-oriented channels were the most common, accounting for 52.84% of the total. These channels offer diverse perspectives, as they are typically contributed by multiple individuals or have a legal structure that enables them to reach a wide audience. Individual channels ranked second, accounting for 38.07% of the total channels. These channels typically involve a single individual creating content, or the channel owner standing out as a personal brand. Finally, channels defined as traditional media extensions represent 9.09% of the total. These channels are usually digital extensions of traditional media organizations with significant corporate infrastructure, allowing them to present religious content in a more professional manner.
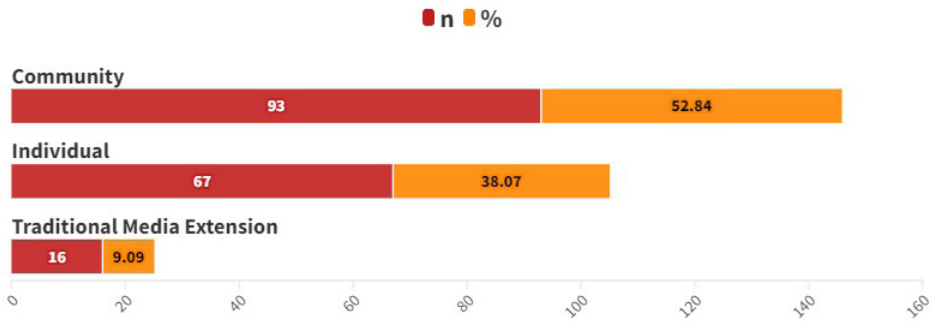
Figure 3. Structure of The Channels

YouTube channels that create religious content exhibit diversity in their structural organization and publishing approaches. The prevalence of community-oriented channels suggests that religious content often benefits from the contributions of multiple individuals, highlighting the importance of presenting various perspectives. The significant share of individual channels underscores the influence of personal brands and individual experiences in religious digital content creation. Moreover, the presence of channels operating as extensions of traditional media underscores the role of traditional media in digital transformation and the significance of institutional infrastructure in religious content creation.

Among the channels that create religious digital content, community-oriented channels have been particularly successful in reaching a wide audience. For instance, Hayalhanem and Sözler Köşkü, with millions of subscribers and hundreds of millions of views, stand out as channels that have been active for a long time and that create content regularly. Among individual channels, Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca and TUNCER – Gizem Avcısı are notable, with Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca having a particularly high number of videos and views. Among the traditional media extension channels, Kanal 7 stands out as the channel with the highest number of subscribers and views, surpassing the channels in other categories. This highlights the effectiveness of the traditional media infrastructure on digital platforms. Overall, community and traditional media extension channels play a significant role in religious digital content creation, boasting high numbers of subscribers and viewership (Table 3).

Table 3. The Top Five Channels with The Most Subscribers by Structure

Community				
Channels	Opening Date	Subscribes	Videos	Total Views (approx.)
Hayalhanem	2013	4.030.000	1.183	771.000.000
Sözler Köşkü	2011	3.900.000	1.013	735.000.000
fussilet Kuran Merkezi	2011	2.300.000	443	357.000.000
İyi Fikir	2016	2.210.000	1.763	879.000.000
Nova Prospekt	2011	2.170.000	346	276.000.000
Individual				

TUNCER – Gizem Avcısı	2010	1.970.000	188	260.000.000
Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca	2013	1.610.000	8.439	549.000.000
Bekir Develi	2013	1.320.000	915	197.000.000
Mehmet Yıldız	2015	997.000	665	162.000.000
Nurettin Yıldız	2012	969.000	9.908	208.000.000
Traditional Media Extension				
Kanal 7	2012	4.510.000	22.136	2.300.000.000
DiyanetTV	2013	1.510.000	36.385	551.000.000
Lâlegül TV	2014	521.000	8.474	114.000.000
Nihat Hatipoğlu – atv	2017	426.000	4.161	125.000.000
Semerkand TV	2009	419.000	1.542	50.000.000

C. Structure of Content

Figure 4 presents the analysis data for the structure of the content created. Most of the channels focused on the original content (69.89%). The original content provides a more authentic and sincere experience, allowing channel owners to present their personal experiences, narratives, and areas of expertise to viewers (Dereli, 2020; Eken, 2021; Ergen, 2023a). On the other hand, the use of stock content also had a significant share (30.11%). While stock content can help create content quickly and cover a variety of topics, it may lack the individuality and authenticity that the original content offers, potentially limiting follower/viewer engagement. Interest (subscribers, views, comments, etc.) tends to be weaker for channels that create stock content.
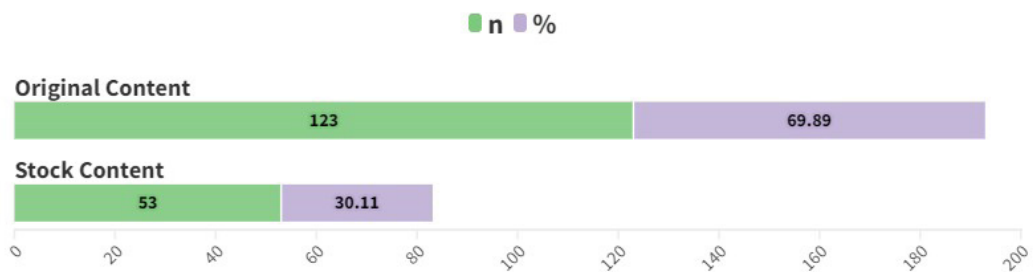

Figure 4. Structure of The Content

D. Type of Content

Upon examining the data analysis, it becomes apparent that there exists a diversity of created religious digital content types (Figure 5), although certain types were more prevalent than others. The predominance of the Fundamental Religious Sciences category signifies its role in fulfilling viewers' need to acquire and reinforce religious knowledge, thus indicating its appeal to a broad audience. Equally noteworthy are the Prayer-Zikr-Parable and Qur'an categories, which underscore the significance of content addressing daily religious practices and sacred texts. While other categories cater to more specialized interests, the relatively lower representation of Children, Pill

Information, Meditation, and Travel-vlog categories suggests that such content is consumed by specific niche audiences. This diversity underscores the audience's interest in a wide spectrum of religious content, prompting content creators to tailor their strategies. Notably, the elevated rates observed in the categories of basic religious sciences and prayers and short stories underscore the audience's inclination towards obtaining religious information and understanding religious practices within digital platforms. This trend aligns with previous scholarly findings, highlighting the frequent use of digital space as a primary source of religious information (Eken & Aydın, 2018; Temel et al., 2018).
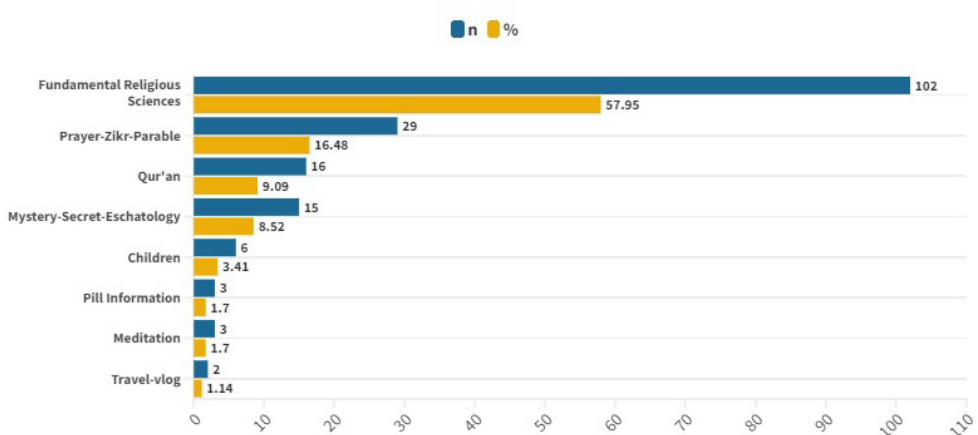

Figure 5. Type of The Content

E. Monetization

Figure 6 presents the results of the analysis on whether channels monetize the religious content they create. According to the findings, 70.45% of the channels opt to generate income from their content through advertising and join, while 29.55% do not profit directly from their content. The majority of channels monetize primarily through advertisements, although YouTube's monetization strategies vary, encompassing revenue from ads, memberships, and viewer-based payments (YouTube Help, n.d.). Consequently, channels monetize the religious content they create to varying degrees, which is influenced by factors such as subscriber count, video count, and total views. At this point, the main point is that it draws attention and should be emphasized that religious content in the digital sphere mirrors the political economy characteristics of traditional markets, highlighting its market value. Although the motivations behind creating religious content may vary, it carries significant monetization potential through sponsorship, product placement, or banner advertisements. This underscores the market value of religious content in the digital realm, necessitating further research on the political economy of digital religion.
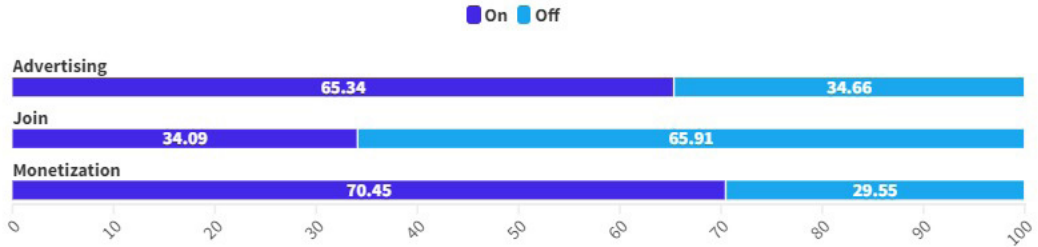
Figure 6. Monetization Status of The Channels

Conclusion and Discussion

Digital religion has changed the structure of religious authority. In other words, the structure of religious authority has begun to shift from a physical to a digital environment. The authority, which previously depended mostly on traditional religious leaders and institutions, has now gained a digital identity as these leaders and institutions have moved their activities into the digital space. On the other hand, leaders or institutions with religious authority also face the danger of losing authority. This is because the creation of religious knowledge (or content) is no longer a monopoly of traditional religious leaders and institutions. Currently, everyone has the opportunity to create content in the religious field, as in all other fields. Therefore, it has become possible for the religious content created to stand out with the favor it will receive. More precisely, who will be more competent in religious content in the digital space and who will gain authority in this framework have begun to be evaluated depending on the interaction capacity of the content created. From this point of view, the AA approach aims to determine who holds digital religious authority according to the algorithmic value of the content created.

In this study, within the framework of the propositions of the AA approach, it was tried to determine who creates of religious digital content in Türkiye are and what kind of structure they have. In this respect, 176 channels that create religious content on YouTube were analyzed through content analysis. Thus, by analyzing these channels in five categories–algorithmic authority (AA), structure of channels, structure of content, type of content, and monetization–a general view of RDCs in Türkiye was revealed on YouTube. First, the authority levels of the RDCs in Türkiye were determined using an AA approach. The authority levels of the RDCs were evaluated based on the number of subscribers, videos, and total views according to YouTube metrics. It was found that the highest level of authority was concentrated on the total view metric. These data show that RDCs that create religious content on YouTube in Türkiye have achieved a significant viewership rate, thus reinforcing their AA. In addition, the authority levels of the RDCs in the other metrics were also considerably high. Therefore, it can be said that RDCs pay attention to the algorithmic structures of digital platforms and give importance to these structures to raise their voices or authority.

The structure of the RDCs on YouTube appeared to vary. First, it is difficult to place this organization in a single and absolute framework. In fact, when it comes to Islam, it is not possible to

talk about a single and absolute structure, a central organization, or a homogeneous way of believing and living. This is especially the case in a country like Türkiye, which has diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious structures. However, it is relatively easier to classify the organizational structure of channels that create religious digital content on YouTube. For this reason, the structure of the channels was coded as "individual", "community, and "traditional media extension". As a result of the coding, it was determined that most community-type channels existed. This is followed by individual and traditional media extension types.

Religious communities are the most important part of the Muslim culture in Türkiye. Additionally, religious communities, which consist of people with the same religious practices, are quite diverse. It can be considered as a natural reflection of the fact that RDCs on YouTube create the most "community" type of religious content, have the most subscribers, and receive the most views. It is noteworthy that individuals with high digital literacy want to play a role in religious content creation. In particular, individuals who do not belong to a religious community or do not want to be a part of one but are very willing to share religious content are also prominent in religious content creation. Moreover, traditional media extension RDCs mostly transfer their existing content in their field of activity to YouTube and contribute to the creation of religious content in both digital and traditional media.

Examining the structure of RDCs content on YouTube revealed a trend towards producing more original content. The density of stock content is relatively low, indicating that RDCs invest significant effort in the content creation process. This suggests that the creation of religious digital content has evolved into a distinct line of work or profession. Indeed, it has been observed that most RDCs that create content in the community category are dedicated exclusively to generating religious content. In contrast, RDCs that focus on stock content tend to prioritize the monetization of this content more than those producing original content. This underscores the importance of considering the political-economy aspect of religious digital content.

The content created by RDCs is heterogeneous, encompassing eight different types, each with its own variation. While the main focus of this research is not on the structure of the content, it is worth noting that the classification is superficial, yet provides a basic impression. More than half of the content created falls within the category of "fundamental religious sciences," indicating that RDCs in Türkiye prioritize the creation of religious knowledge. Following this, "prayer-zikr-parable" and "Quran" are also significant categories. This suggests that RDCs emphasize prayers, the lives of religious figures, and religious narratives, aligning their content with audiences' interests. Given its status as an Arabic text, the teaching of the Qur'an is particularly popular. Moreover, the contents created in the other genres showed further differentiation. Notably, there was a significant presence of channels aimed at the children. Although these channels, created for religious education for children, are limited in number, they hold a substantial level of AA. Specific research on these channels would be valuable for understanding the context of the relationship between digital religion and children.

Why do RDCs create religious digital content? While this question warrants separate research, the content analysis conducted in this study provides a clue: Monetization. A significant number

of RDCs analyzed monetize the religious content they created. Although it would be inaccurate to claim that all content is created solely for profit, the findings highlight the political-economy aspect of digital religion. The monetization of content indicates its commodification: religious content becomes a commodity within the digital space. This means that religious digital content circulates in digital markets and becomes part of digital consumption. This commodification raises several issues, such as trivialization, entertainment-driven transformation, devaluation, and distortion of religious content. These challenges underscore the need for further research to thoroughly evaluate the implications of commodified religious digital content.

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