THE INFLUENCE OF DIGITALIZATION ON RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Natalya SEITAKHMETOVA [1]

[1] Institute for Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies of the CS MSHE RK
050000, Kazakhstan

natalieseyt@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-6297-7317

Sholpan ZHANDOSSOVA [2]

[2] Institute for Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies of the CS MSHE RK
050000, Kazakhstan

sholpan_zhandosova@mail.ru
ORCID: 0000-0002-6151-3788

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the process of religious identity formation in the context of increasing digitalization and changes in the socio-political environment. The findings show a shift in religious authority structures; the traditional hierarchies are being replaced by new decentralized digital networks and user-generated content. From the present study, it becomes clear that social media and other digital communication tools help form hybrid religious identities, combining traditional religious practices and the new digital culture. Three ways in which digitalization affects religious identity are through virtual community formation, algorithmic content curation and interactive ritual practices. The study also examines how socio-political factors, such as the state regulation of digital spaces and content, influence the digital expression of religious identity. The comparison of cultures reveals different trends in the adoption of digital religious practices in various political systems and cultural environments. Quantitative and qualitative methods, including analysis, synthesis, historical-formal methods and generalization, were used in this study to analyze the relationship between digital technologies and religious identity formation. The study analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of Internet-mediated religious practices in various churches while making specific reference to the Republic of Kazakhstan. Thus, the results show how the development of technology influences modern religious identity and interpersonal religious relations and, therefore, contributes to the discussion of digital religion and social change.

INTRODUCTION

New technologies have brought about the most significant change in current religious practices and activities, changing how religious groups develop and sustain their religious identity. When religious organizations deal with the virtual and real worlds of the church, scholars observe the growing tendency to transform the way theological information is presented, accepted and interpreted in the digital environment. The use of social media and other digital resources in religious activities has increased the competition for the spiritual market while simultaneously challenging the church's conventional chain of command and authority.

The youth are very talented at incorporating the digital world with their spiritual activities and thus have found new ways of expressing their religion that do not involve physical presence in the churches. The contemporary religious landscape is characterized by the convergence of different forms of worship as churches strive to adapt their traditional practices to the new generation of worshippers and the digital age. This technological revolution has also affected interfaith relations and religion, as digital media has expanded the possibilities for engagement and interaction between different religions on an international level.

The pandemic has been a key accelerant, forcing churches and other places of worship around the world to shift their activities online and, in the process, transform the way they conduct their business and maintain their community in the future. These trends occur against the background of political and social complexities, where religious movements use digital space to effect change, organize communities, and respond to the political environment. The use of digital technologies in shaping religious identity is an area of growing interest to scholars seeking to understand how and why religious groups and individuals are evolving in the digital age.

This article contributes to the discussion of the effects of digitalization on religious identity and, additionally, offers suggestions to politicians and sociologists on how to use digital technologies to enhance the relationships between different religious groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Both foreign and domestic researchers have been studying this topic. So, the researchers Turganbayeva and Seitakhmetova (2023) studied the features of Islamic identity in the context of Kazakh society's national identification. The article considers the expediency of creating one's own identity model in Kazakh society, which will be based on traditional Islam's cultural and communicative capabilities and guidelines. The authors studied the impact of cultural globalization on Islamic identity, highlighting both the positive and negative sides of such influence.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the unique characteristics of religious digitalization in Kazakhstan. Nyazbekov, Lifanova, Kazmukhanov, Tasybekova and Byerdimurat (2023) examine the specific features of traditional religions' digitalization in modern Kazakhstan, emphasizing how digital platforms mediate religious practices while maintaining cultural distinctiveness. Their research reveals the complex interplay between traditional religious values and contemporary digital expression.

In her scientific work, Mukhatayeva (2021) considered the problems of religious radicalism in Kazakhstan. The study reveals the main stages of the formation of radicalism based on religion and analyzes internal and external factors that can lead to terrorism in the country. The author examines the influence of new worldviews on the formation of extremist beliefs.

A group of Kazakh scientists, Aimaganbetova, Adilova, Sadykova and Baimoldina (2022), studied the psychological characteristics and structure of the religious identity of Kazakh youth. The authors studied citizens' attitudes to a particular religion through their attitude to collectivist or individualist culture. A notable contribution to understanding gender dynamics in digital religious discourse comes from Tasbolat (2024), who conducts a discourse analysis of religious authority and gender norms in Kazakh social media. The study explicitly examines Rizabek Battauly's patriarchal views, providing insights into how traditional gender norms are reinforced or challenged in digital religious spaces.

Campbell and Tsuria's (2021) seminal work provides a comprehensive framework for understanding religious practice in digital media. Their edited volume explores how digital technologies reshape religious expression, community formation, and authority structures. They argue that digital spaces are not merely platforms for religious communication but active agents in transforming how religion is practiced and understood.

In his article, Evolvi (2022) suggests studying religion and the Internet through the analysis of the concept of «digital religion». The paper examines different approaches to the study of digital religion, both material and spatial. The author uses specific examples to show how innovative technologies can be used in traditional religious events and describes specific online rituals that are used exclusively in a virtual environment without analogues in the material world.

The scientific work of Kurganskaya and Dunaev (2020) is devoted to the study of the peculiarities of Kazakhstanis' religious identification in the era of digital technology development. The authors note that in recent years, the role of religion in Kazakh society has increased significantly. At its core, the increase in the religiosity of the population does not carry any destructive overtones except for the emergence and spread of extremist religious movements.

Umbet and Akmadi (2024) contribute to this discourse by analyzing the digital construction of religious identity in contemporary settings. Their research demonstrates how digital platforms serve as spaces for negotiating and expressing religious identities, particularly in multicultural contexts like Kazakhstan.

A few scientists have been studying this issue in particular, such as researchers Lifanov and Lifanova (2022), who studied in detail the processes of virtualization of religion and the influence of digital technologies on religious identification. The paper identifies two main forms of virtualization of religion and

indicates that digital analogues of religious information are gaining increasing support. According to the authors, the virtual environment has a very strong influence on the identity of citizens since it significantly expands opportunities in religious terms.

Sagimbayev (2023) analyzes Kazakhstan's state policies in the field of religion. In the modern world, religion plays a very important role in building domestic policy and ensuring the stability of the State. At this stage of development, the scientist characterizes politics as tolerant and consistent with a secular state.

In his scientific work, Gálik (2019) studied the peculiarities of human identity in cyberspace. The author points out that identity is not static but dynamic and constantly evolving. Cyberspace is a kind of mirror that reflects a person's real essence. At the same time, virtual identity is not completely virtual because it is associated with a person's real cognitive abilities.

Authors Abdurrohman and Fitriana (2023) discuss in their article the role of digital literacy in strengthening religious moderation and indicate that the development of digital technologies affects religious views and worldviews from different perspectives. So, on the one hand, the Internet space provides convenience and comfort for deepening knowledge and understanding of faith. However, on the other hand, the Internet can be used as a source of teachings that deviate from real religious values, such as radicalism, extremism and intolerance. Nord and Petzke (2024) offers valuable perspectives on religious education in the digital age, albeit from a German context. Their work provides comparative insights for understanding how digital transformation affects religious education across different cultural contexts.

Thus, researchers in their scientific works support the view that virtual space radically changes the concept of religious identity. With the Internet space, new forms of consumption of religious information are emerging and the very perception of religion as such is changing.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed a comprehensive multi-method approach integrating both theoretical and empirical frameworks. The synthesis method facilitated the identification and analysis of overarching patterns in Internet usage and advanced technologies' role in identity formation, particularly within religious contexts. A historical-formal analysis was conducted to examine the evolutionary trajectory of religious identity formation in Kazakhstan, incorporating both diachronic and synchronic perspectives on state-religion relations. Systematic generalization techniques were applied to conceptualize religious identity within digital spaces and elucidate the characteristic implications of technological advancement on religious practices. The study utilized qualitative case analysis to examine specific instances of digital technology integration within religious communities, focusing on virtual worship spaces, online theological education platforms, and faith-based social media engagement. Comparative analysis was employed to evaluate the varying approaches to digital adoption across different religious organizations and denominations. Content analysis was performed on digital religious discourse to identify emerging patterns and themes in online religious communication. Observational research methods were implemented to document real-time interactions within virtual

religious spaces and communities. The methodology incorporated phenomeno-logical approaches to understand the lived experiences of practitioners engaging with religion through digital mediums. Statistical analysis of online religious participation and engagement metrics was applied to quantitative data to support qualitative findings.

RESULTS

Today, digitalization processes increasingly impact all aspects of human life (Pelevin, 2024). Religion is no exception since religious life is being adapted to the virtual space. Along with the emergence of new forms and methods of information consumption, new religious practices are also emerging because of widespread digitalization. In the modern world, religion is still one of the main indicators of a person's place in society, but due to the very active processes of globalization and migration, difficulties with religious identity very often arise (Pelevin, 2024).

In the traditional sense, religious identity implies belonging to a particular religious group, and this type of identity plays a fundamental role in the formation of personal identification (Pelevin, 2024). In addition, religious identification, due to its immutability and belonging to a separate religion from birth, was very closely linked to national and ethnic identification. However, with the advent of Internet resources and a variety of virtual opportunities, the very essence of religious identity has changed, as has its purpose. Clearly, the emergence of the Internet space has a powerful impact on the formation of religious identity, especially for young and progressive people worldwide, including Kazakhstan. With the development of the Internet and new ways of transmitting information, religious customs and beliefs are also constantly being transformed. Nevertheless, despite this, religion has not lost its purpose and plays a vital role in developing culture and preserving national identity (Herdiansyah et al., 2023).

> "Issues of self-identification are becoming more and more relevant all over the world in connection with the large-scale processes of globalization and the formation of a multiculture. Religious identity, as the attitude of oneself to a certain religion, is one of the decisive factors in the formation of a modern personality" (Pelevin, 2024).

According to sociological surveys, only 67% of citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan consider themselves believers, only 20% of them indicate that they belong to a certain religious community and adhere to customs, whereas 47% of residents, although they consider themselves believers, do not participate in religious life. Thus, one can conclude that one's attitude towards believers is not a consequence of pronounced religious beliefs but due to long-established traditions.

With the advent of the Internet and all its possibilities, gaining personal identification in the religious sphere has become even more difficult. Initially, the Internet space was a source of information in the field of religion, including sermons, various scientific and analytical literature, as well as the positions of religious leaders and ordinary believers. However, over time and with the development of the capabilities of the global network, the information storage function has become insufficient for most believers. Internet users need not only to receive information but also to fulfill other needs in the field of religious consciousness,

such as prayers, confession, and pilgrimage. The Internet space not only provides all the possibilities for this but also significantly expands them. Due to the emergence of new prospects for the development of the religious consciousness of citizens, researchers note the active development of the religious online environment. Believers and clergy representatives interact in the virtual space as providers of certain content.

Modern scientific and technical means provide ample opportunities for modeling a new character in a virtual plane. Such a religious identity is considered an opportunity to expand everyday religious life (Campbell et al., 2022). The peculiarity of religious views is that identity in the religious sphere can change more than once and depends on ideological trends in the virtual environment.

Since the Internet space has a diverse impact on religious identity, Table 1 presents the main positive and negative aspects.

Table 1. *Features of the influence of digital technologies on religious identity*

Positive aspects	Negative aspects
– complete freedom of worldview and religion;	– dissemination of extremist information;
– the possibility of carrying out religious relations from anywhere in the world;	– expanding the ability of attackers to influence a wide audience, using religious teachings;
– expanding the possibilities of obtaining information on religious topics;	– manipulation of the consciousness of citizens and incitement of inter-confessional hostility;
– the ability of spiritual leaders to spread information to a wider audience;	– changing the essence of religious identity and blurring the boundaries between the virtual and real world;
– communication between members of the same religious group has no territorial restrictions;	– the risk of loss of personal identity for people who are illiterate in the religious and digital sphere.
– religious views can change and transform, depending on a person's worldview.	

Source: Ferguson et al., 2021

Thus, it can be argued that the policy of peaceful interaction of different religious movements in one country is the most successful and practical for the state. Today, the Internet plays the role of a tool through which the population can receive religious information, communicate with like-minded people or carry out religious activities. Of course, new relationships that arise in the virtual space require special attention since they are developing very dynamically. But if technological progress cannot be stopped, then every effort must be made to ensure that religious relations in the Internet space are controlled and benefit

citizens. Undoubtedly, the Internet strongly influences a person's perception and worldview, which also forms religious views.

The emerging phenomenon of digital religious identity is associated with the emerging religious problem of «projected or constructed religious identity». The fact that religion has become an object of digitalization is due to the need to adapt to a new reality in which to maintain both tradition and the flock or the Ummah (Ummah (أمة) refers to the collective community of Muslims worldwide, transcending geographical, cultural, racial and political boundaries. The term comes from the Arabic root word «umm» (mother) and carries connotations of unity, brotherhood/sisterhood, and shared beliefs), one must be relevant to time. Despite the discourse of resistance to digital transformation on the part of individual confessional communities, the process of transforming religion into digital reality is intensifying. A huge number of religious sites in the digital segment of Kazakhstan demonstrates the demand for digital technologies in the presentation of religious online projects. The problems that arise during the digital transformation of religions are primarily related to the formation of religious identities, which are becoming increasingly blurred. Spiritual security and its preservation depend on the preservation of religious and cultural immunity, which is formed based on a country's historically established religious landscape. The concern about the «dual meaning of digitalization» lies precisely in the plane of spiritual security since the spiritual and value attitudes contained in the global digital market of religious products are clip-based, of a different nature. Anonymity and quasi-religiosity in the Internet space promote both religious emancipation and excessive individualization. It is necessary to note the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the fragmentation of communication processes and the 'digitalization' of religious traditions and practices.

CONCLUSION

The consequence of global informatization is a very rapid development in the field of religious relations, which leads to risks of loss of identity and blurring of any boundaries between social groups. The influence of the Internet space on the development of religious identity is a decisive factor in the formation of modern identity since not only the way of communication is changing, but also the very essence and social role of religion changing as well.

As a result of the conducted research, the following conclusions were formulated regarding the impact of digitalization on religious identity in the modern socio-political context:

– One of the problems in the digital space in the field of religious identity formation is the problem of politicization of religious traditions and values. It should be noted that researchers on the relationship between politics and religion, such as Michel Foucault, Slava Zizek, Baudrillard, Uzlaner, and many others, have noted some constancy of this interaction. A historical digression into this problem shows the role of religion in the formation of even statehood in individual countries. In the XX and XXI centuries, politics has had a significant impact on religion, using religious value-based spiritual paradigms for far-from spiritual purposes. Max Weber's famous idea of the existence of the Protestant ethics in capitalism and vice versa still influences the processes of secularization. In Islamic countries, for example, especially after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, religion became

the main factor in the formation of statehood. Islam in Iran is the foundation for developing society and Iranian identity. In the United States, as is well known, Christian rights have exerted and continue to influence political processes in the country. The separation of politics from religion is one of the conditions of modern secular society. Along with the rise of secularization, there is a religious upsurge, which, in the era of digitalization, has more opportunities to involve religion and religious traditions in politics. Religious discourse and the politicization of religion have an impact on religious identity. In these conditions, it is necessary for Kazakh society to preserve spiritual and cultural sovereignty. Digitalization in the process of religious identification should be based on the traditions of religions that have historically arisen here, which demonstrate a stable religious identity, a culture of religious culture based on tolerance and the ability to inter-confessional communication;

– the process of digitalization has a multidimensional impact on the formation and transformation of religious identity, modifying traditional practices and creating new forms of religious interaction;

– expanding access to a variety of information contributes to the pluralization of religious views and the individualization of beliefs;

– social media plays a significant role in consolidating virtual religious communities, but it can also be a tool of political influence and manipulation;

– the digital environment poses several challenges for religious groups, including information security and data reliability issues. Further research is needed to develop strategies for adapting religious communities to digital reality while preserving their fundamental values and traditions.

Based on the provided input, the analysis of the situation suggests that several challenges and opportunities characterize the current state of religious identity in the digital age. To address these issues effectively, the following scientific recommendations are proposed:

1. Comprehensive Digital Literacy Programs. Faith-based communities should be enabled to develop structured digital literacy programs for religious institutions and educational bodies. The modules should include critical thinking, source verification and digital manipulation techniques. The curriculum should be evidence-based and regularly updated to reflect emerging digital challenges and technological changes.

2. Cross Platform Verification Mechanisms. Standardized verification protocols for religious content across digital platforms should be developed and implemented by regulatory bodies. This framework should include automated detection systems for potentially harmful content while preserving legitimate religious discourse. Balanced and effective content moderation can only be guaranteed if technical experts, religious scholars and digital policy specialists collaborate in the implementation process.

3. Integration of Multi-Modal Communication Strategies. Religious organizations should use an integrated communication approach of traditional and digital channels. This should also involve the development of hybrid learning environments that combine instruction with digital resources and

are accessible yet do not compromise traditional values and practices. Empirical research methods should be employed in the regular assessment of communication effectiveness.

4. Digital Content Management in Religious Context – Regional Governance Networks. Formal networks for cross-border collaboration on the management of digital religious content should be established. These networks should provide for regular sharing of knowledge, development of resources and collective action in the society in the light of digital challenges. The implementation process should include standardized protocols for information sharing and joint initiative development among participating nations.

5. Implementation of Evidence-Based Media Literacy Frameworks. Media literacy programs taught at educational institutions should include practical tools for evaluating religious content, fact-checking methodologies, and understanding digital manipulation techniques. These programs should be based on empirical research and include source verification. Quantitative and qualitative research methods should be used to assess the effectiveness of programs.

6. Digital Authentication Systems. Research institutions should also concentrate on developing authenticating systems for religious content in the digital environment. This includes blockchain-based verification systems and digital signatures for accredited religious content providers. The implementation should involve technical experts and religious authorities to ensure that the system is credible and reliable from a religious point of view.

These recommendations should be implemented through a systematic, evidence-based approach with provision for regular monitoring and evaluation processes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Ethical Commission Approval

This study did not require approval from an ethics committee as it did not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data. All data used in this research were obtained from publicly available sources.

Conflict of Interest Statement

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

REFERENCES

Abdurrohman, Fattah and Andalusia Ajeng Fitriana (2023). "The role of digital literacy in strengthening student religious moderation". *Annual International Conference on Islamic Education for Students,* 2(1): 238-247.

Aimaganbetova, Olga, Elnur Adilova, Nazira Sadykova and Laura Baimoldina (2022). "Study of the Psychological Characteristics and Structure of Religious Identity of Student Youth". *Bulletin of Abai KazNPU, Series of Psychology*, 73(4): 1-11. https://doi.org/10.51889/7339.2022.88.93.022.

Campbell, Heidi and Ruth Tsuria (2021). *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media (2nd ed.).* Routledge.

Campbell, Heidi and Wendi Bellar (2022). *Digital Religion: The Basics.* Taylor & Francis.

Evolvi, Giulia (2022). "Religion and the Internet: Digital Religion, (hyper) Mediated Spaces and Materiality". *Zeitschrift Für Religion, Gesellschaft Und Politik*, 6(1): 9-25.

Ferguson, Jauhara, Elaine Howard Ecklund and Connor Rothschild (2021). "Navigating Religion Online: Jewish and Muslim Responses to Social Media". *Religions*, 12(4): 258.

Gálik, Slavomir (2019). "On Human Identity in Cyberspace of Digital Media". *European Journal of Transformation Studies*, 7(2): 33-44.

Herdiansyah, Herdis, Mochammad Rijaal Soedrajad, Hawa Nada Ismita and Ameylia Arintyas (2023). "Resetting the Relationship between Human and Nature: Religion and the New Communication Technologies". *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 22(66): 29-45.

Kurganskaya, Valentina and Vladimir Dunaev (2020). "Information Technologies and Monitoring of the Religious Identification of Kazakhstani Citizens". *Information and Education: Borders of Communication INFO*, 12(20): 215-218.

Lifanov, Sergey and Tatyana Lifanova (2022). "Virtualization of Religion and the Influence of Digital Technologies on the Formation of Religious Identity". In *Humanitarian Knowledge and Spiritual Security: Proceedings of the 5th International Scientific and Practical Conference*, 216–225. Dagestan State University.

Mukhatayeva, Gulnara (2021). "Trajectory of Religious Radicalization". *Eurasian Journal of Religious Studies*, 28(4): 66-75.

Nord, Ilona and Judith Petzke (2024). Religious Education in the digital change. Concepts and reflections from a German context. Retrieved from https://opus.bibliothek.uni-wuerzburg.de/frontdoor/index/index/docId/32858. Accessed: 10.08.2024.

Nyazbekov Serik, Tatyana Lifanova, Rinat Kazmukhanov, Maya Tasybekova, and Dauirjan Byerdimurat (2023). "The Specifics of Digitalization of Traditional Religions in Modern Kazakhstan". *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 104(5): 1-10.

Pelevin, Sergey (2024). "Transformation of Religious Identity in Modern Society in the Context of Globalization: Analysis of the Influence of Social Networks

on Religious Communities and Practices". *Context and Reflection: Philosophy of the World and Human Being*, 13(3A): 30-37.

Sagimbayev, Askar (2023). "State Policy in the Religious Sphere at the Current Stage of Kazakhstan's Development". *Public Administration and Civil Service,* 1(84): 53-61.

Tasbolat, Assyltay (2024). "Discourse Analysis of Religious Authority and Gender Norms in Kazakh Social Media: Rizabek Battauly's Patriarchal Views". *International Journal of Religion*, 5: 4540-4549.

Turganbayeva, Janara and Natalya Seitakhmetova (2023). "Islamic Identity and National Identity: Contexts of Interconnection". *Al-Farabi*, 83(3): 99-109.

Umbet, Raushan and Moldir Akmadi (2024). The Digital Construction of Religious Identity: An Overview of Contemporary Research. Reviews of Modern Science, 2024(8). Retrieved from https://ojs.publisher.agency/index.php/RMS/article/view/4914. Accessed: 22.12.2024.