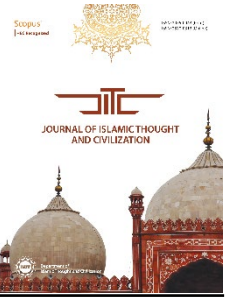
**Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization (JITC)**
**Volume 15 Issue 1, Spring 2025**
ISSN$_{(P)}$: 2075-0943 ISSN$_{(E)}$: 2520-0313
Homepage: https://journals.umt.edu.pk/index.php/JITC

**Article QR**




**Title:** **Social Networks as a Tool for Islamic Preaching**

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**DOI:** https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.151.03

**History:** Received: December 23, 2024, Revised: February 12, 2025, Accepted: February 17, 2025, Published: April 25, 2025

**Citation:** Kerim, Shamshadin., Maxat Kurmanaliyev, and Yershat Ongarov. "Social Networks as a Tool for Islamic Preaching." *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 15, no. 1 (2025): 44–58. https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.151.03

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**Conflict of Interest:** Author(s) declared no conflict of interest

A publication of
Department of Islamic Thought and Civilization, School of Social Science and Humanities
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# Social Networks as a Tool for Islamic Preaching

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## Abstract

In Kazakhstan, social media platforms play a significant role in the dissemination of Islamic teachings. Therefore, the current study aimed to explore the utilization, integration, and significance of these social networks in helping advance the Islamic values within the context of Kazakhstan. The study sought to analyse the evolution and modernization of traditional religious messages, key development pathways, content characteristics, unique traits, presentation formats, and the engagement of prominent figures during the digital age. Preaching Islam through social media is rapidly growing, with evolving topics and shifting content, reflecting ongoing refinement of strategies. To broaden their reach and captivate audiences, preachers hone diverse techniques and increasingly incorporate psychological support, guidance, goal-setting, and motivational themes into their discussions. Social media platforms foster individual religious figures to enhance their visibility and expand their follower base, spurring competition and encouraging the rise of religious influencers. The online prominence of these preachers often serves charitable causes as well as commercial interests. The burgeoning role of social networks in promoting Islam in Kazakhstan is noteworthy. This is because it possesses significant potential to shape religious socialization and influence the development of Islamic beliefs and perspectives.

***Keywords***: digital religion, internet, Islam, preaching, religious influencers, social network

## Introduction

The swift advancement of information technology and the Internet is significantly influencing humanity's spiritual life, transforming the nature of relationships with religious practices. The pervasive presence of social media, with its diverse and multifunctional capabilities, is fundamentally altering how religious institutions operate, as well as how religious information is disseminated and spiritual values are promoted. While the diversity and substance of Islamic resources available on the Internet in Kazakhstan exhibit considerable variation, the study particularly focused to examine Islamic calls as a distinct phenomenon due to the prominence of this trend in terms of demand, perspectives, and impact. This study aimed to explore the evolving dynamics of social media usage as well as its role and influence in promoting Islam, using Kazakhstan as a case study. Furthermore, the study sought to identify the key trends (development patterns), content, unique characteristics, formats, profiles, and notable figures associated with this emerging phenomenon while analysing the transformation and modernization of traditional calls in light of digitization and consumerism.

The exploration of religious discussions online demands a thorough examination as it represents a novel occurrence. Researchers are engaging in studies concerning faiths and the technological aspects of religious rituals, as well as the evolution of spiritual dialogues within the digital realm.

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They aim to uncover fresh experiences and categorize the diverse expressions and formats that emerge in this context.[1]

Researchers have released a publication examining religion and its engagement with various forms of digital media, drawing on case studies from five principal world religions.[2] Professor Gary R. Bunt focuses on Islam, the Muslim community, the myriad technological and digital transformations instigated by the Internet, particularly concerning their effect on religious authority and identity. His insightful studies regarding the rise of a "cyber-Islamic environment," argue that the introduction of, "new individuals," and "new perspectives" would ultimately foster the development of "new religious public spheres," within Islamic communities.[3] Curated by Roberta Rosegnall, this collaborative volume encompasses a broad cultural and geographical scope, ranging from Indonesia, Iran, and the Arab Middle East to North America. It places cyber-Islam in the context of wider societal movements and explores digital media technologies across a diverse array of platforms, such as websites, podcasts, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube channels, online magazines, discussion forums, and religious apps.[4] Sahar Khamis analyses various important shifts and contradictions that the digital revolution has introduced into modern Muslim communities. She delves into these intricate and multifaceted phenomena, as well as the tensions that exist between contrasting forces, such as traditionalism and modernity, diversity and unity, dominance and opposition, along with globalization and localization in the online realm.[5]

As for Kazakh researchers, K. Nazarbek explores the unique aspects and features of the informational and propaganda efforts of religious organizations and communities within the digital realm, specifically focusing on Kazakhstan. However, the study is primarily centred on religious-extremist and terrorist entities that have faced judicial restrictions, as well as the methods they employ to spread propaganda via online platforms and engage with their followers remotely.[6] A study was conducted titled, "The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Islamic Institutions in Kazakhstan." In the study, Julia Shapoval and Tatyana Lipina conducted a content analysis of the Religious Administration of Kazakhstan Muslims (KMDB) website and its social media profiles, which were established by this organization during the quarantine period and disseminated across various media outlets and messaging services.[7] However, the study lacks a thorough examination of preaching via

[1]Mustafa Çuhadar, "Dijitalleşen din ve diyanet (Digitalizing Religion and Religious Affairs)," Çamdereli, B. Önay Doğan, & N. Kocabay Şener içinde, Dijitalleşen Din (Medya ve Din 2) Köprü Yayınları, İstanbul (2015): 175-222.

[2]Gary R. Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority,* (North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press, 2018).http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469643182_bunt.

[3]Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Pluto Press, 2003), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18fs6ck.

[4]Riri Khariroh, "Cyber Muslims Mapping Islamic Digital Media in the Internet Age," *ISLAM NUSANTARA: Journal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture*, 73, no.3 (2022): 101–13. https://doi.org/10.47776/islamnusantara.v3i2.375.

[5]Sahar Khamis, "The Paradoxes of Modern Islamic Discourses and Socio-Religious Transformation in the Digital Age," *Religions* 15, no. 2 (2024): 207. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020207

[6]K. Nazarbek, "Information and Propaganda Activities of Religious Communities in the Internet Space," *Vestnik KazNU, Religious Studies Series*, 1 no. 29.2. (2022): 21–29, https://10.26577//EJRS.2022.v29.i1.r3

[7]Yuliya Shapoval, and Tatyana Lipina, "Islam In Kazakhstan under the Coronavirus Pandemic Conditions: 'Testing' With Mediatization," *Adam Alemi* 95. no,1 (2023):142-55, https://doi.org/10.48010/2023.1/1999-5849.13.

social media platforms. Following the pandemic, this phenomenon continues to grow. Analysing how traditional faiths adjust to contemporary technologies is both significant and intriguing from a scholarly perspective.

In today's digital age, new avenues are emerging in the realm of spirituality, creating opportunities for exploration. The increasing number of individuals are turning to online platforms to receive religious knowledge and verify its accuracy. This shift towards digitization is motivating religious leaders to embrace technological advancements. By establishing a presence in the online arena, faith communities are bolstering their impact on societal values and perspectives. Religious leaders are harnessing the power of the Internet to disseminate their beliefs effectively, transforming it into a powerful tool for Islamic propagation. The thorough investigation into the authentic expressions of Islam in digital environments is essential for both theoretical understanding and practical application. It is crucial to gather and categorize materials related to this subject to better understand its trends and developments. The current study offered a fresh perspective by addressing the pressing issue of research necessity, focusing specifically on contemporary challenges within Kazakhstan, drawing from the most recent data available.

The authors, such as Zaid B., Evolvi, Ibahrine M., Mashudi M. Zilya K., Rozehnal R., and Worth R., discussed Islamic call-in social media, highlighting the multifaceted nature of its influence. They analysed how various platforms, from Facebook to TikTok, serve as conduits to disseminate religious teachings, promote specific interpretations of Islam, and foster online communities. The research shed light on the strategies employed by individuals and organizations to attract followers, counter negative portrayals of Islam, and engage in interfaith dialogues. As for the current study, it is marked by its emphasis on Islamic discourse within the framework of Kazakhstan.

## 2. Methodology

The current study utilized both primary and secondary data. Supplementary secondary data, including original scientific studies, books, written materials, and data analysis was integrated, which contributed to the formation of a novel perspective on the examined issue. Relevant literature, research findings, and works published internationally concerning cyber-Islam, alongside scholarly insights, successful experiences, and advanced methodologies on this topic, were considered and employed as comparative references. Additionally, the study benefited from access to various types of religious content and its frequency on social media platforms. Religious materials sourced from social networks were gathered to enhance and promote spiritual awareness among diverse groups of followers. The objective was to explore the capabilities and achievements of social media within the Muslim community and among imams in Kazakhstan. Data was gathered through observational techniques that involved detailed searches. The evaluation of social media use, including the pages and blogs of individuals, centred on concrete examples of content available in the Islamic Kazakh language.

## 3. Analysis and Discussion

The significant portion of Kazakhstan's populace practices Islam. According to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 483-IV, enacted on October 11th, 2011, concerning “Religious Services and Religious Associations,” Article 8 of this legislation specifies that "missionary activities can be carried out by the citizens of Kazakhstan, as well as by foreign nationals and stateless individuals, only after they have registered."[8]

KMDB is the largest officially recognized Islamic organization in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The mosques associated with this organization engage in religious preaching both in traditional

[8]“Kazakhstan: Law No. 482-IV, on Religious Activities and Religious Associations,” https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2011/en/122796

venues and through online platforms. Typically, traditional sermons are conducted in mosques prior to Friday prayers, after these prayers, and during special gatherings with the community. However, modern technology has opened up numerous avenues to fulfil the religious informational needs of diverse audiences. Resultantly, imams and individual preachers are not confined to traditional Islamic outreach methods; they also embrace new innovations and contemporary online communication formats. [9]

Currently, a significant portion of the Muslim community in our nation consists of a younger generation that actively engages with social media. Consequently, it is essential for preachers to recognize that the majority of their audience comprises the Y millennials. The younger demographic actively seeks spiritual connection online. Consequently, Islamic calls disseminated through various digital platforms resonate more with youth. Research into the mediatization of Islamic outreach is increasingly vital and strategic, particularly as the millennial generation, which is synonymous with social media, leads this period of disruption. Engaging this group through tailored online content is paramount, as it allows for a deeper connection and understanding of faith amidst the fast-paced digital landscape that they are accustomed to.[10]

The religious content shared via social media resonates with the preferences of the millennial demographic.[11] This generation can engage with sermons on their devices virtually from anywhere, even while driving, without the need to select a specific location or time. Sermons stored digitally can be preserved for extended periods, allowing for repeated viewing, copying, sharing, and distribution. With these capabilities, the Internet has emerged as one of the most effective platforms for religious outreach. These factors have contributed to the growing trend of Islamic propagation within the online realm.

Online platforms play a significant role in the practice of Islamic call. Kazakhstan's online landscape features a diverse array of Islamic content. It is believed that the popularity of preaching content is largely due to its ability to be absorbed primarily through auditory and visual means, thereby minimizing the need for deep cognitive engagement. In Kazakhstan, preachers primarily leverage social media platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram to disseminate their messages.

### 3.1. Preaching on YouTube

YouTube serves as a user-friendly platform to watch and download videos. Users can enjoy content on various devices, ranging from large-screen televisions to smartphones. It has become an essential medium for religious teachings, utilized by many within the religious community. Sermons can be shared without time constraints and may also be recorded in various settings, such as mosques, auditoriums, or among congregations, with these recordings being uploaded afterwards. The current study indicated that over a hundred Kazakh-language channels and studios are dedicated to Islamic preaching on this platform. Some of these have a background in this field and began their YouTube journey earlier, successfully growing their subscriber base through high-quality content.

[9]Kantarbayeva Shanbayeva, and Mahoney, "Activities of Mosques of Kazakhstan in the Field of Religious Education," *KazNU Bulletin* 38, no. 2, (2024): 16–29, https://doi.org/10.26577//ejrs.2024.v38.i2.r2

[10]M. Isnaini, and Ahmad Fauzi, "Islamic Boarding School Marketing Communication and Da'wah Through Tik-Tok," *Dakwatuna: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi Islam*, 8. No, 2. (2022): 180. https://10.54471/dakwatuna.v8i2.1919

[11]Erwin Erwin, Siska Jeanete Saununu, and Arief Yanto Rukmana, "The Influence of Social Media Influencers on Generation Z Consumer Behavior in Indonesia," *West Science Interdisciplinary Studies* 1, No.10 (2023): 1040-50, https://doi.org/10.58812/wsis.v1i10.317.

The ÁLI studio has been active for a decade, amassing 1.03 million subscribers and producing 9,000 videos featuring leading preachers. “TALIM KZ” channel, hosted by Nurzhan Zhaksylyk, has 528,000 subscribers and 2,100 videos since its launch on February 13th, 2013. “ILIM NURY,” associated with Labak Ata Mosque in Kaskelen village, has 379,000 subscribers and 2,100 videos. Other notable channels include the "Sermon compilation channel” (@IslamUagyz) with 140,000 subscribers and 294 videos, “Daguat KZ,” with 140,000 subscribers and 464 videos, and “iman nur_kz,” which has 101,000 subscribers and 815 videos uploaded. Among the Islamic sermons presented in the Kazakh language on YouTube, the late Abdugappar Smanov garnered the highest number of views. Utilizing clear and straightforward language, tailored to the local audience in the southern region of Kazakhstan, Smanov effectively conveys religious teachings to the audience. He often provides real-life examples to engage his listeners. Furthermore, his emotionally charged delivery captures attention, particularly when he critiques cultural practices that clash with Islamic principles, often employing vivid comparisons. For instance, in August 2017, while discussing loans, he stated, “Each percentage of interest is akin to committing adultery with your mother seven times”. This bold assertion provoked significant backlash on social media.[12]

A. Smanov's video titled, “Why did he cry? Alas,” attracted over 2,881,000 views, while, “Impressive Sermon,” garnered 2.3 million views, “Tearful Sermon,” drew 1.2 million views, and “Sermon in Turkistan,” reached 1.1 million views. The content analysis revealed that such videos capture significant public interest as compared to others, likely due to their distinctive titles featuring impactful words, such as “impressive,” “tears,” and “warming,” alongside a title “sermon.” Eight years ago, 2.2 million viewers engaged with his message “The Truth of Death,” and six years ago, millions watched, “Story of Old Man in Turkey” (Amazing Propaganda), along with 2 million listeners for “The Old Man Who Went on Pilgrimage and Returned with Repentance.” Despite his passing on July 1st, 2020, his sermons continue to resonate till today. Smanov succumbed to COVID-19 in Saryagash, Turkestan region. In light of the deteriorating health crisis then, around 2,000 mourners attended his funeral, violating the strict health guidelines which limited gatherings to 30. The footage capturing the large turnout for the preacher’s final send-off sparked considerable discussion on social media.[13]

Social media platforms enable preachers to gain recognition among religious followers nationwide, enhancing their status and reputation while providing them with various opportunities. In Kazakhstan, it is a common practice within religious communities to refer to preachers as “ustaz,” as a sign of respect, placing them on par with educators. Within the Muslim community, Yerlan Akataev is held in high regard for his profound understanding of Islam, compelling sermons, and devoutness. His speaking style is marked by a gentle, measured, and tranquil tone. At first, the attendance for his sermons from outside the mosque was limited. He commenced his teachings in a modest mosque located on the outskirts of Almaty. Those who resonated with his messages established the religious-educational centre named, “Erlan Akataev,” diligently tracking his sermons and lectures in various mosques and venues, documenting them through filming, editing, and archiving. The channel has uploaded a total of 627 videos. The number of subscribers to the studio has grown to 425,000 faithful listeners. Among the uploads, there are 287 videos pertaining to the life of the Prophet Muhammad (*SAW*) under the title “SIRA 23,” which has garnered 57,400

[12]“The answer to Smanov: Can Kazakhs take Loans from the Poor? (video),” (2017) https://dalanews.kz/kz/article/smanovqa-jauap-qazaq-nesyeni- jetiskennen-ala-ma-vydeo.html, accessed on 3.1.25

[13]Mıat Káshibaı, "2 myńǵa jýyq adam qatysty: Ýaǵyzshy Smanov janazasynyń jaı-japsary (2 thousand people were killed: The funeral of the deceased Smanov)”, Qamshy (September 02, 2020). https://qamshy.kz/latyn/article/58294-2-mynhgha-dguyq-adam-qatysty-uaghyzshy-smanov-dganazasynynh-dgay-dgapsary.html

followers. Additionally, the “Hadith Teaching,” channel has attracted 12,000 subscribers, featuring 8 translated videos into Russian made available on the platform" Live for sake of truth".

### 3.2. TikTok and Instagram

Religious leaders in Kazakhstan are increasingly turning to social media platforms in order to broaden their reach. Promoting Islam online necessitates a blend of active engagement, media savvy, and innovative approaches. As of 2023, Instagram and TikTok dominate social network usage in Kazakhstan, with Instagram boasting 10.45 million users and TikTok closely following at 10.41 million.[14] Originally designed for business, educational, and entertainment purposes, TikTok has also emerged as a venue for religious discourse. Recently, there has been a notable surge in Islamic-themed content in the Kazakh language on TikTok. For instance, the page “@jurektunushtugu,” has gained 75.4 thousand subscribers and received 67.3 thousand likes, while another account, "@user5003030259097", has attracted 2.1 million likes from its 3,098 followers. Subscribers to the page “@kerek_dunye” - 2458, likers - 43.6 thousand; subscribers to the page, “@ ulgili._soz” - 216.7, likes - 6.1 million; subscribers to “muhammed2116kz,” page - 2064, 18.4 thousand likes; subscribers to the page “@musylmaan.korgany,” - 43.3 thousand, likes - 1.1 million; “@uazizdarchannel,” subscribed to the page - 1156, liked - 5858; “@juma_namazz,” followers - 11.4 thousand, likes - 185.2 thousand; “@islam_nasihaty,” subscribed to the page - 9254, liked - 324.7 thousand; subscribers to the page “@user8006060854,” - 710. It is important to note that the count of posts, followers, and likes is refreshed daily, whether it pertains to a profile on any social media platform or a channel-studio.

In 2023, KMDB directed its social media efforts towards TikTok, producing a total of 60 video sermons. The “Muftiyat,” page has amassed 36,700 comments and 315,400 likes, with the most popular video, titled, “Every Muslim Should Know,” featuring Batyrzhan Mansurov, garnering 1.3 million views. The Instagram account "@"muftiuatkz" has 3,790 posts and 330,000 followers, while the YouTube channel “@muftiuatkz,” has released 2,000 videos and has 466,000 subscribers.

There are also numerous sermon pages on Instagram. Some of them are mentioned as follows: "uagyz_nasihat", “uagizdar_tynda,” “uaguz_tv,” “uagyz.gibrat,” “gibrat. Al,” “korkem_amal,” “jannat_maksatum,” “firdaus_qz,” “turajol_paraqsha,” “kerek_dun1e,” “Ilimgeqyzmet,” and “bul_dunie_aldamshy.” The preachers, recognized for their writings on these platforms, often adapt their favoured vocabulary through editing. Their personal profiles serve as effective outlets to promote their own works. Unlike earlier media, such as radio and television, the present day’s social networks enable anyone including those who are not clergy, to record, edit, and disseminate information at will. Additionally, imams and naib-imams utilize their social media pages to share their sermons. Furthermore, it is evident online that religious individuals not officially affiliated with recognized religious organizations, such as KMDB, seek to engage with the Islamic community in various ways.

The five leading individuals on Instagram in terms of follower count are: Kabylbek Zhumabekov (kabylbek.ustaz: posts - 1421, followers - 956,000); Nurlan Baizhigituly (nurlanimam.kz: posts - 793, followers - 907,000); Arman Kuanyshbaev (armanustaz.kz: posts - 2029, followers - 818,000); Nursultan Rysmagambetov (nursultan_rysmaganbet: posts - 289, followers - 715,000); and Yersin Amire (yersin_amire: posts - 994, followers - 405,000). The rising

[14]“TikTok and Instagram compete for user attention in Kazakhstan -The number of Internet users in the country at the beginning of this year amounted to 17.73 million,” 18 April 2023 14:00, *Profit.kz*, https://profit.kz/news/64528/TikTok-i-Instagram-konkuriruut-za-vnimanie-polzovatelej-v-Kazahstane

follower counts on the personal profiles of these speakers reflect an increasing public interest in Islamic teachings.

The rise of the Internet, the development of social media platforms, the increasing variety of applications, and the transformation of services, along with a growing user base, are significantly altering Islamic outreach methods.[15] Depending on the specific profile within these networks, sermons diverge from conventional approaches, leading to adaptations in style and technique. High-quality visual content, both video and photography, plays a crucial role in this context. Such visual media captures the audience's attention effectively, often evoking a stronger emotional response. Due to the preference for short clips that are only a few seconds long, many preachers opt for formats, such as reels instead of more traditional options.[16] This necessitates the ability to communicate concisely, minimizing extensive quotations from the Qur'an and hadiths.

### 3.3. From Preaching to Religious Blogging

The analysis conducted in the current study indicated that popular internet preachers address relevant themes, such as psychology, goal-setting, and motivation, reflecting the interests of their listeners. It is advantageous to pose inquiries pertinent to contemporary existence, emphasize individual household and family matters, or strive for success in business, attain lifelong aspirations, excel in performance, offer insights, provide direction, respond to diverse queries, and broaden the scope of subjects. Nurlan Baizhigituly launched his personal TikTok account under the handle "@ozinditany," (know yourself), while Arman Kuanyshbaev referred to himself as an "Islamolic, theologian," and "coach," on his personal Instagram pages. This dynamic has resulted in the emergence of independent religious figures outside of the established religious organizations. Social media serves as a vibrant platform that allows preachers to rapidly gain significant followings. Nowadays, these individuals are increasingly focused on connecting with more followers and expanding their digital presence, creating a competitive environment. Influencers on Instagram with substantial follower counts are perceived as more appealing due to their popularity status. It is crucial to understand that the perception of popularity, as indicated by an influencer's follower count, only translates to a sense of opinion leadership in specific situations.[17] Experts assert that there has been the emergence of a "religious influencer," akin to a "coach," guiding followers, in Kazakhstan ("Tiktok-imam and blogger-father: why popular religious influencers in Kazakhstan?"[18]

Ehjan Arzroomchiler claims that the ambition to attain proficiency as a religious leader may now reveal that the digital realm provides an alternative pathway that does not inherently necessitate the attainment of conventional competencies. This new trajectory adheres to capitalist principles, suggesting that effective marketing of one's offerings may draw a broader audience. The veracity of online content often receives little scrutiny. Introducing alternatives within a religious framework

[15]Fitri Maghfirahi, Fitria Andriani, and Husnul Mirzal, "Social Media as a Medium of Da'wah: Religious Transformation among Online Da'wah Audience on TikTok Platform," *Jlentera: Jurnal Ilmu Dakwah Dan Komunikasi*, V (1) (2021): 81–104.

[16]E. V. Miletova, "Internet Preaching as a New Format of Religious Communication," *Aktual'nye Problemy Filologii i Pedagogičeskoj Lingvistiki,* 2. No, (2024): 82–93, https://doi.org/10.29025/2079-6021-2024-2-82-93

[17]Marijke De Veirman, Veroline Cauberghe, and Liselot Hudders, "Marketing through Instagram Influencers: The Impact of Number of Followers and Product Divergence on Brand Attitude," *International Journal of Advertising,* 36. No, 5 (2017): 798–828, https://10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035.

[18]"Religious influencers: blessing or threat for Kazakhstan?" *K News*, 12.12.2023, https://knews.kg/2023/12/12/religioznye-inflyuensery-blago-ili-ugroza-dlya-kazahstana, accessed on 1.3.25.

does not equate to entirely eliminating traditional authority; rather, it significantly lessens its market presence. Those adept in promoting their materials may effectively sell their wares. In the pre-internet era, gaining prominence required a structured approach to education and expertise, with a clear pathway to garnering public interest and recognition.[19]

The Internet is introducing its own set of contradictions to religious practices. One notable irony is that social media platforms enable individuals to quickly ascend to the status of prominent preachers, gaining notoriety and a following almost overnight. The prime example of this phenomenon is Nurzhan Baizhigituly, who has emerged as one of Kazakhstan's most recognized preachers, largely due to the impact of digital technology. His rapid rise to fame may be attributed to TikTok, which has earned him titles, such as "Tik-Tok Imam," and "Tik-Toker Mullah." His immense popularity is particularly notable on social media; he boasts around 860 thousand followers on Instagram, making him Kazakhstan's leading online preacher in terms of follower count.

At first, religious leaders regarded TikTok as a medium to promote secular entertainment, viewing it primarily as a space for youth and non-religious content. However, N.Baizhigituly challenged this perception by successfully sharing Islamic teachings on the platform, quickly gaining popularity. In a conversation with this journalist, he mentioned that his son encouraged him to choose TikTok as a venue. For an imam accustomed to delivering sermons lasting between one to one and a half hours, this shift posed a challenge, as he needed to condense his messages to just 11 minutes. He reminisced about the numerous takes he had to film and the extensive content he had prepared: "I have over 7,000 viewers live." This audience size is unattainable in a traditional mosque setting, leading him to remark that the mosque visitors had become akin to that of social media.[20] Initially, he was ridiculed, with critics asking, "Did you turn TikTok into a preaching platform?" and questioning his late-night activity. He remained resilient during those early days when only two listeners tuned into his online sermons: his wife and child."[21]

The NURLANIMAM'@ozinditany page has 622.9 thousand subscribers and 5.3 million likes. The most viewed comments are: "Only Allah knows what is next," - about the imam who did not chase away a person for coming to the mosque under the influence of alcohol - 1.8 million, "To those who beat the girl," - 1 million, and "Not keeping a clean beard, having a nice look and grooming, minding one's language," - 917,5 thousand, "Heart and soul," - 908, 9 thousand, the sermon focuses on an individual who persevered in memorizing the Quran despite facing setbacks. It addresses inquiries, such as, "Is it acceptable for a woman to pray while standing on a boy's clothing if she lacks a prayer carpet?" and provides insights rooted in Kazakh customs, garnering 816.1 thousand views. Another factor contributing to his popularity on TikTok is his ability to create concise videos that align with the platform's format, rather than simply quoting passages from the Qur'ān and Hadīth. Furthermore, he frequently engages with his audience through live sessions, responding promptly to a variety of questions.

Furthermore, he presents intricate subjects with clarity and fluency. The language he uses is simple, avoiding unnecessary religious jargon, and the Kazakh terminology is easily comprehensible. His charm lies in his humorous and clever responses to questions, making him stand out among other religious leaders. While Kazakhstan is mainly a Muslim country, there is a significant portion of the

[19]Ehsan Arzroomchilar, "Social Media and Religiosity; a (Post)Phenomenological Account," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies,* 21, no. 63 (2022): 96–112.

[20]"800 dollars." Imam Nurlan talked about His Income from TikTok," *AstanaTv* 27.06.2023, https://astanatv.kz/kz/news/87655.

[21]"Imam Nurlan: "I Want to Promote Religion with Kindness, not by Threatening," *Turkistan Today,* May 10, 2023 https://turkistan.today/nurlan-imam-dindi-korkitip-emes-meyirimmen-nasikhattagim-keledi, accessed on 1.3.25

population that does not strictly practice Islam, creating a substantial demand for religious figures who can communicate the fundamentals of Islam in an approachable way. Imam Nurlam has effectively met this demand, thereby broadening his audience. In February 2022, a regional assessment was carried out by the Institute of Strategic Studies of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which operates under the auspices of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The assessment revealed that 71.1% of survey participants were identified as religious. Among these individuals, 25.8% stated that they adhered fully to all the major tenets of their faith.[22] His fellow clerics criticize him for trivializing and, to some degree, misinterpreting Islamic laws. One prominent theologian, Kabylbek Zhumabekov, argued that it is the imam's role to provide counsel while issuing a religious decree. He cited numerous instances of serious misinformation propagated by Imam Nurlan as an example of this issue.[23] In spite of these cautions, Imam Nurlan persists in providing live answers to religious inquiries on TikTok. At times, he makes mistakes in his responses. As Muslims increasingly seek answers to their religious queries online, they prefer to publish them on the Internet and receive rapid feedback.

Notwithstanding the fact that Nurlan, an imam, has not pursued academic studies overseas, and lacks extensive knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, his prolonged tenure as an imam across various regions has endowed him with the capacity to adeptly address challenging inquiries with wit while maintaining composure in front of a substantial audience. Furthermore, he effectively communicates the foundational tenets of faith in a manner that is both accessible and intelligible to the layperson. Since his recognition on the Internet, he is often invited by TV programs, educational institutions, and administrations to meet students and young people. It is rare for preachers to meet such audiences. He also took part in a discussion on "Second wife," a lively topic that sparks many controversies in the Kazakh society on the "El-erna," channel. In response to his host's question, he answered, "We have to stay away from religious fanatism and radicalism. Besides religion, we have numerous critical issues, such as future of our country. Also, we should not forget that we live in the secular country."[24] His interview faced opposition from religious people and well-known Kazakh preachers outraged on YouTube platform criticizing his speech. The prominent religious preacher Ersin Amire said, "Almighty God ordered five-times prayer on us individually, it is a pity that the imam claims this is not mandatory. This is probably a sign of Last Day."

The invitation extended to Nurlan Baizhigituly by President Joe Biden to visit the United States in February 2024 undoubtedly highlights the political significance of such interactions. Selecting an imam known for his influential social media presence and for soliciting donations from notable individuals and leaders worldwide is no simple task for U.S. presidents each year. Furthermore, he is characterized as an advocate for women's rights due to his persistent discourse on this topic during his online sermons. He has been invited as a guest speaker to various television programs and events in order to articulate Islamic perspectives on women's rights and their roles within society. In this context, his preaching endeavors may be likened to those of his Western female counterparts who similarly express their views through online platforms.[25] Another online religious figure, Nursultan

[22]"Society's Image: Level of religiosity of Kazakhstanis," *Analytics, Strategic Development Center,* June 9, 2022, https://kisi.kz/kogam-kelbeti-kazakstandyktardyn-dindarlyk-dengeji-2, accessed on 1.3.2025

[23]"He is making gross mistakes: Religious scholar warned the public about Imam Nurlan," *kisi.Kz*, December 24, 2022, https://on.kz/din_islam/oreskel-qatelikter-ziberip-zatyr-dintanusy-nurlan -imamga-qatysty-xalyqqa eskertu-zasady-204984, accessed on 1.3.2025

[24]"Qazaq Elim," https://www.youtube.com/@qazaqelimm

[25]Maxat Kurmanaliyev, Shamshadin Kerim, Aliy Almukhametov, and Temur Amankul, "American and European Muslim Female Bloggers Increase Their Preaching Efforts in Social Media," *Religions* 15, no. 12 (2024): 1485. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121485

Rysmagambetov, quickly rose to prominence in the country via social media platforms. His discussions on the lives of the Prophets and the history of Islam can be found on both TikTok and YouTube. Key to this success is the presence of a professional producer and skilled technical team who adeptly edit the content for each platform, utilizing social media effectively to enhance visibility through high-quality posts.

This strategic approach significantly boosts advertising impact. In various regions, congregations frequently requested that preachers make a point of inviting Nursultan, demonstrating the demand for his presence and engagement. Nursultan Rysmagambetuly's following on social media continues to expand rapidly. His sermon titled, "Secrets of Health You May Not Know," from the "ILIM NURY" studio received 767,000 views one year ago. Views of interviews, discussions, and podcasts across various YouTube channels range from 20,000 to over 1.5 million. This indicates that the preacher's rapid rise may be attributed to his youth and appealing personality, as well as his relaxed and authentic demeanor. Furthermore, alongside his advanced Islamic education acquired in Jordan, he is fluent in Kazakh and addresses contemporary issues that resonate with the public.

For an Instagram content creator, the foremost challenge resides in sustaining a coherent and compelling online persona. This necessitates frequent updates and the development of a visually striking profile. It is imperative to disseminate engaging material. Digital orators have been increasingly gaining prominence by incorporating strategies utilized by bloggers and social media influencers, endeavoring to captivate audiences through insights into their personal narratives, highlighting elements, such as fashion, gastronomy, travel experiences, and lifestyle selections. Following the cessation of his religious activities, Kabylbek Zhumabekov has frequently shared glimpses of his day-to-day life, featuring casual outfits, outdoor adventures, such as hiking and skiing, workouts at the gym, trips to the United States, and off-roading experiences. He is altering the content of the information he shares and has arranged for personal meetings. Consequently, he has become the leading preacher on Instagram in terms of follower count. He has begun recording a podcast featuring experts discussing topics related to spirituality, family, health, and financial matters as part of the initiative called, "Let's Improve Our Lives," on his YouTube channel. Recently, Kabylbek Zhumabekov introduced a mobile application service to enhance access to his past publications in various formats.

### 3.4. Charity or Business?

In what ways do religious leaders leverage their online influence? The analysis revealed that they utilize this digital authority for both philanthropic and business-related initiatives. The credibility of faith-based influencers who engage with social platforms to assist charitable organizations and motivate their audiences to contribute directly impacts their followers' spiritual commitment, engagement on social media, and willingness to donate.[26]

In Kazakhstan, it is a common practice to promote religious preachers on social media, raise money for the development of religious educational institutions and mosques, assist those in need, and engage in other philanthropic actions. Money is raised for the construction of two madrasahs named for the deceased preacher, Abdugappar Smanov. Nur-Mubarak Islamic University has asked well-known preachers to promote a charitable foundation established to fund the construction of the university's new building. In the spring of 2024, when various districts of the republic were flooded, preachers urged the nation to join the humanitarian aid movement. Preacher Kabylbek Zhumabekov

[26]Shan A Alahi, and Nazmul H, "Role of Information Technology on Preaching Islam (Da'wah)," *American International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, 9. no, 6 (2017): 172–78.

requested to participate in the donation of vans carrying necessary items to the Aktobe and Kostanay regions.

As digital culture is presentational and promotional by nature, marketization implies that the gap between religion and market in classical sociology has been removed in favor of the market, and religion has become a product in itself.[27] In a market-driven economy, preachers are being trained with a focus on marketing and revenue generation. Companies offering Umrah and Hajj services have considerable experience in recruiting well-known preachers for promotional purposes and recruitment activities. These preachers often embark on pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina for a month, engaging in promotional efforts alongside the worship groups they lead. Some of these preachers have paused their religious obligations for KMDB, choosing instead to concentrate entirely on leading Umrah and Hajj. The notable example is Arman Kuanyshbaev, who has been an active preacher for two decades in both online and offline settings. Recently, he transitioned from preaching to business, using his platform to promote Umrah trips through his travel company, "WASILAH-Travel." Additionally, he is soliciting donations for the "Bala bi Qari," center, a Qur'ān memorization facility that he established with contributions from supporters. In Kazakhstan, one avenue for income among religious bloggers involves leveraging their personal fame to promote various products and literature. For instance, Nursultan Rysmagambetov markets his artwork, books, and instructional videos that depict the Prophet's (*SAW*) 63-year journey, while Kabylbek Zhumabekov focuses on promoting his book titled "Family". Looking ahead, it's likely that more religious figures would seek to enhance their visibility to monetize their blogs and develop them into revenue streams. Notably, Zhumabekov has also endorsed the private institution, "Miras Academy," alongside an English language center. Organizations with a focus on religious charity frequently share sermon-related content on their platforms to garner public interest and engage with their audience effectively.

### 3.5 Controlling Online Religious Sermons becomes a Big Issue

The accelerating trends of Islamization in Kazakhstan, coupled with the reinforcement of religious ideologies and surge in preacher activities, have sparked societal concerns. There is an increasing pushback against religious influences that extend beyond places of worship, spilling over into social media platforms where calls for total bans on certain practices are emerging. In an open appeal, a collective of prominent intellectuals urged the nation's President, Senate and Parliament leaders, the Prosecutor General, and the head of the National Security Committee to take action against the proliferation of Islam within the country. They pinpointed the advocacy of religious beliefs on social media as a significant factor shaping current societal trends: "It is crucial to halt the dissemination of propaganda from various religious sects on social media that jeopardize national ideology. There must be rigorous oversight on the propagation of harmful religious movements online. Over the past three decades, there has been a noticeable shift of national ideology towards a religious one, leading the youth away from their roots and cultural identity. Presently, we find ourselves in an ideological void that is being filled by various religious leaders and influencers, who are becoming role models for the younger generation".[28]

During a discussion with Kairolla Koshkaliyev, who leads the Department for Religious Affairs in Astana, remarked, "This statutory framework has undergone negligible modifications and does not correspond with the exigencies of contemporary digital progressions." He added, "Instead of

[27]Francois Gauthier, "From Nation-State to Market: The Transformations of Religion in the Global Era as Illustrated by Islam," *Religion* 48 (2018): 382–417, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2018.1482615

[28]"The Salafis-wahabit religious current must be prohibited." Intelligentsia Publishes Open Letter to the President," *Ozgeris. Info,* 6.11.2023, https://ozgeris.info/rus/archives/2267, accessed on 1.3.2025

augmenting the severity of the existing legal framework, it is imperative to effectively implement and uphold the statutes currently in place." [29] On February 28th, 2024, KMDB convened the inaugural national forum titled, "Islamic Preaching Ethics," in Astana. In today's scientific and educational climate, certain preachers face significant criticism on social media for disparaging the traditions, beliefs, and sacred principles vital to the people's identity, often ignoring the views of the majority in the nation. During this event, attendees ratified the document on Islamic Preaching Ethics, which outlines guidelines for preaching. Additionally, the forum addressed the regulation of religious messaging on social media platforms.

Governments face challenges when it comes to legally curbing, closely monitoring, scrutinizing, and obstructing religious preachers on social media platforms. Currently, the impact of the Internet on the religious socialization of youth continues to grow. The significance of online movements within social networks is becoming a focus of interest for researchers examining the faith perspectives of the millennial generation.[30] The issue of religious socialization remains unresolved as the process of Islamization significantly transforms the landscape of religiosity in the digital era. Nevertheless, it is evident that social networks hold a considerable sway in shaping the Islamic beliefs and attitudes among young individuals.

## 4. Conclusion

The current research highlighted the growing incorporation of innovation in Islamic outreach activities, particularly through the use of information and internet technologies. Social media platforms are a powerful tool for religious promotion and their effectiveness is contingent on aligning with current trends and societal needs. In Kazakhstan, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook are utilized to advance Islamic teachings. Religious leaders are adopting inventive approaches to engage broader audiences and address pressing issues, blending traditional practices with technological advancements. The strategies for Islamic sermons on social media are continuously evolving. The content, subjects, and profiles of religious leaders are diverse, and traditional preaching methods are adapting to the unique characteristics of each platform. There is an increasing trend of transferring and sharing messages across different platforms. Numerous studio channels and pages dedicated to Kazakh language calls exist in the digital domain, and the number of users is growing. Social media forces preachers to compete for popularity and following, leading to the rise of religious influencers. The Internet introduces paradoxes into religious life, such as the rapid rise to fame for preachers on social networks. This phenomenon allows individuals to quickly gain recognition and notoriety as preachers.

### 4.1. Future Directions

The rise of Islamic preaching on social networks presents both opportunities and challenges. It allows for wider dissemination of religious knowledge and engagement with diverse audiences, transcending geographical boundaries. Individuals can readily access lectures, discussions, and interpretations of Islamic texts from various scholars and perspectives, fostering a sense of community and shared identity among Muslims globally. However, this accessibility also raises concerns about the potential for misinterpretation, and the lack of proper vetting of religious authorities. Islamic preaching on social networks is a new phenomenon requiring further study of

[29]Uldai Kaboshkyzy, "elimizdin buigingi qauipsizdigo ertengi urpagymyzdyn tynyshtygy (our country's today security is its future stability), Durbi (February 19, 2024). https://durbi.kz/2024/02/19/airolla-k-sh-aliev-astana-qalasynyn-din-isteri-zhonindegi-basqarmasynyn-basshysy-elimizdin-bugingi-qauipsizdigi-ertengi-urpagymyzdyn-tynyshtygy/

[30]Erawati Desi, Agus Indiyanto, and Arkan Syafera. "The Construction of the Millennial Generation Religious Vision through Digital Literacy," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 22. no, 65 (2023):159–74.

religious scholars and experts. It is difficult to fully cover all aspects of such large-scale trend, which is reviving at a very fast speed, in one short manuscript. Social media continues to evolve and adapt to the needs of users, and more constant change and innovation can be expected in this area in the future.

## Conflict of Interest

The manuscript authors have absolutely no financial or non-financial conflict of interest regarding the subject matter or material discussed in this manuscript.

## Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

## Funding Details

This research is funded by the Science Committee of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Grant No. AP19680228—Islam in the digital space in the example of modern Kazakhstan).

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