The Mediatization of Religious Authority on Instagram: Theological Layers of Discourse and Representation Among Digital Preachers in Türkiye doi

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Abstract

Religion and media, traditionally understood as belonging to separate spiritual and secular domains, have become increasingly intertwined with the rise of television and social media. Digital platforms now function as central spaces where religious discourse is produced, circulated, and reconfigured, with Instagram emerging as a particularly influential medium. Drawing on Hjarvard's mediatization approach, this study shows that religious speakers are no longer merely transmitters of religious knowledge. Instead, they actively adapt to the communicative logic of digital media, producing platform-oriented content and reconstructing religious authority. Through these practices, religious authority is reshaped and rearticulated within the dynamics of contemporary digital culture. This study examines the discourse strategies and representational forms of male speakers producing religious content on Instagram in Türkiye, and how they reconstruct religious authority in the digital sphere. Conducted based on Hjarvard's mediatization approach and Hall's theory of representation, the research evaluated 1,086 videos from a total of 26 speakers, both affiliated with and unaffiliated with religious communities, through content analysis. The findings show that digital platforms standardize religious discourse, focusing it around morality, halal and haram, and worship practices. It was determined that speakers affiliated with religious communities reproduced authority through institutional sources and traditional visual codes (scholars, hadith, places of worship, traditional clothing), while independent speakers established legitimacy through individual experiences and Quran-centered discourse. The study reveals that Instagram diversifies rather than homogenizes religious authority, and that two different models of authority (institutional-traditional and individual-experiential) coexist in the digital sphere.

Keywords: Digital Religion, Mediatization, Religious Authority, Instagram, Islamic Communities.

JEL Codes: Z12, L82, Z19

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1. Introduction

Religious discourse, once confined to mosque pulpits or within the walls of madrasas, now reaches millions through Instagram Reels. In the digital age, the visibility and modes of transmission of religion are undergoing a profound transformation. The limited reach of traditional religious authorities has shifted to a broader and more interactive medium with the proliferation of social media platforms. Video-based platforms, particularly Instagram, YouTube, and Tik-Tok, are reshaping both the transmission of religious knowledge and the nature of representations of faith. Postsecularism asserts people recognize the moral failings of modern society and science, and this has led to a resurgence of religion in the public sphere, in new forms, where certain religious groups seek to assert their influence alongside new postmodern spiritual sensibilities. This post secular turn was noted in a number of recent digital religion studies by scholars seeking to explain changes in the religious landscape within digital culture. For example, Evolvi's (2016) study of religious bloggers in Europe found religious internet engagement plays an important role in influencing political and social discourses in the public arena, and showed that the public function of religion persists in many circumstances (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). This transformation signifies not only a change in communication forms but also the reconstruction of religious authority and the diversification of forms of public expression of piety. Digital media encourages the formation of virtual religious communities by allowing individuals to connect across geographical boundaries (Natale & Pasulka, 2019).

To understand the theoretical dimension of this transformation, media theorist Stig Hjarvard's theory of mediatization provides a guiding framework. This approach emphasizes that media is no longer merely a channel for transmitting religious messages. and that religion has become subject to media logic (Hjarvard, 2008). Furthermore, this process is not unique to Western societies but is also evident in different cultural contexts with the proliferation of digital platforms. While religious citizens are required to consider their faith "reflexively from the outside and to relate it to secular views," secular citizens are required to be open to the possible truth content of religious arguments and to transcend a "secularist self-understanding of Modernity" which denies religious worldviews as resources for truth, meaning, and identity (Lövheim, 2017).

Therefore, the emergence of religious content creators and influencers through social media is a critical issue in analyzing the media's impact on religion. In this context, forms of authority based on traditional institutions such as mosques and madrasas are being reshaped on social media platforms; traditional or new media platforms themselves have become

as important as the message (McLuhan, 1964). This change means not only the transfer of religious content to the digital environment in terms of form, but also the restructuring of authority, representation, and religious practice. In recent years, the influence of religious speakers on social media in Türkiye has increased significantly. Religious actors, who have limited visibility in traditional media, interact directly with their followers through social media, presenting religious knowledge blended with personal commentary, everyday life, and social issues (Haberli, 2022). This situation has given rise to a new form of communication in which religion is intertwined with individual experiences, emphasizing emotional sincerity and authenticity.

The study aims to reveal how religious meanings are constructed in the videos of religious speakers, which themes stand out, and how these themes merge with modern media aesthetics. This study examines the discourse strategies and representational forms of male speakers producing religious content on Instagram. The research evaluated 1,086 videos from a total of 26 speakers, both affiliated with and unaffiliated with religious communities, through content analysis. Women preachers were excluded from the scope of the study due to the fact that religious discussions in Türkiye are conducted through speeches or sensational videos of male preachers, especially the intensity of videos of male preachers who appear to be cult-related in content produced to fuel ideological polarization on social media.

The theoretical framework of the study focuses on both the reshaping of religious authority on social media (mediatization) and its image-based presentation (representation). In this field, founded on McLuhan's principle that "the medium is the message", Stig Hjarvard's (2008) Theory of Mediatization is used as a basis for examining the formal transformation of religious content. This article provides an example to understand how mediatization, particularly the logic imposed by the Instagram Reels format—such as short duration, high tempo, emotional intensity, and personalization—challenges the use of sources (e.g., shifting to personal experiences) and presentation formats (e.g., use of background music, clothing style) in religious content.

The third pillar of the theoretical framework is Stuart Hall's Representation Theory. Representation is the process of giving meaning to a concept, image, or idea in language (verbal, visual) (Hall, 1997). The clothing styles, choice of location, and body language used by religious speakers in their Reels videos construct an "ideal" representation of religious authority for viewers. In this context, representation allows us to analyze how affiliated and unaffiliated speakers negotiate their religious competence, their relationship with tradition, and their approach to modernity through visual codes.

2. The Relationship Between Mass Communication Forms and Religion in a Historical Context

The relationship between religion and communication forms has developed through mutual interaction throughout history. With the invention of the printing press, it became possible to disseminate religious texts to large audiences; this situation has been decisive in the transformation of both individual piety and institutional authority. Hoover (2006), who explores the complex relationship between media, religion, and culture, argues that the evolution of media technologies has changed the ways in which religious messages are conveyed and experienced, and that this transformation is evident in various contexts, from traditional practices to digital expressions of faith. Similarly, Postman (2010) emphasizes that communication forms transform the nature of content and that visual-intensive media such as television tend to secularize the sacred.

The relationship between religion and media reveals an epistemological tension between the two domains. While religion stands out as a system claiming absolute truth, based on the principles of sanctity, integrity, and immutability; media, despite attempting to adapt to the sensitivities of society, often operates through reconstructed realities. This situation which causes religious authority and messages to be interpreted differently by audiences, resulting in semantic fragmentation (Tajuddin et al., 2024). The breakdown and multilayering of meaning in digital media environments is closely related to the deconstructive logic pointed out by the post-structuralist approach in film analysis (Aker, 2022). Adapting religion to the "spectacle" logic, especially in tools such as television and digital media, creates a tense relationship between content and form (Postman, 2010). In this context, the medium through which the religious message is conveyed becomes too worldly and secular to carry the sanctity of the message (Gülerarslan, 2010). However, the secular nature of television has been reappropriated by some religious communities. Evangelical preachers in the United States, in particular, have effectively used television to intertwine religious content with popular culture, giving rise to the concept of "televangelism" (Cover, 1993; Melton et al., 1997).

According to Borowski's (2018) analysis, the visuality, speed, and short narrative structures offered by media language cause religious messages to lean toward simplified and emotionally impactful forms rather than complex theological meanings. In a study by Edgell and colleagues (2023), nearly half of the participants (43.4%) reported regularly finding meaning and satisfaction in media use; this rate was found to be approximately 2.5 times higher than those who found meaning and satisfaction through practicing their religion (15.5%).

The transformative impact of the media on religious representation is not limited to Western countries where mass media originated and developed, nor is it confined solely to Christianity. Judaism, Islam, and other religious traditions have also experienced similar disruptions and restructurings in their interaction with modern media tools. While some Orthodox Jewish communities in Israel resisted tools such as television and the internet for a long time, they eventually began to use these platforms to strengthen their internal community communication and disseminate religious educational content (Cohen, 2012). Similarly, in the Islamic world, religious leaders in countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia first delivered sermons via radio and then television, ensuring that religious discourse evolved into a public, mass form (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003). Within this global transformation, the example of Pakistan offers a striking illustration of how the media politicizes religious discourse and intertwines it with authority. Khan's (2023) study analyzes how blasphemy charges are represented in the English-language press in Pakistan, revealing that religious figures are portrayed as guarantors of justice in some news stories, while in other cases they are directly associated with violence. This demonstrates how religious discourse is reproduced in polarizing and instrumentalized forms through the media.

2.1. The Digitalization of Religion and Social Media

Digital media has become a tool that transforms not only the transmission of religious discourse but also its nature. As De Sousa and colleagues (2021) emphasize, in the digital age, users can construct their own religious practices, interpretations, and rituals outside of traditional institutions; this situation leads to the emergence of more personalized and interaction-based authorities. Social media influencers are rising as alternatives to traditional religious figures, especially among younger generations, and these new figures build their content through sincerity, emotional connection, and cultural affinity. These approaches have provided important frames for theoretical reflection on the relationship between media technologies and religion, and the ways in which religious discourses and media practices are negotiated in online and offline spheres (Zaid, 2022).

As Ess (2017) points out, the social media environment is turning religious figures into "brands"; elements such as the number of followers, visual aesthetics, and narrative language are becoming tools that redefine religious authority. Missier's (2025) fieldwork with Gen Y and Z youth in India found that the vast majority of participants preferred social media content as their first choice for acquiring religious knowledge, and that trust in traditional authorities had relatively declined. The study also emphasizes

that digital figures strengthened by visual content and personal narratives are found to be more effective and persuasive.

Similarly, according to Febrian's (2024) study, religious social media influencers on Instagram largely employ visual strategies such as "close-up and intimate appearance" (98% of the time); this style clearly differs from the formal and distant presentation style of traditional religious figures. Social media platforms like Instagram provide an opportunity for relatively young and new Muslim figures—those without formal and strong religious education or relationships with established Islamic organizations—to be involved in da'wah activities, and it has enabled the emergence of religious influencers. While access to sacred texts, sermons, and religious references has become easier through websites, social networks, and digital platforms, this form of access is also having a transformative effect on individuals' daily life practices. While some believers use digital opportunities as a tool to strengthen their religious identity, some communities prefer to remain faithful to traditional practices by setting clear limits on media use (Muller, 2024). Furthermore, phenomena such as the commercialization, individualization, and transformation of religion into a spectacle in the public sphere during its digitalization process are also restructuring the representation of religious figures who have become social media influencers. In this process, religion is not only a sacred space; it is becoming a cultural performance shaped by audience interest, algorithmic visibility, and aesthetic preferences (Tajuddin et al., 2024).

Despite the opportunities offered by digital media, the way religious content is presented in these platforms has also brought various criticisms. While there is a risk of religious messages becoming superficial and misrepresented in digital environments, the commercialization of religious teachings within the logic of the media poses the risk of spirituality becoming a consumer object (Mahan, 2014). At the same time, it is emphasized that digitization distances individuals from community-based worship and leads them towards more personalized and isolated faith experiences; this situation may weaken the social dimension of religious identities (Sousa et al., 2021). On the other hand, the rise of digital religion also brings challenges such as the potential spread of misinformation and the dilution of traditional practices (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

2.2. Religious Figures and Religious Discourse in the Turkish Media

When examining how religious authority figures are defined in the Turkish media, it is evident that historically, these figures have been a source of legitimacy intertwined with the state. In the Ottoman Empire, religious figures also assumed the role of legitimizing the affairs of the state, while in the Republican era, religious institutions came under state control. In this context, it is noted that religious figures serving in mosques in the early years of the Republic were referred to as "religious commissioners." This illustrates that in the relationship between religion and media, the image of the religious figure was constructed not only as a leader of worship but also as an actor in the "state-religion alliance" (Yenen, 2012). With the opening of private television channels in Türkiye in the 1990s, the visibility of religion on television screens increased significantly. With the proliferation of private thematic channels, religious figures with a strong "showmanship" emerged on television (Akyüz & Karakoç, 2013). During this period, religious figures redefined their screen identities to establish direct contact with viewers, present personal narratives, and adapt to the television format. Consequently, the identity of religious figures in the television era acquired a hybrid character, maintaining traditional authority while embracing media performance (Furat, 2008).

During the period when there were no private television channels, TRT brought religious figures working at the Presidency of Religious Affairs and universities to the screen. However, with the opening of private and thematic channels, more "approachable / audience-friendly religious figures emerged in line with television's entertainment dimension. The first type of religious figure to emerge was the conservative-Islamist cleric who never compromised on the essence of religion and used television solely to convey religious commands. The other type consists of religious figures who believe that religious figures should not have a cold demeanor in order to better explain religion to people, who are like Protestant television preachers (Kurt, 2009), and who claim that most of what people have long believed is "misconception." The work of Akyüz and Karakoç (2021) shows that the media not only conveys religious practices but also transforms them. The fact that Yaşar Nuri Öztürk, a name that often goes beyond the established religious discourse, both interprets verses and hadiths and interacts with the audience through humorous and personal narratives in his television programs reveals that television functions as a tool that recodes the sacred within a secular context and transforms religious content from "what is important" to "what is watchable" (Postman, 2010; Cover, 1993).

With the 2010s, the visibility of religion in the media has not been limited to television; the internet and social media platforms have become indispensable channels for religious content production (Haberli, 2022). Imams, religious leaders, or community members who could not find a place in traditional media, in particular, have gained new visibility through social media, becoming alternative digital authorities. Church Online now offers a chatroom

throughout broadcasts, supported by new language translation tools, a global map of audience locations and a much more active use of Facebook and Twitter. Participants come to these churches because they offer something that local congregations do not: international conversation, constant prayer, world-class preaching on demand, space to discuss difficult ideas without censure or, conversely, a place where 'sound' Biblical teaching will be authoritatively upheld (Hutchings, 2011). Various studies conducted in Türkiye on the representation of religious content on social media reveal that digital media plays a decisive role in the religious perceptions, discourse, and preferences of both content producers and users. Öztürk and Tosun's (2021) study with high school students found that young people find religious content they encounter on social media more interesting and accessible than traditional religious education. Arıcan's (2021) research revealed meaningful relationships between the frequency of social media use and young people's religious beliefs and attitudes, showing that religious content in the digital environment influences young people's value systems. In Uçar and Kurt's (2024) study analyzing the family-themed discourse of religious content creators on YouTube, it was determined that this content defends traditional values, targets the negativities of modern society, and frequently uses examples from the Quran, hadith, and companions as solutions. In Kandemir and Toprak's (2023) field research conducted with university students, a significant portion of young people stated that they found religious content on digital platforms more accessible, sincere, and relevant to everyday life.

3. Methodology

This study employed quantitative content analysis. This method allows for the systematic classification of textual or visual content and its analysis under specific themes (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2017). Content analysis is an objective technique frequently used in communication research to reveal the structure, frequency, and form of messages conveyed. Berelson defines content analysis as a systematic and numerically based, impartial form of analysis that reveals meanings not apparent on the surface (Metin & Ünal, 2022). In this study, videos shared on Instagram were coded according to predefined categories and coding schemes, and the obtained data were evaluated using descriptive statistics. This approach allowed for a comparative analysis of discourse trends, content densities, and thematic differences (Coe & Scacco, 2017).

The primary objective of this research is to reveal the discourse styles, thematic orientations, and representation strategies of male speakers who produce religious content on social media platforms in Türkiye. The main research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What themes are prominent in the posts of speakers who produce religious content on social media?

RQ2: What types of sources (verses, hadiths, personal experiences, scientific explanations, etc.) do these individuals refer to in their religious discourse?

RQ3: In what discourse styles (candid, instructive, critical, etc.) are religious discourses presented?

RQ4: How do the discourses of religious speakers strike a balance between modern media aesthetics and traditional religious authority?

RQ5: Are there any differences between the sermon topics, style, and technical characteristics of religious speakers associated with a religious community and those who are not affiliated?

3.1. Sample and Limitations

The sample for the study was determined through a two-stage process. First, speakers who were well-known in the public sphere through traditional and digital media and who stood out for their religious discourse were identified. Then, the sample was diversified by evaluating similar accounts recommended by the Instagram algorithm. Having 100,000 or more followers and a high level of visibility and digital interaction were set as criteria for inclusion in the sample. Accordingly, 26 accounts were included in the analysis process. The research covers the content shared by these accounts between February 15 and April 15, 2024.

The research is limited to male religious speakers. Female figures were not included in the study because a sample structure with sufficient representation in this area could not be achieved. Therefore, gender-based comparisons are not included in the scope of the research. The study is limited to Reels videos on the Instagram platform; content on other platforms such as YouTube and TikTok was excluded from the analysis. Only accounts that shared at least five videos during the sampling period were included in the analysis, and videos with a maximum length of 3 minutes were evaluated. The data collection process only covers the specified two-month period (February 15–April 15, 2024).

The names of the religious speakers whose videos were examined in the study are indicated in the findings section. In specifying the accounts of the preachers that they share on their public profiles in the study, it is aimed to ensure transparency, data verifiability and clarify the boundaries of the sample. In addition, the videos of each preacher were not examined separately in the study, a descriptive, categorical and thematic intensity-oriented analysis process was carried out over the entire sample and community affiliation.

3.2. Data Collection Process

The videos on Instagram were individually viewed and analyzed by researchers. During the viewing process, each piece of content was evaluated in terms of the defined thematic categories, discourse forms, source types (verses, hadiths, personal experiences, etc.), and technical elements. The collected data was recorded in a coding form created using Google Forms. A separate form was filled out for each video, and markings were made in the specified categories.

Descriptive data were transferred to Microsoft Excel and analyzed using the Python programming language. Differences in representation between affiliated with religious communities and unaffiliated groups were compared using statistical tests (Levene's test and the Mann–Whitney U test) and descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies).

The Findings section contains information about the number of religious speakers and the videos studied, the number of followers of religious speakers, the distribution of main and sub-themes, the general distribution of reference sources, the style of discourse / dress, the video environment and technical characteristics, the use of music in videos.

4. Findings

Table 1. Information About Religious Speakers and The Number of Videos Examined

No	Name	Title	Affiliation with Religious Orders	Follower count	Video count
1	Abdulkadir Özbek	Religious Content Producer	Yes / Nur Community	608 Bin	15
2	Ahmet Taha	Religious Content Creator	Yes / Nur Community	647 Bin	26
3	Caner Taslaman	Academic, Author	No	269 Bin	78
4	Celil Tokmak	Preacher	Yes / Naqshbandi / İsmailağa	205 Bin	56
5	Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca (Ahmet Mahmut Ünlü)	Preacher, author; one of the leading figures of the İsmailağa Community	Yes / Naqshbandi / İsmailağa	1,3 Milyon	6
6	Fazlı Tonar	Religious Content Producer	Yes / Naqshbandi / İsmailağa	121 Bin	332
7	Fatih Koca	Theologian	No	134 Bin	10
8	Fatih Yağcı	Sözler Köşkü initiative /religious content producer	Yes / Nur Community	833 Bin	10
9	Harun Serkan Aktaş	Religious Content Producer – Author	Yes / Nur Community	438 Bin	27
10	Halis Aydemir	Qur'an Researcher	No	176 Bin	43
11	Halil Konakçı	Preacher / Religious Officer	No	1,8 Milyon	17
12	Halil Necipoğlu	Hafiz, Religious Music Artist	No	545 Bin	11
13	İhsan Şenocak	Author – Founder of the Center for Scientific and Intellectual Research	Yes / Naqshbandi / İsmailağa	1 Milyon	21
14	İsmail Hünerlice	Preacher specializing in Fiqh / Islamic Law	Yes / Naqshbandi / İsmailağa	182 Bin	24
15	Mahmut Sami Güçlü	Religious Officer	No	145 Bin	22
16	Mehmet Ede	Religious Content Producer	Yes / Nur Community	335 Bin	44
17	Mehmet Okuyan	Theologian, Author	No	386 Bin	52
18	Mehmet Yıldız	Hayalhanem Foundation – Religious Content Producer	Yes / Nur Community	2,9 Milyon	28
19	Muhammed Emin Yıldırım	Founder of the Siyer Foundation; Researcher, Author	No	885 Bin	57
20	Nureddin Yıldız	Preacher and author	No	1 Milyon	34

21	Onur Kaplan	Religious Content Producer	Yes / Nur Community	1,2 Milyon	29
22	Osman Sungur Yeken	Founder of Çınaraltı Science and Culture Association – Religious Content Producer	Yes / Nur Community	1,2 Milyon	56
23	Osman Nuri Topbaş	Sufi leader, author; contemporary representative of the Erenköy Community	Yes / Naqshbandi / Erenköy Community	312 Bin	23
24	Selman Okumuş	Religious Officer	No	268 Bin	30
25	Uğur Akkafa	Speaker who regularly gives talks under the "Nur Mektebi" platform	Yes / Nur Community	2,2 Milyon	6
26	Volkan Atmaca	Content creator who gives talks on religious life around "Yelken Istanbul"	Yes / Nur Community	385 Bin	29

The analyses were conducted on a total of 1,086 videos belonging to 26 different individuals. The individuals whose videos were examined, information about their religious affiliations, and the number of followers and videos are listed in Table 1. Diversity of speakers producing religious content on Instagram in terms of follower volume, content production intensity, and religious affiliations. In the dataset consisting of a total of 26 speakers, 16 individuals were found to be associated with various religious communities, while no affiliation was detected for 10 individuals. Follower counts range from 121,000 to 2.9 million, speakers affiliated with religious communities such as Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca, Mehmet Yıldız, Onur Kaplan, and Uğur Akkafa notably reaching large audiences. Among the unaffiliated group, Halil Konakçı, Nureddin Yıldız, and Muhammed Emin Yıldırım are observed to have a broad follower base.
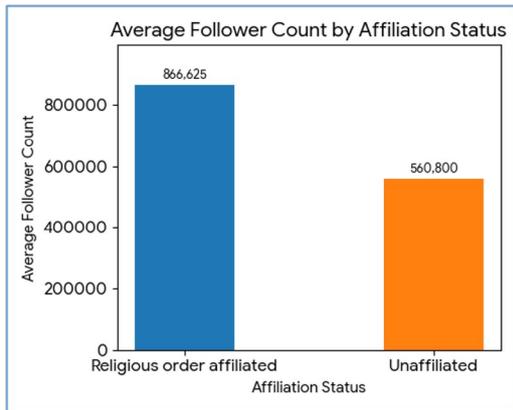
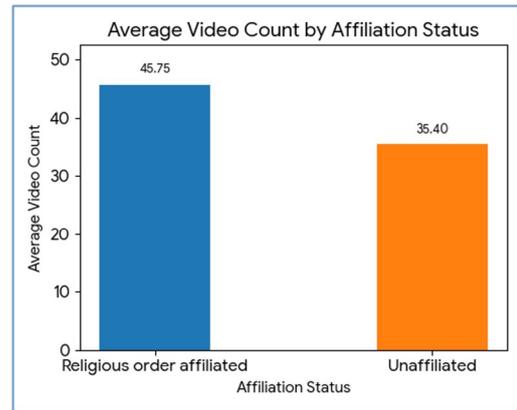Figure 1. Number of Followers of Religious Speakers

Figure 2. Average Number of Videos Shared by Religious Speakers

Figure1 and Figure2 show that speakers affiliated with religious communities, whose posts were analyzed, have an advantage over unaffiliated speakers in terms of digital reach and audience size. The average number of followers for the affiliated group was calculated as 866,625. The average number of followers for the unaffiliated group remained at 560,800. Speakers affiliated with religious communities had an average of 45.75 videos. The average number of videos for unaffiliated speakers was measured as 35.40.
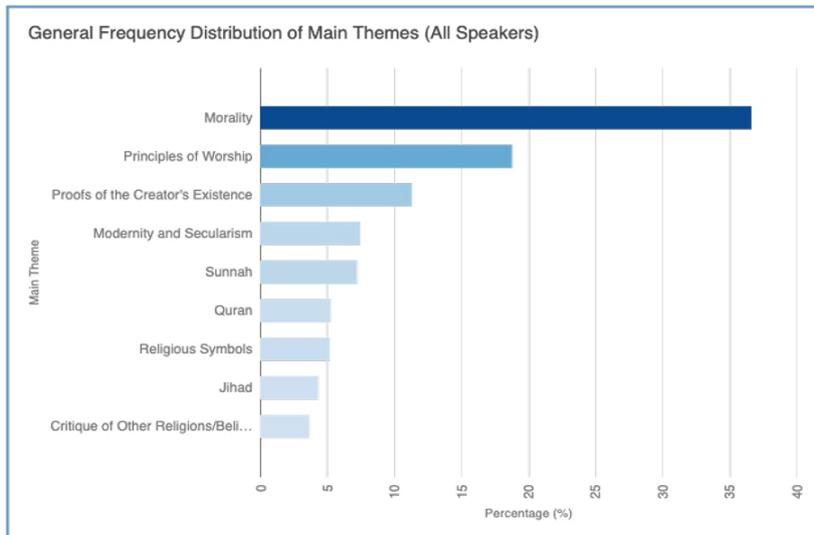
4.1.Thematic Distributions

Figure 3. Main Theme Distributions

When examining the total frequency distribution in the videos, a clear thematic concentration was observed in the content (Figure3). The most frequently mentioned theme was Ethics (36.66%), which constituted a large portion of the total content. This was followed by the themes of worship principles (18.80%) and evidence of the Creator's existence (11.33%). Approximately two-thirds (66.79%) of the analyzed content revolves around these three main themes. Lower down in the distribution are the themes of Sunnah (5.80%), Jihad (5.57%), and criticism of other religions/beliefs (3.70%).
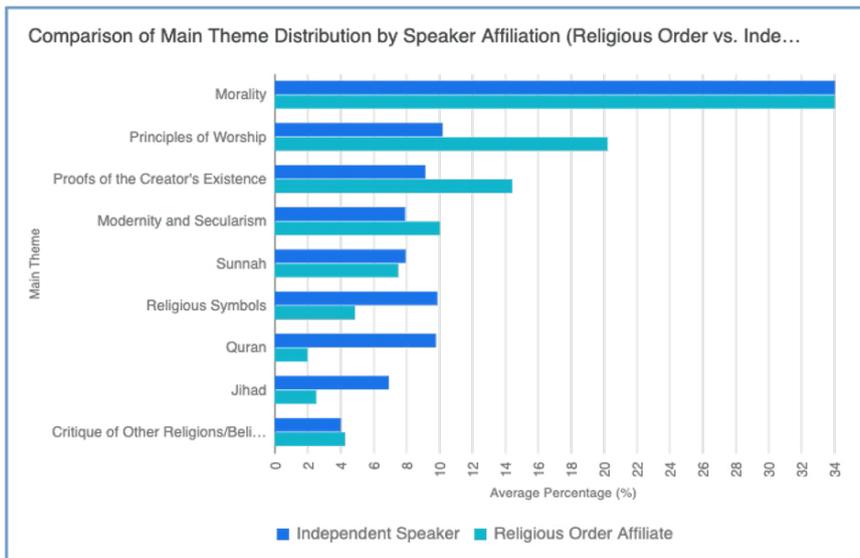
Figure 4. Distribution of Main Themes According to Religious Affiliation

In the analysis conducted in terms of religious affiliation in the main themes (Figure 4), it was observed that independent speakers had a higher mention rate in the themes of religious symbols, the Quran, and jihad. It was understood that religious speakers affiliated with religious communities referred more frequently to the principles of worship, evidence of the existence of the creator, and the themes of modernism and secularization. The results of the Mann-Whitney U test and independent samples t-test conducted for the main themes showed statistically significant differences between the content distribution of affiliated and unaffiliated speaker groups in terms of two themes. The first significant difference was found in the Quran theme ($p \approx 0.014$), with independent speakers referring to this theme at a higher rate than the affiliated group. The second significant difference was determined for the Worship Principles theme ($p \approx 0.037$). In this theme, the average percentage of the affiliated group was significantly higher.

A Mann–Whitney U test indicated a statistically significant difference between affiliated and unaffiliated speakers in the Quran theme, $U = 34.00$, $p = .014$, $r = .48$, reflecting a moderate-to-large effect size. Unaffiliated speakers devoted a significantly greater proportion of their content to this theme. A significant difference was also observed for the Worship Principles theme, $U = 120.00$, $p = .037$, $r = .41$, indicating a moderate effect size, with affiliated speakers emphasizing this theme more prominently.
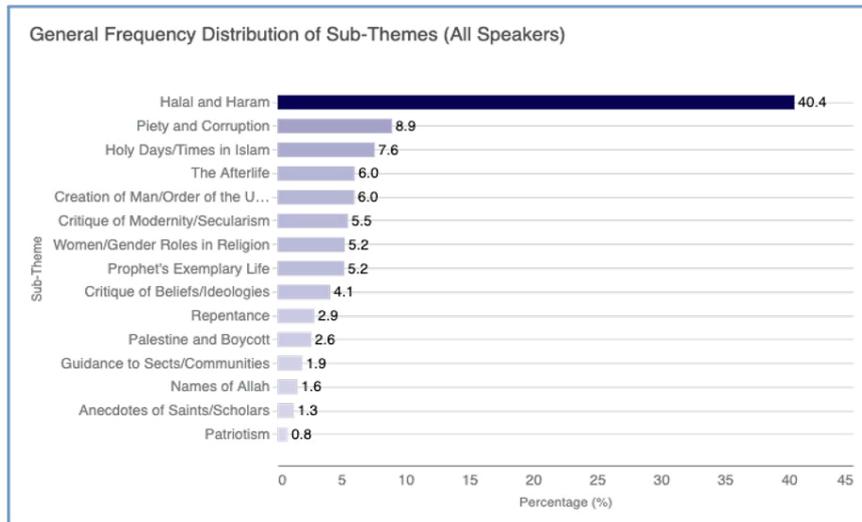
Figure 5. General Distribution of Sub-themes

According to Figure 5, the three most frequently mentioned sub-themes were halal and haram (40.4%), piety and corruption (8.9%), and blessed times in Islam (7.6%). In contrast, the three least frequently mentioned sub-themes were the names of Allah (1.6%), the stories of saints and scholars (1.3%), and love of country (0.8%).
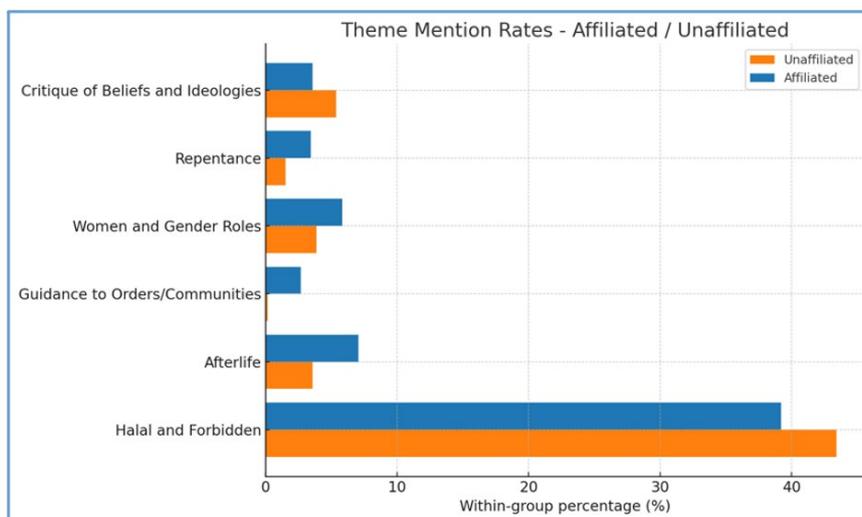
Figure 6. Distribution of Sub-Themes According to Religious Affiliation

Figure 6 comparing the intra-group ratios for selected sub-themes reveals significant content differences between speakers affiliated and unaffiliated with religious communities. Among the themes that are common to both groups but differ in weight, "Halal and Haram" (unaffiliated: 43.39%; affiliated: 39.18%) and "Afterlife" (unaffiliated: 3.58%; affiliated: 7.06%) stand out. In particular, the affiliated group is seen to include the themes of "Referral to Religious Communities" and "Women and Gender Roles in Religion" in more of their sermons.
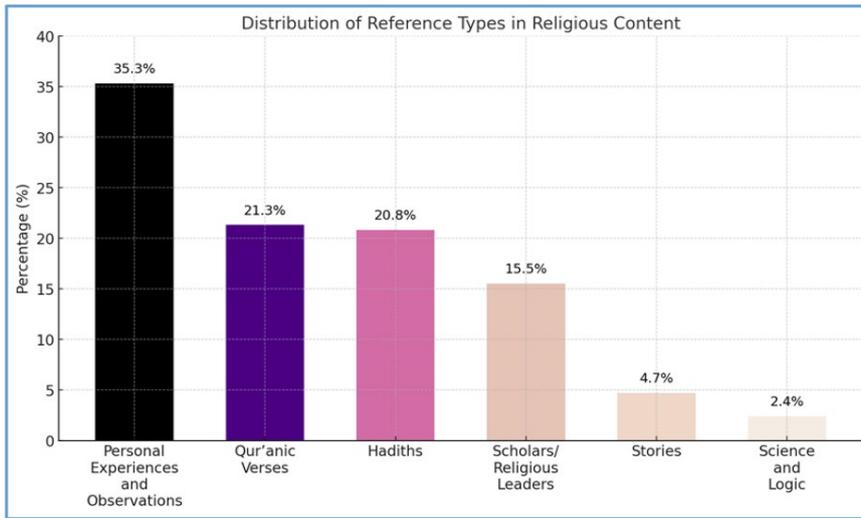
4.2. Religious References

Figure 7. General Distribution of Reference Sources

When examining the types of references cited in the content (Figure 7), it was found that Personal Experiences and Observations (35.3%), Quranic Verses (21.3%), and Hadith (20.8%) were the most frequently used sources. Scholars, Religious Order and Community Leaders (15.5%) and Stories (4.7%) are used at lower rates. Discourses based on Science and Logic (2.4%) are limited.
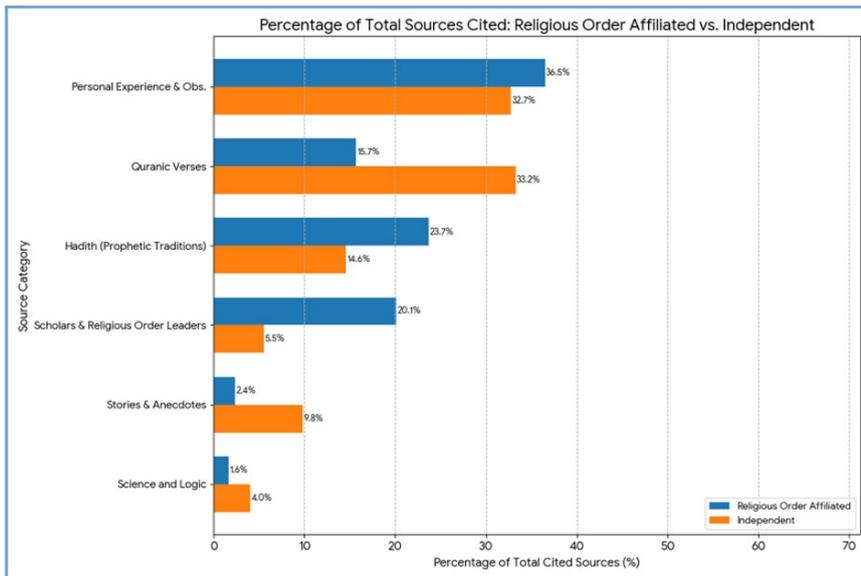

Figure 8. Distribution of Reference Sources According to Religious Affiliation

As shown in Figure 8, speakers affiliated with religious communities highlight the categories of scholars and religious leaders (20.1%) and hadith (23.7%) by directing a significant portion of their references to institutional authority sources. The unaffiliated group leads the affiliated group (15.7%) in the use of Quranic verses as the primary source (33.2%). The use of personal experience and observation, which has the highest share in both groups, is slightly higher among those affiliated with a religious community (36.5%) than among those who are not affiliated (32.7%).

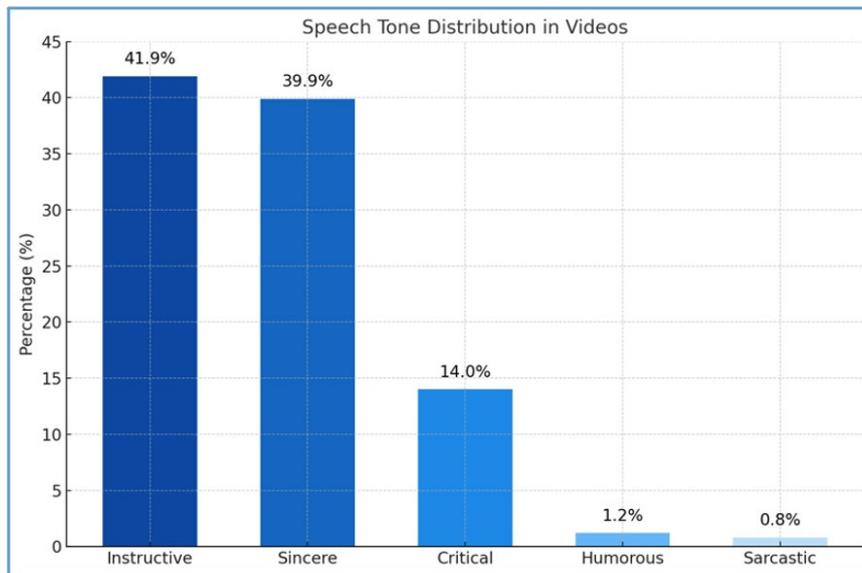## 4.3. Discourse/Dress Style, Video Environment and Technical Features

Figure 9. General Distribution of Discourse Styles

The most frequently used discourse styles in the videos were instructive (41.9%) and sincere (39.9%). Critical discourse (14.0%) was used to a more limited extent, while humorous (1.2%) and sarcastic (around 0.8%) styles were observed at very low rates (Figure 9).
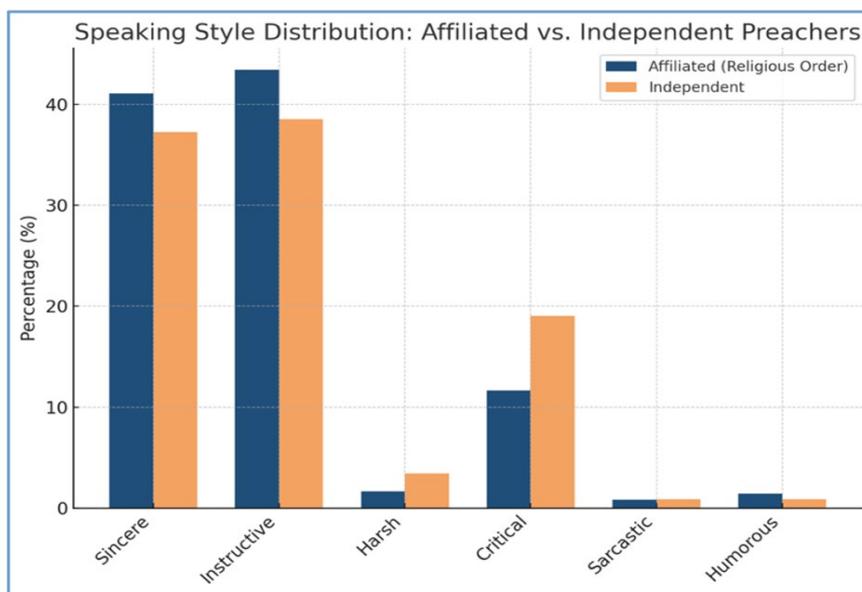

Figure 10. Distribution of Discourse Styles According to Religious Affiliation

While sincere (41.1%) and instructive (43.4%) styles are used at similar rates by both affiliated and unaffiliated religious speakers, unaffiliated speakers show slightly higher rates of critical (19.1%) and harsh (3.4%) tones. Sarcastic and humorous styles are quite low for both groups (Figure 10).
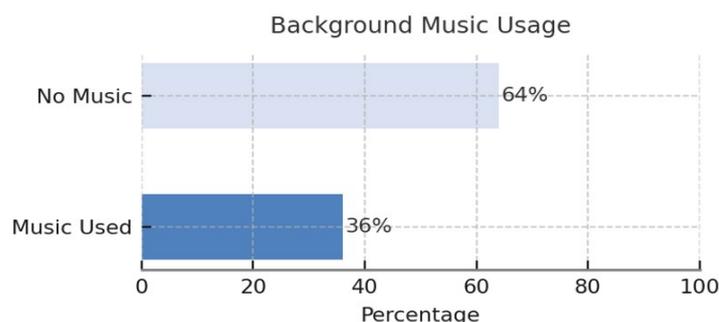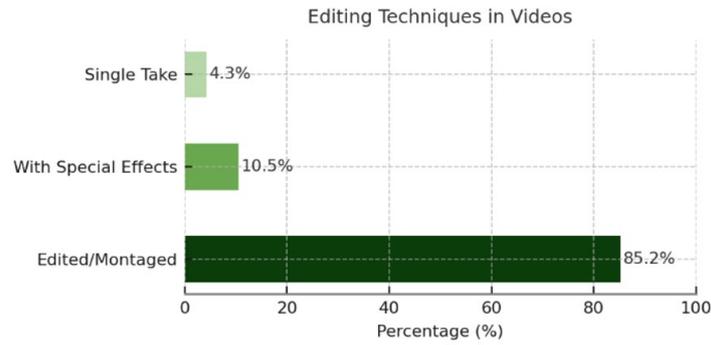

Figure 11. Music Usage in Videos

Figure 12. Visual Editing and Effects Usage in Videos

Among the 1086 videos examined in the study, the rate of background music usage was determined to be 36%. In contrast, it was found that no music was used in 64% of the videos. There was no significant difference in the use of background music between speakers affiliated with religious communities and independent speakers. When technical applications in the videos were examined, it was seen that the vast majority of the content was edited (85.2%). The use of special effects (10.5%) was quite limited. No significant difference was found when comparing the video editing styles of affiliated and unaffiliated speakers (Figure 11, Figure 12).
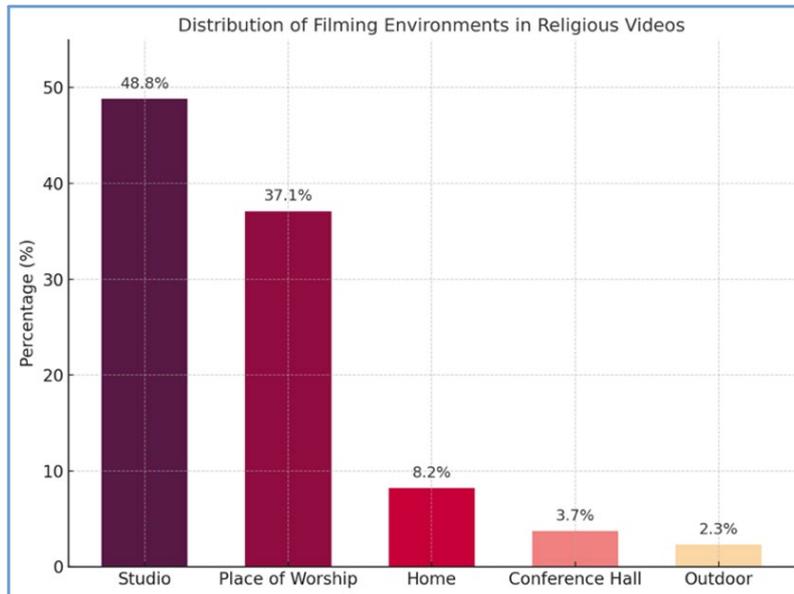

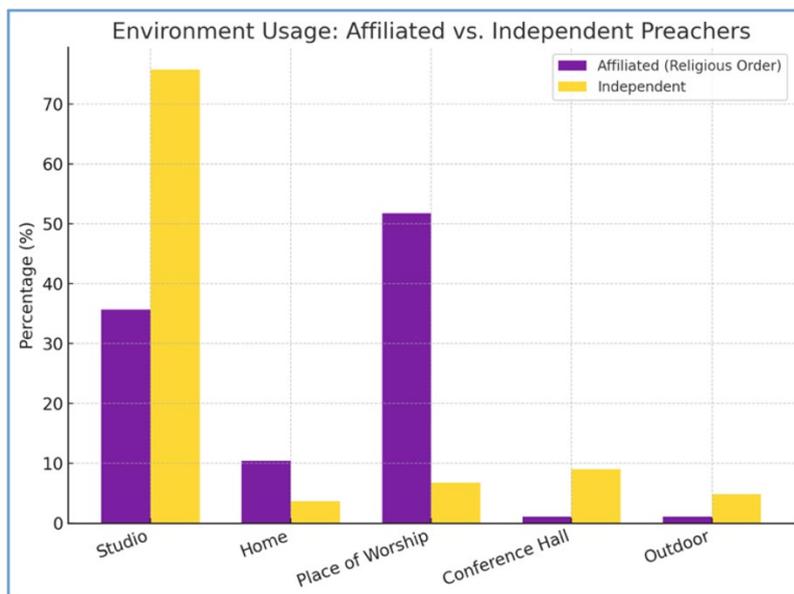Figure 13. Filming Environments in The Videos

Figure 14. Distribution of Filming Locations According to Religious Affiliation

As shown in Figure 13 and Figure 14 in terms of filming locations, the most frequently used setting was the studio (48.8%), followed by places of worship (37.1%). Less frequently used settings included home environments (8.2%), public speeches (3.7%), and outdoor locations (2.3%). Those affiliated with religious communities most frequently prefer the place of worship environment (51.8%), while independents clearly stand out in the studio environment category (75.8%).
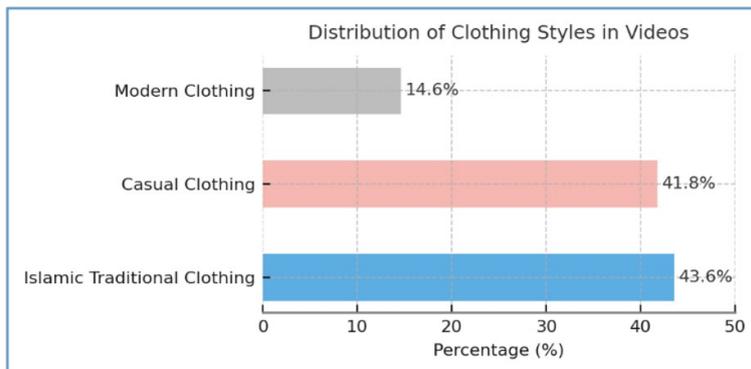

Figure 15. Dress Styles of Religious Speakers

In terms of clothing style, the majority of religious speakers preferred clothing styles that were in line with Islamic tradition (43.6%) and everyday wear (41.8%). Modern clothing (14.6%) was represented to a limited extent (Figure 15).
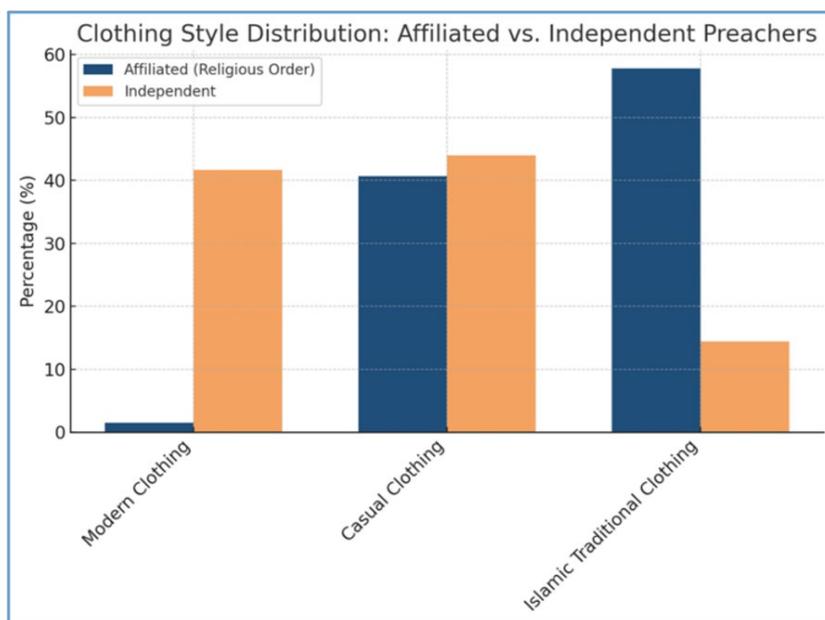

Figure 16. Distribution of Clothing Styles According to Religious Affiliation

According to the findings in Figure 16, individuals affiliated with religious communities predominantly prefer clothing styles consistent with Islamic tradition (57.8%), leading this category. In contrast, independent speakers exhibit higher rates of modern clothing (41.6%) and casual clothing (43.9%) styles.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study reveals that religious speakers' content strategies are strongly related to institutional affiliation (religious-affiliated/unaffiliated) and that the origins of discourse play a decisive role in shaping digital religious communication. The findings challenge the assumption frequently expressed in media and religious literature that "digitalization homogenizes religious authority," showing that institutional origin has a differentiating effect on content strategies.

Looking at the basic data, it is seen that affiliated speakers have a high level of digital influence. The fact that both the average number of followers and the average amount of content production are higher in favor of affiliated speakers suggests that religious structures can effectively transfer traditional authority and community networks to the digital environment. However, it should be noted that these results are sample-dependent. When a different sample is selected—a broader category, other digital platfor-

ms, or more diverse religious groups are included—the direction or level of the findings may change. The striking difference between the sources referenced by affiliated and unaffiliated groups reveals that legitimacy is established on different foundations. The dominance of "Scholars and Religious Leaders" and "Hadith" sources in the affiliated group indicates that this group bases its discourse on institutional authority. In contrast, unaffiliated speakers build their legitimacy on primary and experiential sources such as "Quranic Verses" and "Personal Experience and Observation," indicating that religious authority has taken on an individualized form.

This divergence is also observed in the themes discussed. Religious speakers focus on practical religious knowledge, to adapt to the platform's attention economy dynamics. The prominent theme of "Halal and Haram" in both groups demonstrates that religious discourse has become standardized and simplified in line with popular demands, in accordance with Hjarvard's theory of mediatization. However, speakers affiliated with religious communities produce a framework based on community identity, spirituality, and discipline, with themes such as "Life in the Hereafter," "Repentance," "Women and Gender Roles in Religion," and "Guidance to Religious Orders and Communities." Unaffiliated speakers, on the other hand, develop a more outward-looking, critical, and historical discourse with topics such as "The Prophet's Exemplary Life" and "criticism of other faiths." These differences show that the two groups reconstruct Islamic discourse in different ways within the framework of Stuart Hall's representation theory. While speakers affiliated with religious communities legitimize religious authority through institutional tradition, hierarchy, and obedience relationships, unaffiliated speakers redefine religious discourse through individual experience, moral questioning, and social criticism. Thus, Instagram becomes a digital religious space where religious knowledge is popularized and different forms of authority are reproduced through visual performance and representation strategies.

Despite the divergence in source and visual codes, an examination of the discourse style reveals the homogenizing effect of the platform logic. Both groups adopt a sincere and instructive style at high rates; this confirms that, according to Mediatization Theory, the emotional closeness and accelerated didactic narration required by the platform directs speakers toward a common digital rhetoric aesthetic, independent of institutional affiliation. This homogenization is also reflected in video editing. Both groups produce heavily edited content.

The areas where institutional differentiation is most visually apparent are clothing and filming environments. Speakers affiliated with religious communities prefer symbolic clothing such as robes and turbans to emphasize authority and traditional legitimacy; they usually film their videos in more traditional settings such as inside mosques, libraries, or offices. In contrast, unaffiliated speakers offer a more accessible form of religious representation by preferring simple clothing and personal spaces such as minimalist studios or home environments. These visual codes reveal that both groups visually legitimize authority in different ways, in accordance with Hall's theory of representation.

The findings of this study align with those of numerous studies in the literature. Borowski's (2018) observation that the media's speed- and visuality-based structure simplifies religious messages aligns with the fact that speakers on Instagram focus on practical issues such as "Halal and Haram." Similarly, Edgell and colleagues' (2023) findings showing that media use has become the primary source of meaning and satisfaction for modern individuals parallel our study's observation that content tends toward an authentic and instructive style. Cohen's (2012) observations regarding religious communities gradually beginning to use media tools to strengthen internal communication also bear similarities to the identity-based communication strategies observed in the affiliated group.

In contrast to Khan's (2023) study, which reveals that religious figures in Pakistani media are associated with political authority, the speakers with religious communities in this research avoid political discourse; they reproduce religious authority more along moral and social order lines. Missier's (2025) findings that trust in traditional authorities has declined and social media figures are found more persuasive align with the individual experiences and Quran-centered discourse forms of unaffiliated speakers. Furthermore, Febrian's (2024) observation that social media influencers differ from traditional religious figures through their authentic, close-up aesthetic is similar to the visual representation strategies of the unconnected speakers in this study.

In conclusion, this research reveals that digitalization diversifies religious authority rather than homogenizing it; Instagram offers a multi-layered media space that makes both institutional traditional authority and individual and experience-based alternative forms of authority visible simultaneously.

Only male religious speakers were included in the scope of this study. Considering the increasing visibility of female speakers in religious communication, it is important that future research expands its representation of gender to examine this dimension. Secondly, the study is limited to videos shared on the Instagram platform. Other digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, or X (Twitter) may yield variable results in shaping religious representation with different user interactions and content types. Finally, it was observed that speakers affiliated with religious

communities were concentrated in two main communities. The fact that one of these communities follows a traditional line (branches of the Naqshbandi Order) and the other has a structure that is more open to modernity and has a greater impact on young people (branches of the Nur Community) may have led to the distinction between affiliated and unaffiliated groups appearing more ambiguous than expected. This situation illustrates that religious affiliation is far from homogeneous; even among members of religious communities, there are differing orientations toward modernization. Future research that examines different community traditions typologically may yield more comprehensive results.

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