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## **DIGITAL RELIGION: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FEMALE RELIGIOUS INFLUENCERS ON INSTAGRAM IN KAZAKHSTAN**

Social media platforms have become significant tools for religious communication and propaganda, and in this context, the role of female influencers has been increasingly prominent. This study examines the content creation practices of prominent female religious influencers on Instagram, focusing on their strategies, themes, and audience engagement. By analyzing selected case studies, the research explores how these influencers intertwine economic, religious, and psychological themes in their content. Particular attention is given to the use of personal experiences, the integration of patriarchal traditions, and religious-philosophical elements as part of their narratives. The study also investigates the monetization strategies employed by these bloggers, including book publications, online courses, social media branding, and event organization such as marathons. The findings highlight how these influencers cater to the spiritual and material needs of their audiences while building personal brands and public images through social media platforms. Furthermore, the study contextualizes these practices within broader trends in Kazakh society. The article reveals new trends in the Kazakh media landscape by highlighting the unique approaches of female bloggers in creating and promoting content on social media compared to traditional religious institutions and their representatives.

**Keywords:** Religious Influencer, Islam, Social Media, Instagram, Blogging

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### **Цифрлық дін: Қазақстандағы Instagram кеңістігінде әйел діни инфлюенсерлердің парақшаларына контент-талдау**

Әлеуметтік желілер діни-үгіт насихат жасаудың тиімді құралы болып отырғаны баршаға мәлім. Еліміздегі цифрлық діндарлықты дәріптеуде ерлермен қоса, әйелдердің ықпалы да аса зор. Басқа әлеуметтік желілерден гөрі әсіресе әйел блогерлердің Instagram-ды діни пропаганда ретінде қолдану тенденциясы басым. Мақалада Instagram-дағы танымал әйел блогерлердің діни контент жасау ерекшеліктері зерттеледі. Осы мақсатта бірнеше діни әйел блогерлер таңдалып, олардың кейстері жан-жақты қарастырылады. Зерттеу барысында аталмыш блогерлердің экономикалық, діни және психологиялық тақырыптар бойынша контент жасаудағы тәсілдері, аудиториямен байланысы талданады. Әсіресе әйел блогерлердің жеке тәжірибесі негізінде жүргізетін контенттерінің өзіндік ерекшеліктері, патриархалдық дәстүрлермен байланысы және діни-философиялық элементтері зерттеу нысаны ретінде алынады. Зерттеуде блогерлердің бизнес-модельдері, атап айтқанда Instagram парақшаларын монетизациялау, кітап шығару, марафондар ұйымдастыру және онлайн-курстар өткізу сияқты әрекеттері де қарастырылады. Сонымен қатар, әлеуметтік желілердегі контенттер арқылы аудиторияның рухани және материалдық қажеттіліктерін қанағаттандыру тәсілдері зерттеледі. Бұл зерттеу қазақ қоғамында әйел блогерлердің брендинг, қоғамдық имидж қалыптастыру және аудиториямен әлеуметтік-медиа платформалар арқылы байланыс орнатудағы рөлін айқындауға мүмкіндік береді. Сондай-ақ, мақала дәстүрлі діни институттармен және олардың өкілдерімен салыстырғанда әйел блогерлердің әлеуметтік желілерде контент жасау және насихаттау тәсілдерінің ерекшелігін көрсету арқылы қазақ медиа кеңістігіндегі жаңа тенденцияларды ашады.

**Түйін сөздер:** діни инфлюенсер, Ислам, әлеуметтік желі, Instagram, блогер

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### **Цифровая религия: контент-анализ религиозных инфлюенсеров-женщин в Instagram в Казахстане**

Социальные сети становятся важным инструментом для религиозной коммуникации и пропаганды, а роль женщин-инфлюенсеров в этом контексте приобретает все большее значение. Среди социальных платформ женщины-блогеры особенно активно используют Instagram для распространения религиозного контента. В статье рассматриваются особенности создания религиозного материала популярными женщинами-блогерами на платформе Instagram. Для этого в исследовании были выбраны несколько кейсов женщин-блогеров, которые детально анализируются. Особое внимание уделено способам работы блогеров с экономическими, религиозными и психологическими темами, а также взаимодействию с аудиторией. Рассматриваются уникальные аспекты контента, основанного на личном опыте блогеров, их связь с патриархальными традициями и включение религиозно-философских элементов. В исследовании анализируются бизнес-модели женщин-блогеров, включая монетизацию их аккаунтов, выпуск книг, организацию марафонов и проведение онлайн-курсов. Кроме того, изучаются способы удовлетворения духовных и материальных потребностей аудитории посредством создаваемого контента. Данное исследование предоставляет возможность определить роль женщин-блогеров в формировании бренда, общественного имиджа и установлении связи с аудиторией через социально-медийные платформы в казахстанском обществе. Также статья раскрывает новые тенденции в казахстанском медиапространстве, демонстрируя отличия в подходах женщин-блогеров к созданию и продвижению контента по сравнению с традиционными религиозными институтами и их представителями.

**Ключевые слова:** религиозные инфлюенсеры, ислам, социальные сети, Instagram, блогинг

## **Introduction**

In contemporary times, the world is rapidly shifting from traditional media platforms, such as radio and television, to social media networks. Kazakhstan is no exception to this trend. To observe this phenomenon, it is necessary to take a look at the social media landscape in Kazakhstan. According to information published by Datareportal, as of early 2024, the social media usage statistics in Kazakhstan are as follows: 92.3% of Kazakhstan's 20-million population (18.19 million people) use the internet regularly, with 71.5% of them (14.10 million users) actively using social media platforms (Datareportal, 2024). Specifically, 2.6 million people in Kazakhstan use Facebook, 14.1 million use TikTok, and 12.1 million use Instagram. In the last year (2023-2024), the number of Instagram users increased by 1.7 million (+15.8%). Meanwhile, only 320.3 thousand Kazakhstanis registered on X (formerly Twitter) (Datareportal, 2024). This data demonstrates the significant role that social media platforms play in Kazakhstan. In other words, almost all citizens of Kazakhstan are on social networks. This is an unlimited opportunity in terms of spreading ideas and information, and a significant power for the person/group that has mastered it.

Social media users have reached the point where they discuss topics of global importance, from what they had for breakfast to climate change. However, not everyone uses social networks for the same purposes. Although Instagram in our country is mainly used for shopping and entertainment, there is a significant share of religious propaganda. It has been found that religious bloggers often use Instagram to conduct propaganda and distribute religious content. The role of female bloggers is also huge here.

Researchers believe that the emergence of social networks has given women who previously faced restrictions in sharing their religious thoughts with others an opportunity to open up to the world. Female religious bloggers in America and Europe have also made it a habit to conduct religious propaganda through social networks (Kurmanaliyev et al., 2024: 2).

The exploration of the internet and Islam began in the late 1990s, with scholars initially studying how religious figures used the internet to disseminate religious content and information (Zaid et al., 2022: 3). Gary R. Bunt is recognized as one of the first researchers to examine the intersection of Islam and the internet. In his book *Islam in the Digital Age*, Bunt addresses significant topics relevant to

his time, such as cyber jihad, online fatwas, and the broader relationship between religion and the internet (Bunt, 2003: 8).

Meanwhile, Hoover provides valuable insights into the attitudes of youth towards religion in the social media era. He observes that modern youth are more independent and prefer to choose religious beliefs that best suit their personal preferences as consumers (Hoover, 2012: 30).

Some researchers are concerned with whether the traditional model of religious adherence can be maintained in light of the rapid development of digital media. They argue that new media has the potential to dismantle the hierarchical system of contemporary religious establishments. The deep-rooted influence of digital media could weaken dominant traditional religions while strengthening marginalized religious groups (Zaid et al., 2022: 3). In addition, these scholars extensively discuss the role of religious influencers on social media, examining their strategies for attracting followers and highlighting the influence of religious influencers in countries within the Persian Gulf region.

Western scholars studying Islam in Kazakhstan's media landscape are also contributing to this discourse. Schwab, for example, analyzes the social media publications of the religious channel *Asyl Arna*, aiming to uncover the inner meaning and underlying messages within their content (Schwab, 2016: 2). Bigozhin, on the other hand, focuses on the intersection of Islam, masculinity, and sports in Kazakhstan's media. He examines the work of influencers like Abdugappar Smanov and Ardak Nazarov, who connect sports and religion, while also promoting traditional Islamic values (Bigozhin, 2019: 189).

Several controversial religious issues are also subjects of research within Kazakhstan's social media landscape. In this context, Tasbolat analyzes discussions that arose from statements made by the religious influencer Rizabek Battaluly about women on social media. He investigates the patriarchal attitudes within Kazakh society and the role of women (Tasbolat, 2024: 4540).

Furthermore, the study conducted by Baskynbayeva and Aldjanova explores female religiosity on Instagram. Instead of focusing solely on individual female religious influencers, they analyze posts from the top 20 female bloggers in Kazakhstan, examining their collective religious content (Baskynbayeva, Aldjanova, 2022: 32).

This article examines the cases of several influential female religious influencers in Kazakhstan's

social media landscape, who hold significant sway among Muslim communities with thousands of followers and subscribers. In the study, women who disseminate religious content on Instagram, either directly or indirectly, are referred to by the terms "female religious bloggers" and "female religious influencers", both of which capture their dual roles in content creation and influence.

### **Justification of the choice of article and goals and objectives**

This article is aimed to conduct research on female influencers' activity in the fields such as religion, psychology and social values on Instagram. Besides Instagram female influencers make various contents and communicate with their followers through the social medias like Youtube, Facebook and Tiktok. But Instagram stands out among these online platforms.

Goal of this research is to analyze female influencers' content creation strategies, their interaction with followers, and the extent to which their content aligns with traditional patriarchal norms. Objectives of the article are to identify the influencers' content styles, monetization methods, as well as their approach to gender and psychological issues. It also examines the comparative role of social media influencers with traditional religious institutions.

This paper aims to contribute to understanding the role of female social media influencers in shaping cultural and religious norms in contemporary society.

### **Scientific research methodology**

The article employs a case study research method. According to Stake, there are three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental and collective. An *intrinsic* case study is designed to explore a unique phenomenon, where the researcher must provide evidence of what makes the case distinctive. An *instrumental* case study aims to provide a general understanding of a particular situation by selecting a specific case. In contrast, a *collective* case study involves the examination of multiple cases to achieve a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon (Stake, 1995: 3).

In our research, we aim to apply all the three approaches that were listed above. As cases, we will conduct a content analysis of the social media pages of four female religious influencers that are most relevant to our research topic. The selected female

religious influencers were chosen based on the following criteria: having more than 200,000 followers, producing content with religious themes either directly or indirectly, and being actively present on social media platforms.

## Results and Discussion

### *Who is a Religious Influencer?*

In contemporary times, the role once held by traditional religious leaders is now largely performed by religious influencers. These influencers play a crucial role in disseminating religious content on social media. In essence, religious influencers can be seen as modern religious leaders, although they do not view themselves in this way. Compared to traditional religious leaders, they are closer to young people and rely more on creativity and innovation in content creation. These attributes give them a significant advantage. Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when mosques and traditional religious educational institutions were closed, the role of influencers in spreading religious content became even more significant (Zaid et al., 2022: 11).

A social media influencer is someone who, through their social media page or blog, has a large number of loyal followers and can influence the decisions and behaviors of these followers (Sorgenfrei, 2022: 212). Therefore, a religious influencer refers to a blogger who holds influence over religious issues among internet users.

Social media influencers combine religious content with entertainment material, thereby moving religion out of the domain of dogma and into the realm of experience and accessibility. Researchers suggest that this approach is more appealing to the digital youth of the 21st century (Zaid et al., 2022: 4). The hybrid form of religious preaching that combines religious knowledge and entertainment has existed in the Islamic world for a long time. It is believed that Muslims adopted this method from Christians' televangelists (Zaid et al., 2022: 2).

Researchers also point out that religious influencers can communicate effectively in the language of social media. Recent studies show that young people often see influencers as reflections of themselves. Spending time on social media and resisting the influence of religious influencers is not an easy task (Zaid et al., 2022: 5).

Khamis argues that today, an ordinary individual does not need traditional intermediaries such as editors and producers to achieve fame and wealth.

Instead, there is a growing trend among young people to engage in self-branding, creating their personal brand and public image independently (Khamis, 2016: 4).

### *Instagram and Kazakh Women*

Statistics show that in Kazakhstan, YouTube is predominantly used by men, Facebook is equally popular among both men and women, and Instagram is more widely used by women. Specifically, 63% of YouTube users are men, while 32% are women; on Facebook, 51% are men and 49% are women; and on Instagram, 70% are women, with only 30% being men (Brandanalytics.kz, 2024). This data indicates that Instagram is particularly "associated" with women in Kazakhstan. This raises the logical question: Why do women prefer Instagram? The answer is not overly complex. Instagram offers tools for photo editing, enhancement, and the application of various filters. Women, who naturally have a desire to appear aesthetically pleasing, find these features to be in line with their interests.

In general, Instagram was never designed as a platform for long posts or videos. Instead, it has always been seen as a space for sharing pictures and short videos, focused on beauty and aesthetics. Therefore, it is natural for women, who are inherently more inclined towards beauty, to gravitate toward this platform (theatlantic.com, 2016).

Our discussion about Instagram's popularity among women is not coincidental. In addition to being a platform for beauty, fashion, and commerce, Instagram is increasingly becoming a central space for sharing religious content among women in Kazakhstan. In a social survey with 748 participants, when asked, "Do you support religious content on social media (religious posts, photos with headscarves, Quran verses, hadith excerpts)?", 72% (537 people) answered "yes," while 28% (211 people) answered "no".

Additionally, in a survey involving 1072 respondents about "How do women's religiosity manifest?" their responses were as follows:

- 11% (117 people) identified it "through clothing"
- 32% (349 people) identified it "through behavior"
- 25% (269 people) believed "it should not be publicized"
- 32% (337 people) chose the answer "everything is valid" (Baskynbayeva, Aldjanova, 2022: 35).

The survey results indicate that most people do not oppose the dissemination of religious con-



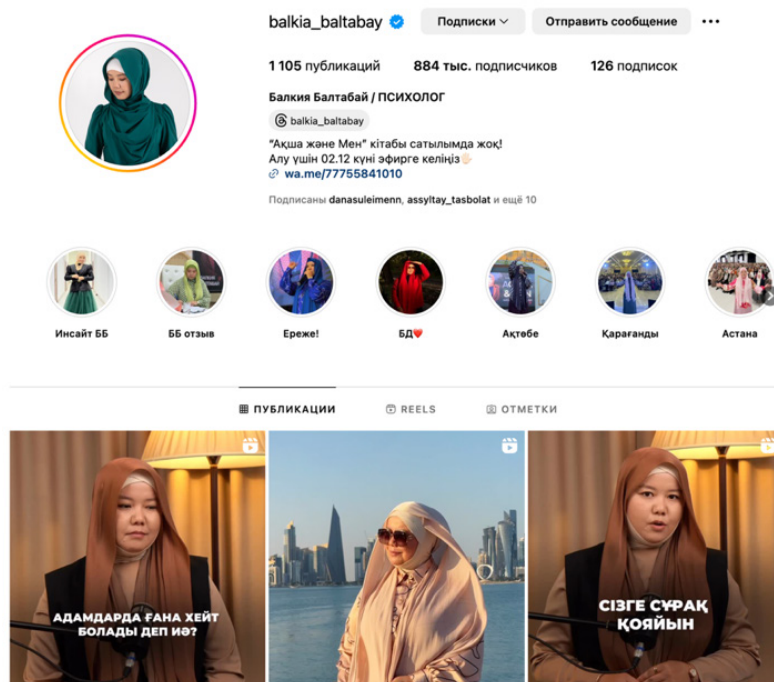
tent on social media; rather, they view it positively. The demand for and interest in religious material is significant. This task is primarily carried out in Kazakhstan by female bloggers, who often introduce themselves as psychologists, relationship experts, or financial consultants. These women are skilled in delivering religious content to their audiences, either directly or indirectly.

With hundreds or even millions of followers on social media platforms, particularly Instagram, their posts and stories can achieve engagement levels that rival even those of the most famous influencers. Female bloggers in Kazakhstan now influence a substantial segment of women spiritually and religiously. Almost all the bloggers we observe wear headscarves. Many of these women have a luxurious lifestyle, often traveling abroad, driving high-end vehicles, and maintaining a successful financial status. They serve as “celebrity figures” in Kazakhstan’s religious community, blending material success with their religious persona.

### *Balqia Baltabay*

Balqia Baltabay is one of the most popular content creators among Kazakh women who speak Kazakh language. She is known in the social media space as a blogger, psychologist, and personal development specialist. In particular, she is engaged in the promotion of methods aimed at forming a psychological culture in society, encouraging personal growth, and solving psychological problems. Balqia Baltabay’s social media pages show that she gives advice on topics such as maintaining emotional stability, ways to achieve motivation and efficiency, strengthening family relationships, methods for improving parent-child relationships, and supporting self-development and growth at work with psychological methods.

Balqia has 884 thousand followers on Instagram, 4,500 on Facebook, and 280 thousand subscribes on her YouTube channel (26.11.2024). However, she primarily conducts her blogging activities through Instagram.



Balqiya Baltabay’s Instagram main page

Just by looking at her Instagram page, it is not hard to see that most of Balqia Baltabay’s content is devoted to making money and getting out of debt. She tries to connect these topics with religious content. Baltabay’s increased focus on money and debt

is not accidental. In the context of economic difficulty and the desire of people to satisfy their material needs, the above issues are clearly relevant topics. Baltabay has also written a book on this topic, *Money and Me (Aqsha jane Men)* (2024). Along

with her work *Peace of the Heart (Jurek tinishtigi)* (2022), this work is also in great demand, especially among women in Kazakhstan.

Although almost all of Baltabay's content on social networks is not related to religion, some of her materials are directly or indirectly related to religion. She does not position herself as a theologian or a preacher, but some of her activities and posts subtly encourage her followers towards religious engagement. Specifically, Balqia Baltabay provides advice during Ramadan. She encourages readers to spend the last ten days of Ramadan engaging in acts such as reciting the Quran, performing *Tahajjud* prayers, giving charity, seeking forgiveness (*Istighfar*), and praying to Allah (Balkia\_baltabai, 2024a). Additionally, she promotes a free informational marathon during Ramadan (Balkia\_baltabai, 2024b).

Recently, Balqia Baltabay has increased her activity on YouTube, alongside Instagram. She has launched a podcast series titled *Money and Me*, named after her new book. In these broadcasts, she typically invites fellow bloggers, psychologists, and financial experts as guests. The podcast discussions revolve around topics such as "*Does Allah Keep His Promises?*" and "*Why Doesn't Allah Grant Me Wealth?*" making the religious and financial orientation of her content unmistakably clear (Balkia\_baltabai, 2024c).

Bloggers can achieve substantial financial success by monetizing their social media presence through promoting courses, organizing marathons, selling books, and offering paid consultations—essentially leveraging their popularity and social media accounts. Balqia Baltabay is no exception to this formula. She places significant emphasis on her media image. Videos showcasing her driving luxury cars and photos of trips abroad reflect her financial stability and success.

In November 2023, a large religious complex consisting of mosques and madrassas, worth 2.5 billion tenge, was inaugurated in Arys, the town where the blogger was born. This project was initiated and financially supported by Balqia with the participation of the Mufti (Aikyn.kz, 2023). Additionally, her Instagram posts reveal her involvement in the construction of the *Nur* Mosque in Kyzylorda back in 2021 (Balkia\_baltabai, 2024d).

The monetization of religion remains a subject of significant debate in contemporary Kazakh society. Many Muslims disapprove of blending religion with financial transactions. In this context, Balqia Baltabay sparked controversy by posting a video

standing in front of the Kaaba, encouraging followers to send 1000 tenge to a specific account, promising to pray for them. In the video, Balqia stated that the money would be used as charity for those in need and would not remain with her. Despite her claims, social media users accused her of "*selling prayers for money*" (Din-Zhanaozen, 2023).

The public backlash compelled Balqia to release an explanatory video, clarifying her intentions (Balkia\_baltabai, 2023). In response to the situation, a representative of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (QMDB) stated that asking for money in exchange for prayers contradicts the principles of Islam, and the Muftiyat does not support such practices (Zharilgasin, 2024).

#### *Asel Mustafaeva*

Asel Mustafaeva is a prominent blogger in Kazakhstan's media landscape, known as a model and entrepreneur. She is a native of Kyzylorda. Her early participation in a dance club, encouraged by her parents, eventually led her into the modeling industry. At the age of 15, she participated in the *Miss Shymkent* competition. She later attended Seoul University, where she studied fashion design.

Asel Mustafaeva is a multifaceted individual with an active presence on Instagram, boasting 3.3 million followers. About 90% of her content is centered on Islamic themes. She doesn't typically create long posts but rather uploads short videos and reels that are under a minute in length. She conveys the essence of her Islamic content through subtitles or sound bites taken from other media sources. Her content mainly addresses topics such as proper prayer practices, prayers performed when entering a house, and common mistakes Muslims often make in their daily lives.

Notably, Asel Mustafaeva employs unique methods to deliver her content to her followers. She has a high-level proficiency in mobile photography and video editing. Most of her content is tailored for young people like herself. Since she posts primarily in English, it is evident from the comments that she has a substantial following of Muslim individuals from around the world. She also shares glimpses of her life in Malaysia and her travels abroad, not hesitating to showcase her experiences.

Asel's content—characterized by stylish clothing, visually appealing aesthetics, and humor-infused, concise videos—appeals strongly to young people both in Kazakhstan and internationally. Many viewers find themselves identifying with or comparing themselves to her.

Her popularity is influenced not only by her choice to wear the hijab but also by her modeling career before embracing Islamic attire. She previously appeared in music videos for popular Kazakh singers. Major media outlets, such as *tengrinews.kz*, covered her modeling work in Korea, highlighting her resemblance to anime characters and showcasing her life before adopting the hijab (Tengrinews.kz, 2019).

Asel Mustafaeva's content took on a more Islamic direction after she embraced religion. One notable video on her Instagram titled *Hijabi Girl Public Reactions* stands out. In this video series, she walks around busy areas in Muslim and non-Muslim countries while wearing the hijab. A mobile videographer captures

the astonished reactions of people around her, editing these moments with dynamic music to create a powerful visual impact (Aselmustafayeva, 2024a).

Her tall, fair-skinned figure, wearing elegant white clothing and a hijab, draws attention in public spaces as if she is walking on a runway. People often stop to take pictures with her, creating an interaction that highlights her uniqueness and charm. Such reactions bring Asel joy and a sense of validation. This confident self-presentation and desire to embrace her identity are not only characteristic of Asel but also reflect a broader trend among the younger Z generation, born after the 2000s, who share a similar inclination to confidently express their individuality.



Screenshots from Asel Mustafaeva's Instagram Videos

In addition to her modeling and Islamic blogging endeavors, Asel Mustafaeva actively engages with global events affecting Muslim countries. For instance, in July 2024, she showed solidarity with Bangladeshi students by sharing a supportive post on her Instagram account during an unfortunate incident that occurred there (Aselmustafayeva, 2024b). Furthermore, her social media pages often feature images of her wearing scarves with the Palestinian flag, along with posts urging support for Palestinians (Aselmustafayeva, 2023).

Asel Mustafaeva maintains an active presence not only on Instagram but also on YouTube, where

she has 128,000 subscribers. On her YouTube channel, she shares short videos and shorts similar to those on Instagram, covering topics such as proper ways to pray on an airplane and pre-sleep routines.

On Facebook, she has 3,900 followers. However, this account mainly serves as a platform for reposting content that she has already shared on Instagram and YouTube, and she appears to pay less attention to it.

#### *Marziya Bekaydar*

Compared to the previously mentioned bloggers, Marziya Bekaydar takes a different approach.



She is a psychologist and coach, primarily focusing on family issues such as female psychology, relationships between men and women, and child upbringing, while closely linking these topics with Islamic teachings. Marziya believes that the essence of a happy life lies in serving others, maintaining pure intentions, and mastering self-control.

Like other bloggers, Marziya actively maintains her presence on Instagram, where she has 281,000 subscribers (as of December 2, 2024). Additionally, she manages a separate Instagram page under the name *marziya\_bekaydar\_academy*, which boasts 783,000 followers.

She does not have a dedicated YouTube channel and is not particularly active on Facebook. Marziya's Instagram posts and video content often have a religious-philosophical tone. She frequently shares photos containing layered meanings and introspective messages. Her blog is mainly conducted in Russian, although content in Kazakh is also present.

The majority of Marziya Bekaydar's subscribers and followers consist of middle-aged, married women who have attained a certain maturity in life. This is not surprising, as much of her content is specifically tailored to this demographic, addressing their experiences and challenges.



A screenshot from Marziya Bekaydar's Instagram page



There is no publicly available information about Marziya Bekaydar having formal education in psychology or religious studies. Therefore, it can be inferred that she conducts her religious-psychological lectures based on her personal experiences and insights. Analyzing the content on Marziya's Instagram page, it is evident that she addresses the issue of women's submission to men in a distinct way. She encourages women to view their husbands not as their personal property but as creations of Allah, advising them to serve their spouses solely for Allah's pleasure (Marziya\_bekaydar\_academy, 2024a).

Marziya Bekaydar actively conducts seminars and training sessions across various cities in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, she holds lectures in neighboring countries such as Tashkent, Bishkek, and Kazan, suggesting that her audience extends beyond Kazakhstan. As a result of her influence, there have also been instances of individuals converting to Islam (Marziya\_bekaydar\_academy, 2023). Marziya has also initiated travel classes, herself calls it "bachelorette party" (*devichnik*), where she organizes trips to countries like Uzbekistan and the Maldives along with her followers. These trips combine leisure activities with religious and coaching sessions (Marziya\_bekaydar\_academy, 2024b). This reflects the growing trend among bloggers to merge travel experiences with coaching sessions.

Although Marziya does not maintain a personal YouTube channel, she frequently appears on podcasts hosted by religious influencers like Balkia Baltabai. The podcast topics range widely, covering everything from marital relationships to financial success.

Moreover, Marziya Bekaydar is the author of several books, including "*Qisqy Qabyrga, Nazyk Zhan*" (The Crooked Wall, the Fragile Soul) (2021), "*Bud' Vertikal'noi*" (Be Vertical) (2021), "*Eki Dunienin Baqyti*" (The Happiness of Two Worlds) (2023), and "*Net Boli. Est Volia. Volia Tvorca*" (No Pain. There is Will. The Will of the Creator) (2021).

In an era where the authority of traditional religious institutions and their representatives is weakening, the words of non-professional religious figures like Marziya Bekaydar hold sway among the general population. Considering the unique nature, thought processes, and issues women face, spiritual and philosophical solutions tailored to their needs are required. These are the methods that influencers

like Marziya Bekaydar have successfully mastered. This is likely one of the reasons for Marziya Bekaydar's modest but notable popularity in Kazakhstan and neighboring countries.

#### *Gulvira Yerdankyzy*

Gulvira Yerdankyzy stands out in our research as the only blogger with formal religious education who has successfully integrated her expertise with fields like psychology and pedagogy. She is known for addressing various subjects on her social media platforms, including her Instagram page (*gulvira\_ustaz*, 542,000 followers as of 7 December 2024). Her content primarily focuses on religious and social topics such as marital relationships, personal character development, prayer, fasting, life motivation, and the connection between an individual and Allah.

Gulvira Yerdankyzy differs from other female bloggers in that she is an experienced religious expert. A graduate of the famous *Al-Azhar University*, a member of the Republican Group of Information and Propaganda, a lecturer at Nur-Mubarak University. That is, she has the opportunity to receive religious materials from an original source. Gulvira is one of the few graduates of religious institutions in the Middle East who successfully monetized her religious education. She is the founder of the website *tajacademy.kz*. This platform offers courses for learning Quran and Arabic for money. This also deserves attention. This is due to the fact that, in accordance with trends in Kazakhstan, popular religious figures (especially men) often do not have their own pages on social networks. Usually, excerpts from sermons filmed in mosques or special places are published on their social network pages. They rarely sell courses and conduct direct interviews with their subscribers on Instagram.

Analyzing the content on Gulvira Erdankyzy's Instagram page reveals similarities between her style of religious preaching and that of male preachers who studied in Arab countries. Her speaking style includes modulation of voice volume—sometimes lowering and sometimes raising it—citing examples from the lives of the Prophet and the Companions, and incorporating everyday situations into discussions to make narratives more engaging for her audience, along with the inclusion of humor. Gulvira presents her content in short video formats lasting 1-2 minutes.



Balqiya Baltabay's Instagram page

As a woman, the majority of her content is directed at female audiences. This is unsurprising, as it is a natural outcome of societal norms. In Kazakhstan, Muslim men generally prefer listening to male preachers, while women tend to follow both female bloggers and male influencers as role models. This dynamic might be a reflection of the patriarchal system present in our society, which is also visible on social media platforms.

In addition to her Instagram presence, Gulvira Erdankyzy maintains accounts on TikTok with 53.8 thousand followers and on YouTube with 22.9 thousand subscribers (as of December 7, 2024).

## Conclusion

In the course of our research, we conducted a content analysis of the Instagram pages of female religious influencers in Kazakhstan to uncover their styles of religious preaching and methods of engaging with their audiences. It was observed that most of these influencers did not have formal religious education. Except for Gulvira Erdankyzy, the others identify themselves not as religious specialists but as psychologists, educators, and motivational speakers. This is because these fields are more comprehensible to the general population and, most im-

importantly, offer greater financial success. Connecting Islam with psychology, finance, and philosophy increases both the appeal of the content and its audience reach.

In recent years, the growing level of religiosity in our country is evident. Therefore, focusing solely on psychology and pedagogy would limit a blogger's audience and result in competition with professional specialists. Consequently, a synthesis of these fields proves to be more effective.

It is difficult to determine definitively whether religious influencers are driven solely by financial interests or also have spiritual motives (seeking divine rewards). A more reasonable perspective is to acknowledge that both factors play a role.

By analyzing the Instagram pages of female influencers who distribute religious content, we can categorize them into two groups. The first group creates content by integrating religion with fields such as psychology and financial literacy, drawing from their personal experiences and self-improvement journeys. These influencers use a religious tone in their social media materials to attract a broader and more exclusive audience. The second group consists of professional religious specialists who combine secular fields with religion to amass a following. They are motivated by the need to align religion with contemporary demands and trends, thereby enhancing content marketability.

The research findings show that among female religious influencers, the trend of selling courses and organizing seminars is more widespread compared to male counterparts. This trend can be explained as follows: male religious specialists often have

opportunities to participate in events organized in mosques, madrasas, and other organizations, where participation usually comes with financial compensation, ensuring their economic stability. In contrast, female religious specialists face fewer such opportunities and, therefore, are more inclined to monetize their religious knowledge in digital spaces.

In conclusion, the two categories of female religious influencers mentioned above have a significant influence on women in Kazakhstan who are either seeking religious knowledge or considering doing so. Currently, it is easier to study, listen to, and watch content from influencers sharing religious material online at home rather than buying books or attending mosques. This is particularly relevant to women who spend much of their time at home.

Moreover, the external image maintenance of hijabi female influencers on social media – such as posting pictures where makeup and styling are apparent – raises a separate issue concerning adherence to Islamic norms. Conservative religious specialists often criticize these influencers for perceived frivolity, accusing them of actions that do not align with the decorum expected of Muslim women. The ethics of religious influencers and the monetization of religion remain subjects that could form a separate area of research.

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