ARGOS
Perspectives in the Study of Religion
Perspectives en sciences des religions
Perspektiven in der Religionswissenschaft
Prospettive in scienze della religione

Religious authority in the field of German-speaking Muslim content creators

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Published on 05/05/2026

Abstract

Previous research indicates that traditional religious authority structures have not necessarily been replaced by the widespread growth of digital media but have been partially transformed and/or expanded to include a new group of religious content creators. These actors do not necessarily have religious expertise or a traditional Islamic education, but they offer their own religious interpretations to their followers as part of their digital practice. Our contribution to this special issue offers an analysis of social media content by German-speaking Muslim content creators, focusing on the question of how religious authority is claimed or manifested in this context. To this end, we first develop a systematisation of potential sources of religious authority based on various existing approaches. Our analysis identifies four models of attributing authority depending on whether a) religious roles and positions are claimed, b) religious and other knowledge is presented, c) certain personal characteristics are demonstrated, and/or d) a relationship or collective identity is established between the content creator and their followers. We examine in detail selected audiovisual material from Muslim content creators on Instagram and discuss their internal differences and where they fall within the categories presented above. This analysis reveals an affinity between, on the one hand, explicit claims to religious authority and an emphasis on clear dichotomies and, on the other hand, creators who present themselves as average Muslims and their offers of a rather non-committal identity.

1. Introduction: Digital arenas of Islam for negotiating religious authority

The camera is focused directly on a face. Two items of clothing stand out: A beige headscarf frames the face and falls around the neck with a bulky fold. Beneath it, the speaker is wearing what looks like a white doctor's coat. The Instagram clip comes from dr. hatun, a content creator who explains "5 health boosters for Ramadan" in her short video. Her attire reflects a double claim to authority: Medical training provides her with reliable expertise regarding food choices and suggestions for healthy practices during religious fasting — and she shows herself as a practising Muslim, strengthening her claim to be a competent religious advisor.

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To quote this article: Neumaier, Anna / Mehmet T. Kalender. 2026. "Religious authority in the field of German-speaking Muslim content creators." *ARGOS* 5 (2) Special Issue *Contested, Conflated, Converted: Dynamics of Religious Authority in Minority Constellations and Digital Media*, 166–187. DOI: 10.26034/fr.argos.2026.9752.

The short video can be seen as part of a growing sphere on social media, which we intend to address in this article as the field of German-speaking Muslim content creators. This field is situated in the context of contemporary religious transformations and the increasing digitalisation of religious life. In research on digital religion, the internet is widely regarded not only as a technological tool, but also as a social environment, "which create[s] unique mediated contexts, spaces, and discourses where religion is performed and engaged" (Campbell 2017: 2). It results in religious knowledge becoming more accessible and potentially subverts hierarchical structures and established social control by offering new spaces for religious exchange. Digital spaces, therefore, harbour the potential to question traditional forms of *religious authority* and allow for the emergence of new points of reference for religious orientation (Anderson 1999; Campbell 2007; Turner 2007).

Social media, including well-known platforms like Instagram and TikTok, have played an important role in these transformations of the religious field. As places of religious (inter-)action, social media do not form self-contained spheres of activity but are instead related in many ways to other places of religious activity and thus also to offline religion. In other words: What happens in mosque communities, in private religious practice, in religious television programmes and in TikTok posts related to Islam is not without context but forms a potentially interrelated network of arenas in which religious content is recurrently dealt with and negotiated. They can all be seen as part of the social world (Strauss et al. 1985: 287–289) of Islam,[1] which manifests and continues through actors in each of these arenas. Social media can be understood as such an arena (or arenas) insofar as they are spaces for the reproduction, negotiation and questioning of key aspects of social worlds (Strauss 1993: 226–227). In terms of practice theory (Garfinkel/Sacks 1976; Reckwitz 2003), the focus here is on the question of how *doing religion* — or more specifically for this article: *doing Islamic authority* — takes place on social media.

With regard to the ongoing digitalisation of the social world of Islam, Gary Bunt distinguishes different digital zones in which understandings of Islam have been created over the course of time and coined the term "Cyber Islamic Environments" (CIEs) to describe these contexts (Bunt 2024: 2). He then emphasises the connection between Cyber Islamic Environments — understood by us as digital arenas of Islam — and Islamic religious history and contemporary analogue Islamic life. Consequently, he understands Muslim influencers as shaping Islamic world views in a relevant way (Bunt 2024: 9). Following Bunt's understanding of social media as arenas of Islam and environments for the negotiation of religious authority, this paper examines the content produced by German-speaking Muslim content creators in order to analyse aspects of religious authority at play. Our exploration includes the identification of different patterns in

[1] Obviously, there is not *one* social world of Islam, but many different (sub-)worlds that relate to each other in one way or another. When we speak of one world here, we mean that there are a number of spheres of activity that relate to an emic umbrella concept of Islam.

which religious authority emerges in our material through the particular structures of social media content.

In the following chapter, we will first take a brief look at the current state of digital religion research and subsequently sharpen our concept of religious authority in light of the fluid field of social media. Afterwards, we explain the methodological framework of our study and present an analysis of six selected videoclips of different German-speaking Muslim content creators. The main section then provides an in-depth examination of the clips' contents and design regarding the role of Islamic authority. In the conclusion, we summarise the most important findings and offer suggestions for potential follow-up research.

2. State of research and theoretical approach

Like its research subject, digital religion is a comparatively young field of academic investigation, but in the last decade it has established itself as a central focus in the field of contemporary religion. The current debate on digital religion is, on the one hand, characterised by case studies and surveys that focus on specific areas of religion in digital media — e.g., religious web apps (Díez Bosch/Micó Sanz/Sabaté Gauxachs 2017; Fakhruroji 2019), religious content creators from different traditions (Krain/Mößle 2020; Zaid et al. 2022) or, encouraged by the pandemic events of recent years, the transformation of religious practices when they shift to digital media (Schlag et al. 2023, Neumaier 2023). On the other hand, a number of conceptual approaches have been developed to systematically investigate the empirical data, to relate it to theoretical debates and to make it compatible within interdisciplinary approaches, e.g., for concepts of identity, community, ritual, space, or authority (Campbell/Evolvi 2020; Campbell/Connelly 2020; Campbell/Tsuria 2021). Since our research discusses Muslim content creators in relation to the concept of religious authority in digital media, the following subsections will give brief overviews on the current state of research in both areas.

Research on Muslim creators' religious content

A deeper look at the current international research leads to some broader interpretations on the development of digital Islam. Anderson contributed to early scholarship in this area, defining the Internet as a new public sphere in which Islamic authority is restructured by "seekers and various other Muslims" (1999: 52). These include various Islamic organisations and intellectuals, who are able to offer their definitions of Islam for easy consumption and even for sale. In the course of these changes, according to Anderson, the many forms of Islam, from a traditional interpretive elite (1999: 53) to the mostly illiterate, popular or "folk-religious" approaches, become visible and discursively strengthened (Anderson 1999: 52–53). Another extensive exploration of the impact of digitalisation in Islamic traditions can be found in the works of Gary Bunt. He sees technological progress, including the emergence of mobile phones and social media, as having led to rapid changes in the information culture of Islam and a shift in Islamic authority structures (Bunt 2018: 34). Traditional forms of Islamic authority are being challenged by these new digital forms.

" '[T]raditional' in this context," says Bunt, "refers to the purview of *imams*, *mullahs,* and *shaykhs* located in the historically rooted 'analogue' locations of religious authority such as *madrassahs* or mosques." (Bunt 2022: 19) The relationship between this traditional constellation of Islamic authority and the individual believers is being challenged by a large digital marketplace of religious offerings, in which media-savvy actors can make a name for themselves (Bunt 2022: 62–63). The religious sources of Islam, once in the sole care of the religious elite, are now publicly and freely accessible and serve as a basis for new interpretations of meaning (Bunt 2022: 64). This amplifies previously unheard voices and also leads, among other things, to a challenged but strengthened female Muslim perspective (Bunt 2024: 194–195). The range of players in this field might include:

> [...] students (in both traditional Islamic madrassahs and modern universities), religious scholars (*'ulamā'*), middleclass technocrats, labour migrants, government gatekeepers, corporate workers, Islamist ideologues, as well as members of established religious institutions. (Rozehnal 2022: 7)

Other international research contributions shed light on further facets of the field: Sorgenfrei (2021) shows how a group of Swedish Salafi preachers use the social media platform Instagram to establish Salafism as a "brand" for missionary purposes. In doing so, they use strategies similar to non-religious content creators, such as product promotions and visible brand elements, including having a logo and other aspects of corporate design. The author also points out invisible brand elements of Salafism, such as the creators' Salafi lifestyle, which is based on certain behaviours, attitudes, and clothing styles. In Sorgenfrei's study, the owners of the analysed accounts explicitly position themselves as providers of a religious worldview and thus as authorities on religious issues (Sorgenfrei 2021: 229–233). In her view on the topic of "Muslim Instagram", Hasan (2022) points out three general types of such content: Islamic content, lifestyles of Muslims and a mixture of both, which she calls Islamic lifestyle. Based on Muslim influencers from the Gulf region, Zaid et al. (2022) also note the establishment of a new generation of "Global Urban Muslims" who tend to be urbanised, educated and tech-savvy. This group is not concerned with imparting religious knowledge, but rather with offering an experiential, relatable approach to religion by sharing biographical information alongside other facets of their lives (Zaid et al. 2022: 4). In this way, they appeal more to young Muslims worldwide than the dogmatic doctrinal discourses of traditional leaders do and can therefore be understood as having a kind of implicit religious authority (Zaid et al. 2022: 11).

As is the case in other parts of the world, there is also a large field of religious content creators on established social media platforms in the German-speaking sphere. This is particularly evident on image and video-sharing platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, and somewhat less evident on text-based platforms such as microblogging sites, private blogs or online forums, whose technical characteristics are less likely to reinforce the influencer-follower dynamic. Research on these platforms is, however, increasing in recent years.

A few case studies focus on Christian content creators in German-speaking countries (Kühn/Simojoki 2021; Krain/Mößle 2022; Neumaier 2022; Jetter 2023) and provide general observations and analysis of the content of prominent creators. With regard to the field of *German-speaking Muslim content creators*[2] (Haddad 2026) and their relevance to religious authority, research is sparser. In their article, Richthofen, Hafner and Wünsche (2022) explored the social media activities of a broad selection of Muslim actors, analysing more than 400 social media posts and identifying their topics and framings. The results show that religious topics appear in only about ten percent of the posts and that questions of religious authority do not appear to play a pivotal role at all. The study also creates a typology that integrates the content into seven frames of reference: The double standard frame (referring to the sometimes conflicting standards found in the majority society versus within the Muslim community), the activism/solidarisation frame, the self-efficacy/empowerment frame, the discrimination/ marginalisation frame, the counter-narration frame, the education/sensitisation frame and the system/structural dimension frame (von Richthofen/Hafner/Wünsche 2022: 19–23).

Hotait and Ali understand social media platforms as spaces for building virtual communities within the marginalised group of Muslims in Germany, where experiences can be exchanged and identities sharpened (Hotait/Ali 2024: 1–2). In their analysis of TikTok content the authors explore the subfield of Islamic radicalism and anti-radicalism. Based on a qualitative content analysis of more than 2,900 videos on 43 different accounts, they identify two main themes that frequently appear: a) victimisation, grievances and political action and b) religious advocacy, everyday life, and guidance (Hotait/Ali 2024: 4). The second theme in particular demonstrates the relevance of religious discourse in the narrower sense, such as "religious teaching, reminders, discussions, and jurisprudence", as an important part of the content (Hotait/Ali 2024: 12). The research material analysed reveals a close link between religious guidance and questions of everyday life. The authors interpret this as an indication of the insecurities of being part of a marginal group and a longing to reconcile Islamic affiliation with the complexity of the contemporary world and with living in a non-Muslim majority society. Two basic attitudes are also identified in the content: one that respects ambiguity and one that makes a clear and unquestionable distinction between what is permitted and what is forbidden (Hotait/Ali 2024: 12–13). This second attitude indicates the high relevance of aspects of religious authority.

Finally, research on German-speaking Muslim content creators can also be embedded in the broader discourse on Islam in Germany. This is a contested arena of discourses in which biased media reporting, questions about the compatibility of Islam with Germany and Europe, anti-Muslim racism and criticism of Islam repeatedly and systemically frame and question Muslim identity (Karis 2013; Schmitz/Işık 2015; Şahin 2017; Röther 2019; Wigger 2019; Mustafa 2023). Even though we cannot consider this broader context in detail here, these aspects of negotiating

[2] For a general overview on research regarding Islam in cyberspace, especially in the German-speaking context, see El-Wereny (2026).

Muslim identity in Germany form an important backdrop to at least some of the case studies discussed in this article.

This brief review of the current state of research points to a fundamental dynamic in the field of Islamic religious authority and social media. This is seen, in particular, through the involvement of traditional and media-savvy individuals from the middle class, revealing further facets and actors within this field. The question of religious authority is primarily brought up with regard to the relationship between new and traditional actors and within the emerging digital market of Islamic providers of meaning. However, in-depth analysis of aspects of religious authority within the field of Muslim content creators is still lacking, specifically for the German-speaking region. A detailed analysis of the more subtle dimensions of religious authority in the field of Muslim content creators is therefore still in its early stages. This is where this paper aims to make a contribution.

Research on religion, authority, and digital media

A broad range of recent discussions on digital religious authority take Max Weber's concept of domination (*Herrschaft*, Weber 1922) as their starting point (Hoover 2016, Horsfield 2016). Weber identifies several motives for obedience: from the rational considerations of interests, custom and habit, to the personal and affective responses of the dominated (Weber 1922: 122, see also Nagel in this special issue). Domination is supported and stabilised by three different types of legitimacy: Legal rule, which can be found in forms of bureaucracy, and in which rules, laws or contracts are obeyed; traditional rule, which is exercised by virtue of belief in the sacredness of the traditional order; and charismatic rule, which is based on an extra-ordinary devotion to the holiness, heroic power or exemplary nature of a person and their orders (Weber 1922: 124). While Weber's concept of domination reflects the time and context in which it was developed and, therefore, cannot be directly applied to contemporary societies, let alone to the field of social media, some of its guiding principles still appear to be relevant to recent debates. Among these principles are a) the understanding of authority not as a personal quality but as emerging in a socially configured situation, b) authority as needing both a motive on the part of those recognising it and an acknowledged source of legitimacy on the part of those offering it, and c) that the existence of authority can ultimately be measured by its consequences.

The work of Heidi Campbell offers another widely used approach to research on authority and religion in digital media (Campbell 2007, 2010). In a study with Christian, Jewish and Muslim Internet users, Campbell showed that the interviewees perceive four different layers of authority:

> "[…] religious hierarchy (specific roles, official leadership positions or recognized religious or community leaders), religious structures (community structures, patterns of practice, or official organisations), religious ideology (commonly held beliefs, ideas of faith, or shared identity) or religious texts (recognized teachings or official religious books). (Campbell 2010: 254)

These categories are particularly interesting as they emphasise concepts of non-personal authority, such as religious teachings and dogmas (ideology) and religious texts, as also displaying authority. Thus, this work goes beyond Weber's narrower concept of domination (see discussion of Weber's concept in the introduction to this special issue) as personal authority.[3]

With regard to our case studies, Campbell's work supports the inclusion of elements such as ideological and material culture as independent carriers of authority (although personal and non-personal entities exist in a relational web). As authors with backgrounds in cultural studies, we share the conviction that the inclusion of ideologies and elements of material culture, as well as their specific logics (which include the attribution of authority to their various manifestations), enables us to better understand essential characteristics related to the question of authority. And while we need to acknowledge that in research on religious content creators, personal authority plays a much more prominent role and is therefore likely to be at the forefront of the data collected, examples of non-personal authority might be a necessary part of how authority is attributed. Therefore, we also want to introduce the contributions of Horsfield, who emphasises an increasing need to develop a new concept of religious authority that is "more individually constructed, defined significantly by media audiences rather than institutions, more consumerist in its approach, and more global in the figures and resources it draws on" (Horsfield 2016: 38). Arguing for considering more fluid, competing and complex constellations of claims to authority, Horsfield offers a list of possible sources of religious authority: radiated social position and success, recognised general or specific knowledge, recognised experience or wisdom, charisma, ideological authority (i.e. ideologies that represent a group's beliefs), sacred texts, religious teachers, appointed leaders or bureaucratic office, rituals, martyrs and saints, proverbial wisdom and visual memory (Horsfield 2016: 42–46).

This list covers a broad variety of sources of authority, which emerge from the author's research into the history of religion, therefore they are not entirely relevant to our research. They also do not always seem to be at the same level of abstraction. Horsfield's considerations share similarities with those of Cambell and Weber but also have unique features which offer fruitful additions to the dialogue. Therefore, we offer a preliminary synthesis of these three interrelated approaches to religious authority (Campbell, Weber, Horsfield), which should, on the one hand, enrich the denser considerations of Weber and Campbell, and, on the other hand, re-organise their singular aspects so they become less particular. In doing so, we find four categories to offer relevant sources of claiming authority for social media content creators and these can provide some additional structure to the considerations of Campbell, Weber, Horsfield and others:

[3] This adds a cultural studies perspective to the familiar sociological understandings of persons and roles as bearers of authority, including what might be considered key aspects from a religious studies standpoint — specifically the issue of material culture (e.g. relics and other sacred objects) exerting authority.

1. Legitimisation based on the display of offline recognised roles and positions in religious organisations and comparable structures. This reflects Campbell's hierarchies and structures, Weber's legal and traditional rule and some of Horsfield's categories.

2. Legitimisation based on the display of religious and other bodies of knowledge (dogmas, doctrines, narrative forms, textual references, etc). This involves Campbell's level of ideology and Horsfield's inclusion of knowledge, ideological authority and religious teachers. It is important to differentiate between religious and non-religious bodies of knowledge in our analysis, because in our observations, both must exist for religious content creators to reach the necessary audience (Neumaier 2022a).

3. Legitimisation based on the assumption of personal qualities. This seems to be lacking in Campbell but can be found in Weber's charismatic rule and in Horsfield's list of recognised experience and charisma (as well as other approaches, see e.g. Bourdieu's type of prophet, Bourdieu 2011: 12). In our conceptualisation, this category includes attributions of authenticity, empathy, wisdom, charisma and legitimising biographical experiences. It remains to be seen how this takes further shape in the empirical material.

4. And finally, a fourth category seems promising, which takes into account the relationship between content creators and recipients. It is not explicitly listed in the models mentioned so far but is implicit in any assumption of relational authority, as is generally recognised in Weber, but also in other, more recent sociological and religious studies (Popitz 1992; Cheong 2021; Lincoln 1994). What seems plausible here is how a collective or shared narrative, practice and/or quality can invoke a collective identity and memory and thus not only address viewers individually but also create an (imaginary) community.

3. Methodological approach, sample and case examples

The research presented here is a result of an investigation of German-speaking Muslim content creators on Instagram, combined with a detailed qualitative analysis of selected cases. To explore and understand the field from within, we started our field work with a digital ethnographic approach. Digital ethnography, in our understanding, is a research approach that adapts the epistemological core principles of ethnographic research to digital spaces, aiming to explore social phenomena in their own logic, complexity and context. This endeavour relies on the presence of both researchers and research subjects in the field, accompanied by different forms of data collection (Neumaier 2022b). The adaptation of ethnographic approaches to digital spaces is already well documented by scholars (Hine 2000; Strübing 2006; Boellstorff et al. 2012).

In our field work we extensively explored the network of Muslim content creators, their content, and their comment sections and deepened our understanding of topics, practices and modes of communication found in this field. After gaining a preliminary understanding, we decided to focus on a sample of audiovisual material from these content creators. The decision to focus on clips, not the creators and their accounts, was informed by our interest in conducting an in-depth

analysis of how religious authority is displayed in audiovisual materials on social media. While the general impression social media followers may have of content creators offers additional insights and adds an important perspective, after our ethnographic immersion we concluded that a detailed analysis of selected content would be a necessary first step in developing a model of religious authority on social media.

Our sampling strategy included that material had to be posted on Instagram by German-speaking Muslim content creators. In addition, the creators had to be visible in the content, eliminating pure slide shows of e.g. text as these led too far away from our research interests, and the content needed to bring up aspects of Islam or Muslim life. From this still overwhelming amount of data, we narrowed our cases down to a manageable number for an in-depth qualitative analysis, based on what we hoped would provide maximum contrast. These possible contrasting cases were selected to include material that relied more strongly on verbal expression vs. content that relied more on teaching by performance; material where religious reasoning was very dominant vs. cases where it seemed only partially relevant; cases where content creators seemed to explicitly claim religious authority vs. cases where the claim was implicit or not visible at first glance, and content creators of different genders. All of these aspects seemed promising with regard to our research interests and based on our findings during our ethnographic field work. Additionally, while we generally drew on Grounded Theory Methodology in selecting our cases and developing categories from the material, our theoretical considerations and the synthesis we presented above served as sensitising concepts during the sampling and analysis processes. Finally, during our research process, we developed a systematisation of subcategories which guided our in-depth analysis of the material.

For the purposes of this article, we decided to illustrate our findings using six short videoclips from our data set, which come from six different creators. The samples presented in the next section serve to illustrate our circular systematic considerations and do not represent the only meaningful or exhaustive selection of cases. At one point, we decided to also draw some conclusions from our analysis of the comment sections: These were explored as part of our ethnographic study and embedded in our content analysis. Therefore, we included them wherever they added important further considerations to our data.

Short descriptions

Example one: "The covering of the brother in Islam"

(German original: "Die Bedeckung des Bruders im Islam")[4]

Abdelhamid is sitting at a white table with his smartphone on it, otherwise the table is empty. The black background blocks out any context and focusses all attention on the speaker. As a practised preacher, he doesn't need a script. He is a well-known figure in the Salafist community in Germany. In his videos, he often gives religious lectures related to everyday life, as in this 3-

[4] Abdelhamid_offiziell, 18.12.2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/C1AjJYFtOV3/.

minute clip entitled “The covering of the brother in Islam”. The camera is aimed at him from the front, but he directs his speech to the side. The video is apparently an excerpt from a lecture he gave to an audience, as repeated murmurs of approval can be heard. Some video cuts are apparent, which probably serve to shorten the clip. His speech comes across as fluent and approachable. He addresses his listeners directly, knows how to use colloquial terms (such as “stylish”) and positions himself as a brother among brothers. However, the firmness of his statements does not allow for any discussion or ambiguity; he makes it very clear what is right and what is wrong. He speaks quickly, with a *nasheed* (pious Islamic music) playing in the background. He states that some aspects of current fashion trends are un-Islamic and should not be worn by Muslim men: He states unequivocally that the toned body should not be flaunted and uses a collective formulation — “it doesn’t suit us”. He clearly rejects other scholars’ views that tight clothing is unseemly but not forbidden. The lecture is interspersed with references to religious sources. Abdelhamid talks about the suitability of certain clothes for everyday use as a kind of exculpatory reference, by pointing out that pants that end above the ankles are fashionable today anyway. He goes on to say that there is therefore no need to fear any conflict with the non-Muslim public. He doesn’t mention it, but the same presumably applies to his full beard.

Example two: “I am talking about some of the small signs of judgement day”

(German original: “Ich spreche von einigen der kleinen Zeichen des jüngsten Tages”)[5]

The camera is pointed slightly sideways at Hanna Hansen, though she speaks past it. She wears an Arabic robe and a headscarf in dusky pink. Her appearance highlights her transformation from former model, DJ, and professional boxer to a Muslim convert who gives religious lectures. She is sitting at a table, holding a microphone, with an additional microphone present on the table. The background is hidden by a white screen, but the shadow of a large microphone stand is visible behind it. There is a clear view of a window at the edge of the frame, where people occasionally walk past. In the lower section of the picture, we can see a tablet, probably not placed by chance, with a sticker on the back promoting Palestinian freedom. In her speech, which is accompanied by a continuous *nasheed* in the background, Hansen lists evidence of the “small signs” of the approaching judgement day that are already visible in the world: swindlers who spread falsehoods about Islam, rampant fornication, alcohol consumption, the dissolution of boundaries between the sexes, wars, natural disasters and a contraction of time. Her language seems to mimic a preacher’s style and is only interrupted at one point by a brief personal admission (“*Subhanallah*, I didn’t really notice the summer”). Her speech is peppered with Arabic-Islamic terms, which she endeavours to incorporate routinely into her sentences. Many cuts in the video create a tightening effect and a sense of tension. The spoken text is displayed in German and English in the centre of the screen; with the text appearing in different colours and font sizes making the rapid dynamics of her speech visually tangible.

[5] Hannahansenofficial, 09.10.2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/DA6QC-TqWxP/.

Example three: "5 health boosters for Ramadan"

(German original: "5 Gesundheits-Booster für Ramadan")[6]

dr.hatun wears a beige headscarf and a doctor's coat and speaks directly into the camera, which is directed at her from below. She fills the picture almost completely, only a small part of the white, sterile-looking room, which is perhaps reminiscent of a hospital, can be seen. Soberly and with reference to medical studies, she first briefly describes the health benefits of Islamic fasting. She then gives a series of nutritional tips to support healthy fasting "so that you", she adds with a raised index finger, "become healthier in the long term through fasting". Technical terms such as "apoptosis" and "noxae" create the impression of well-founded knowledge, which is emphasised by her consistently advisory tone. The lecture appears clearly structured and well prepared, but is sometimes delivered somewhat haltingly, which suggests that she is following a script and not speaking completely freely. The fact that the foods mentioned, such as black cumin oil and green tea, can be purchased online in her own shop is part of creating the overall image of a successful Muslim woman who offers herself as a role model, not only through her medical studies and her knowledge, but also as a businesswoman. Her closing words — a prayer of farewell — frame the clip in Islamic terms and ultimately position her as a practising Muslim.

Example four: "[no title]"[7]

Two people stand at an open car boot and unload food packed in bags. Further shots show one of them, Björn, distributing the bags to various people in sunny streets and at the entrances to houses, some of which are run-down. A *nasheed* can be heard almost continuously. For just a brief moment, Björn interrupts his activities and addresses the camera with a greeting of peace ("*as-salāmu ʿalaykum*, dear brothers and sisters"), explains the charitable underpinning of the food distribution and then gets back to work by placing a parcel in front of someone's door. Björn wears a casual shirt with the sleeves rolled up slightly and radiates a certain drive. He has converted to Islam and, as the caption of the clip makes clear, is very grateful for this, as it has given him a new perspective on the world. The fact that this is a charitable act of distribution can also be surmised from the neighbourhood that appears in various shots: unpaved roads, damaged house walls and corrugated iron roofs can be seen. Björn hands over parcels in a friendly and attentive manner to children and adults who are visibly happy about the goods. Where the food distribution takes place, presumably somewhere in the global south, remains unmentioned.

Example five: "be nice to your mum, it's her first time living life too"[8]

Two people prepare a table with fruit, raw vegetables, bread, and drinks. One person, who is older than the other, can only be seen from the side, a large summer hat covers her face with long hair peeking out from underneath. The other person is fatmanur, who is wearing a brown headscarf that falls down her chest and back. The picnic table with integrated benches is

6 Dr.hatun, 01.04.2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CqflQS4ISOq/.
7 Bjoernslife82, 21.08.2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C-8LICliEr2/.
8 Fatmanur, 13.05.2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C6584jdtexb/.

somewhere in the countryside. Trees and a meadow can be seen in almost every camera cut. In one shot, even a herd of deer is seen moving peacefully through the picture. Meanwhile, the two women have settled themselves at the table and are enjoying their picnic. A rhythmic guitar plays quietly. A sentence can be read in the centre of the screen and is implied discreetly throughout: "be nice to your mum, it's her first time living life too". The sentence indicates that fatmanur is spending a special time with her mum. The fact that books can also be seen in between them and that the two women do not talk during the short clip emphasises the aspect of being together. The whole scene suggests, strongly emphasised by the caption, that everyone should spend time with their mother from time to time.

Example six: "POV: Germany has made you quick-witted"

(German original: "POV: Deutschland hat dich schlagfertig gemacht")[9]

busra.caramella sits on a couch and gives a monologue throughout the clip, referring to an experience from her school days: A teacher had asked her what the divorce laws are like in Islam. She reacts to this experience in an indignant and rash manner and explains that since at the time she was only twelve years old, she understandably did not feel able to respond to the question. Even today, as a non-theologian, she denies responsibility for this topic. The situation made her feel ashamed because she could not answer questions about her religion and culture, "which is foreign" and "would be strange". She is sitting on a couch, wearing a reddish dress and a white headscarf that falls over her shoulders. Her speech is directed straight at the camera. While the shot remains the same throughout, a few cuts ensure a continuous flow of speech. She speaks as if she were sitting in a circle of friends and acquaintances. As she speaks, she puts on make-up and occasionally pulls other make-up items out of her handbag. She explains that such questions have triggered an urge in her to prepare herself to address political and sensitive issues surrounding Islam.

4. Traces of religious authority

In the following section, we present the results of our comparative analysis with regard to the role of religious authority. The sections of this analysis are orientated towards our concept of religious authority, as described in section 2.2. Specifically, these are: the religious roles of the content creators, the role of religious and other knowledge, the relevance of personal qualities, and the relationship of content creators and their recipients.

Religious roles

Our theoretical reference points suggest that offline religious roles and positions are relevant for establishing positions of authority online. It is noteworthy that, in contrast to parts of the Christian field, distinct official positions cannot always be indicated in Islam (e.g. via codified clothing like a gown with a clerical collar). Yet roles such as that of the preacher can nevertheless be assumed

[9] Kopftuchmaedchen (@busra.caramella), 19.08.2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C-11XQxMi8G/.

and are likely to be familiar to viewers in terms of style and setting from offline contexts. Therefore, in our analysis, we identified two different approaches that content creators took with regard to their claim of religious authority: those who claim official religious authority for themselves and those who merely present themselves as Muslims without any claim to a position in the field of religion.

Abdelhamid and Hannahansen can be seen as content creators making a claim to religious authority, as they use authoritative religious statements in their performance of religious doctrinal discourse. Abdelhamid relies most heavily on references to religious sources (hadiths, scholarly discourses) and uses numerous Islamic phrases and terms (e.g. *allāhumma bārik, fitna, jahannam, makrūh*), which convey his practised use of these concepts. His appearance combines a casual style (T-shirt with a sailor motif) with a sporty haircut and a short full beard. In purely visual terms, he does not present himself as a classic scholar, but more as a pious and approachable "brother" in faith. The setting of the clip, however, suggests an offline lecture hall in which the speaker occupies a prominent instructional position. Audible comments and approving remarks confirm the presence of an audience. Hannahansen can be similarly categorised as a "sister" in faith, which is emphasised by her headscarf and the visible beginnings of an Arabic-style robe, for example. Her style of intonation is comparable to that of Abdelhamid, which is why the question arises in the comments: "Why do almost all Salafi preachers speak in the same tone of voice?" This comment indicates that she is seen in a similar light to other Salafi preachers. Nonetheless, several critical comments question whether she is able to fulfil the role of a religious authority. On the one hand, this could be due to the unclear setting of the lecture: Hannahansen appears to be speaking to a crowd, but there are no explicit references to an audience apart from the direction of her speech past the camera. The setting shows a stand-up microphone on the table and the shadow of a larger microphone stand on the background screen, suggesting a kind of home studio for the production of social media content rather than a lecture room. One recipient also refers to the setting as a "home theatre" in a comment. On the other hand, this could be because Hannahansen does not cite any religious sources for her statements. The fact that the statements in her lecture make no reference to the Qur'an and hence have no doctrinal backing is criticised several times in the comments. Her few uses of Islamic phrases and terms (e.g. *aʿūḏu bi-llāhi, wa-l-ʿaṣr*) are also not taken seriously, as reflected in at least one comment ("dropping a few Arabic terms and talking about 'Islam'... quite my humour"). A closer look at Hannahansen as a person reveals that she only officially converted to Islam in 2023. While this is not directly referenced in the comments of this video, it may be relevant to attributions of her religious authority.

The other actors in our sample present as being "average Muslims" in various ways. In the case of dr.hatun and busra.caramella this is done by wearing a headscarf, among other things. In fatmanur's clip, a religious reference appears as a caption next to the headscarf ("May Allah protect our mums"), otherwise the clip's religious character remains open to interpretation. In bjoernslife82, on the other hand, the act of giving out food, alongside the audible *nasheed,* is

further marked as religious by the caption, which credits his conversion to Islam as opening up a new perspective on the world. This new perspective subsequently led to the religiously coded distribution of charity seen in the video. However, he does not claim a distinctive position of authority like Hannahansen and Abdelhamid.

Religious and other bodies of knowledge

Knowledge plays a role in various ways in the videos under consideration. We have already shown that *religious* knowledge is important for Abdelhamid and Hannahansen's religious sermons in the narrower sense and is presumably also expected by the viewers to legitimise the claims to authority in religious matters. This is indicated by the critical questions posed to Hannahansen in the comments. Abdelhamid stands out among the group by explicitly citing sources and referring to the relevance of Islamic clothing norms, which are derived from hadiths, among other things. He pointedly categorises different styles of clothing in contemporary Germany as those that conform to Islam and those that do not. For example, he states: "We wear wide jeans!" — in this respect, they do not create any tension with the clothing practices of the non-Muslim society, which leaves no excuse for not wearing them — and yet other styles do not conform and should not be worn ("*ḥarām!*"). In her clip, Hannahansen situates her remarks within Islamic eschatology (the Day of Judgement etc.) and distinguishes between major and minor signs of Judgement Day, with the latter being the focus of her short clip. Explicit *non-religious* knowledge comes into play in dr.hatun's video through her recourse to her medical expertise. Additionally, her reference to the Islamic practice of fasting indirectly refers to religious knowledge, although this remains rather implicit.

Thus, in addition to explicit knowledge, implicit knowledge can also be identified in the videos. Implicit knowledge refers to practical knowledge that is indirectly expressed in actions and applies in particular to the more performative videos in the sample. This is especially seen in the charitable distribution of food by bjoernslife82, which indirectly refers to and demonstrates one of the pillars of Islam (almsgiving). The underlying *nasheed* also very clearly places his charitable act in a religious context. The contribution by fatmanur can be understood much more generally as a kind of "honouring of the mother", which might be described as a secondary Islamic value. Here the video demonstrates its practical implementation as "quality time" through a picnic in the countryside. The more or less explicit advertising of certain products (for example dr.hatun's food supplements) furthermore indicates a certain business sense.

Busra.caramella distances herself from formal bodies of knowledge by firmly rejecting her own legitimacy to offer answers to religious questions in the face of the teacher's enquiry ("I am neither a scholar nor have I studied theology").

Personal qualities

In this section, we want to focus on the role of personal qualities in claims to authority and how biographical or personal aspects come into play. The analysis reveals a difference between

biographical/personal contributions and contributions which predominantly build on bodies of knowledge. busra.caramella and bjoernslife82 place themselves in the foreground of their clips and refer to biographical experiences (discrimination or conversion) as central points of reference. In their content we also find aspects of empathy — directed either towards users with similar experiences or towards third parties in need of assistance. In contrast, Abdelhamid and dr.hatun focus primarily on their (semi-)professional knowledge, which is shown, among other ways, by the fact that both present evidence (religious sources or medical studies) and use specialised terminology. In both cases, however, they do not disguise their personal involvement in the topic under discussion. Abdelhamid, for example, creates a certain degree of relatability through his approachable language and with pseudo-observations from his everyday life ("the other day I saw a brother who..."). dr.hatun is more reserved in sharing personal aspects of her life and also uses more formal language than Abdelhamid. Yet her own relation to the practice she discusses is clear ("our fasting"), emphasising that Islam influences her everyday life.

There are also clips that reveal cracks and discontinuities between the persona of the content creator and how they represent themselves in different ways. In fatmanur's video, viewers are supposedly given access to a private moment between a mother and a daughter. However, the elaborate editing of the video shows that it is clearly designed for an audience, so that instead we observe a staged privacy which does not reveal meaningful details about her private life. This rupture is bridged by the strong aestheticisation of the contribution and is evaluated entirely positively in the comments. In Hannahansen's case, the most obvious crack in the content's narrative can be seen in the ambiguous setting and comments that question her sources. The feedback in the comments shows a divided response. What for some is an admirable religious impulse from a sister of faith is seen by others as a contrived staging without substance to back up her claims.

This observation is important for another conceptual consideration: Creating the impression of authenticity is often considered central to attributing authority to content creators on social media. However, this is difficult to investigate through research techniques beyond autoethnographic observations. The most valid way to conduct this research would be through empirical methods involving account followers, for example in qualitative interviews or problem-centred group discussions. Beyond this, researchers are heavily reliant on their own impressions, and it quickly becomes clear that the attribution of authenticity can vary from person to person. One indicator of authority, however, that appears to be consistent is the coherence of content and persona: It is precisely when cracks become visible — either in the content itself or in the overall image of the content creator and/or their persona — that opportunities to question authenticity arise. Yet this category of coherence is the one that is often the least scrutinised when solely analysing the audiovisual data and therefore benefits from including other approaches and material.

Collective identity as key to the relationship between content creators and their audiences

In the clips we analysed, community is created to varying degrees, and different collective identities are addressed. Many of the clips focus on an imagined Islamic community of believers (umma) in their approach to their target group. Abdelhamid addresses exclusively male umma members ("brothers") and seems to have Muslims in the German, non-Muslim context in mind. For example, he points out that an Islamic style of dress is partly in line with current fashion (trousers in a shorter cut) and therefore "not a problem" in the context of the majority society. In a similar vein, Hannahansen addresses exclusively female members ("sisters") of the umma, but remains rather vague in her contextual categorisation. The English-language subtitles point to her interest in also being received beyond Germany. Comments in languages other than German also suggest a reach beyond Germany. bjoernslife82 also has a community of believers in mind and addresses his greeting of peace to all "brothers and sisters". By obviously locating the clip outside of Germany, he creates a more international framework. Although the greeting is in German, comments posted in English, Arabic and Turkish, among others, indicate a wider reach. Finally, dr.hatun's post focuses on a more specific community of people who fast with her tips for a healthy fasting period, emphasised by a kind of prayer of petition at the end of the post ("may Allah accept our fasting"). The German-language article that she refers to and the almost exclusively German-language comments frame a German-speaking community as the field of reference.

The creation of collective identity is somewhat more complex in the other two cases. busra.caramella addresses a community of Muslims with a migration background who have grown up in Germany and who are exposed to critical, potentially discriminatory questions about Islam. This creates an experience of explicit othering from the majority community, while they are simultaneously negotiating their own identity. In addition to her verbal description of the experience of discrimination, an essential part of her performance is that she puts on make-up throughout the clip. This supposed contrast between the headscarf-wearing Muslim woman and use of make-up emphasises a multi-faceted identity in this performance and thus pushes back on the reduction of Muslim women to their faith alone. The video by fatmanur is ultimately characterised by an implicit, but varying range of ideas which viewers could identify with. These include a longing for time away, a love of nature, a positive mother-daughter relationship and Muslim lifestyle and fashion. These many broad identity markers, paired with the relaxed guitar music and the high-quality recording, combine to create a weak religious imprint and therefore only a discreet offering for religious identification. Whether and how this multi-layered offering is actually received and how it generates group identification is a task for subsequent research that would include a deeper dive into the account as well as a consideration of the social media users' perspectives within and beyond the comments.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed video clips by German-speaking Muslim content creators, understanding them as part of the digital arenas of Islam and as an environment for the negotiation of religious authority. Our concept of religious authority aimed to identify more subtle authority structures by including the significance of roles and different bodies of knowledge, the creation of collective identity and the relevance of personal qualities. Based on our findings, we want to offer some preliminary conclusions.

A fundamental division in the material emerges with regard to the modes of claiming positions of religious authority. In the preaching cases (Abdelhamid and Hannahansen in the selected examples above), this claim is made in the explicit formulation of religious norms, which is framed as a dichotomous categorisation of right and wrong within the narrow, religiously conservative position of both actors. Other examples indicate more implicit offers of religious instruction, either in the form of exemplary behaviour worthy of imitation (bjoernslife82 and fatmanur) or in combination with non-religious knowledge presented as a way to enhance religious practice (dr.hatun). In addition to these explicit claims and implicit offers, there are also examples of rejection of or quarrelling with religious authority. Here, we found several creators, including busra.caramella, rejecting titles and roles they felt the majority society was ascribing to them. In another example, which we have not included as a case here for reasons of space, a criticism of the "preacher type" refers precisely to the explicit claims to religious authority mentioned above.

How these claims are presented points to different strategies of legitimisation. The explicit assertion of religious authority is clearly linked to traditional religious knowledge, often seen in educational content. We must note, however, that this approach does not prevent creators from being criticised, as we find in the comments to Hannahansen's video. This criticism emphasises the mechanisms of a reciprocal authority relationships and the need for external legitimisation as described by Weber and others. The example of dr.hatun also illustrates Horsfield's reference to the potential role of non-religious knowledge. Her professionalism in medical matters apparently legitimises her dietary advice on Islamic fasting, especially as it is combined with personal fasting experience. Implicit religious instruction, on the other hand, is backed up by authentic narratives (e.g. one's own conversion experience), sophisticated aestheticisation of an Islamic lifestyle (e.g. professional technical preparation of scenic shots, see also Hasan 2022), reference to similar experiences (e.g. anti-Muslim discrimination) and/or an overall convincing performance without any incoherences between narration and persona. These cases might comprise a second group of religious influencers using the frame of role models, which rely on authenticity, personal experience and other obvious personal qualities. This group, however, is internally diverse and calls for further differentiation based on a broader data set. With regard to aspects of gender, our sample obviously does not allow for broader generalisations. We might, however, mention in passing, that while male- and female-presenting creators are found in both groups, it is the female creator from the educational group that receives critique in the comments. In addition, the subgroup of creators that rejects or critiques religious authority consists exclusively of female-

presenting creators. The claim to authority and its legitimations or denials in relation to the content creators' gender is surely an important task for further research.

Our explorations allow for a few insights with regard to the state of the research, in particular with regard to new digital forms that have emerged alongside the traditional forms of Islamic authority (Anderson 1999: 52; Bunt 2022: 19) and have so far received little in-depth consideration in research. When discussing the role of religious authority, the relevance of the topics that von Richthofen, Hafner and Wünsche (2022) identify for German-language Muslim content cannot be reduced to religious topics in the narrower sense. Examples in our sample show that contributions to other areas (e.g. anti-Muslim racism) can also be understood as part of the digital arenas of Islam, indicating that the shape of the majority society is also important for the dynamics of religious authority. In addition, our analysis showed how collective identities were created within the framework of the contributions and thus that many possibilities exist for building a virtual community (Hotait/Ali 2024: 1–2). Most of the content we analysed is situated in the field of religious advocacy, everyday life and guidance, as identified by Hotait and Ali. At the same time, critical and activist contributions were also evident in our samples and appear relevant for the negotiation of religious authority in Islam, including the fields of victimisation, grievances and political action (Hotait/Ali 2024: 4).

The framework of religious authority that we have developed so far worked well in our analysis and at the same time allowed us to develop more differentiated subcategories. It became apparent that some of the categories have stronger elective affinities with each other — for example, that a certain claim of authority (here: the educational role) goes hand in hand with the claim of religious knowledge, while the role model approach relies heavily on personal characteristics as a legitimisation of religious authority. Yet religious roles claimed offline, on the other hand, prove to be a bit more difficult with regard to Islamic traditions than in the Christian field, as the Christian tradition (at least in large parts) is characterised by a stronger institutionalisation and therefore includes more precise structures and possibilities of displaying offline roles. The added category of developing a creator-audience relationship seems helpful to us in order to further understand aspects of the process of establishing legitimisation.

As a limitation of our research, we need to address the decontextualisation of the material in our presentation. By focusing on a small-scale analysis of selected content, the content is inevitably removed from the context of the accounts and the platforms as well as the networks of their respective areas. Our considerations on the impact of the posts, beyond the comments cited, have also not been compared with the actual reception of the followers in a systematic sense besides the ethnographical explorations.

Generally, there still is a clear need for research that also systematically analyses how social media content is received and how that impacts the production of religious authority. Drawing on our findings, it might be fruitful for further projects to deepen and further differentiate the three directions we have identified in dealing with religious authority, i.e. an explicit claim, an implicit

offer of guidance, and a decisive demarcation. Specifically with regard to the explicit claim to religious authority, the polarisation of the religious field could be addressed more broadly by also taking into account other conservative as well as more traditional and progressive forms (with more room for ambiguity, Hotait/Ali 2024: 12–13). Finally, with regard to the scope of the content analysed, more intensive research also seems necessary in order to obtain a more detailed picture of "Global Urban Muslims" (Zaid et al. 2022), to better understand possible networks and movements of these actors and to gain insight into the connection between online and offline arenas of Islam.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Laura Haddad and Alexander-Kenneth Nagel for their critical review of this article.