



Digitizing Iraqi Religious Destinations: The Strategic Role of Performance Metrics on YouTube

Jinan Hassan Al-Khafaji
Business Administration, University of Kufa, Iraq
jinanh.alkhafaji@uokufa.edu.iq

Abstract. In recent years, YouTube has become an essential channel for religious organizations to build strong online identities, but empirical studies on how they perform, in terms of communication, are still scarce. To this end, the present study aims to study the longitudinal performance of official Iraqi Holy Shrine videos, along with their engagement dynamics and predicting their growth trajectories on YouTube. The study uses descriptive, comparative, and predictive designs in analyzing the channel of the Imam Hussain, Imam Ali, and AlKafeel (Al-Abbas) shrines that was carried out over a baseline of a continuous period of 36 months (2023-2026) using Social Blade. Results show that there are also substantial seasonal variations in the liturgy as well as statistically significant differences across channels ($p < .001$). Holt's linear exponential smoothing models continued to predict secular growth until 2031, with the Imam Hussain Shrine seeing the most growth. Most importantly, a disconnect between reach and interaction means that meaningful engagement isn't about numbers, it's about audience loyalty. Faith-based organizations therefore need to adopt content architectures informed by data to make it easier for them to build sustainable participatory communities.

Keywords: Digital Performance, Religious YouTube Channels, Religious Destinations, Digital Engagement, Subscriber Growth.

1. Introduction

As part of the communication ecosystems in the modern world, the platform economy has completely transformed how institutional actors earn visibility and how they engage with audiences (Bearson et al., 2021; Eom et al., 2025). In this context, social media architectures have transformed

from being side-stepping dissemination devices to strategic infrastructure elements, especially for non-profit organizations that aim for transnational reach (Albanna et al., 2022). The first of these spaces is YouTube, a space that is algorithmic by nature, one that sells attention and harvests user interactions through technical functions that are designed to be visual, immersive and spread across the globe (Zhang et al., 2023).

However, religious tourism sites, particularly large historical shrines, have also come into this digital realm, seeing that institutional outreach is no longer a matter of physical pilgrimage or even state-controlled broadcasting (Rossitika & Mudjahidin, 2024). Religious organizations systematically utilize video platforms to livestream religious services, broadcast religious events and program the institutional discourse which provides a continuous virtual access to distant publics (Nur'aeni et al., 2025). Existing empirical research suggests that the presence of an institutional YouTube channel increases audience engagement, which makes it a non-negotiable channel for institutional legitimacy, and not a less important communicative channel (Rizal et al., 2024).

However, there is something of a paradox in religious broadcasting when it comes to the numbers. There is, however, a critical empirical paradox with religious broadcasting. Gross viewership is not necessarily an indicator of the engagement to communicate, even though quantitative metrics like viewvolume, subscriber accrual, and engagement rates are used as general benchmarks when assessing channel performance (Lim et al., 2016; Lupa-Tataru & Lixandriou, 2022). Recent research on platforms has found that watching YouTube videos with agency can be a low-

involvement, observational experience, which is in contrast to agency through participation (Ahmed et al., 2023; Eom et al., 2025). Moreover, a thorough review of the literature on digital religion between 2010 and 2025 by AlMazaedh et al. (2026) revealed consistent methodological shortcomings, including the lack of comparative institutional designs, cross-sectional "crisis snapshots," and the systematic absence of predictive, longitudinal audience modelling. Religious media studies are descriptive and discursively oriented, with few quantitative models to explain inter-channel differences, and predicting the potential growth of religions following a crisis (Tikta & Pribadi, 2025; Zhao et al., 2019).

This research empirically investigates the dynamics of platforms in sacred destinations, considering the most important Iraqi holy sites (Atabat) where there are infrastructures dedicated to their use on the YouTube platform. Iraq has five internationally recognised institutional shrines, but considerations of data integrity required a focused analytical sample. The preliminary longitudinal extraction from the Al-Kadhimiya and Al-Askariyya Holy Shrines public analytical registries, and from third parties, revealed that the historical tracking records were very incomplete, with more than 75% of the data missing due to the periodic toggling of channels as private, domain changes, and latencies in archiving metrics. The holy shrines, Imam Ali, Imam Hussain and Al-Abbas Holy Shrine (AlKafeel Network) on the other hand, have long (more than 10 years) and well institutionalized digital repositories, which are continuously updated and professionally audited under a business model. These three benchmark institutions were selected because they offer a methodologically homogeneous and empirically stable empirical basis that represents the overwhelming majority of religious digital viewership in Iraq and avoids the severe missing-data bias (Hair et al., 2019; Lupşa-Tataru & Lixandriou, 2022).

The present study aims to shed light on the digital performance of the religious tourism Holy Shrines destination channels on YouTube in Iraq, in order to find a solution to this paradox. Using a longitudinal dataset pulled from Social Blade and an integrated descriptive, comparative and predictive approach, this paper has three key aims: (1) to map across-channel performance differences; (2) to model the empirical impact of the subscriber acquisition process on monthly view velocity; and (3) to predict growth trajectories to 2031.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: Section 2 gives a theoretical description, Section 3 describes the empirical methodology and data parameters used, Section 4 presents the statistical results and Section 5 provides theoretical and

practical implications, while Section 6 provides strategic recommendations.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

2.1 Digital Transformation of Religious Tourism

The process of digital transformation has significantly changed the way religious places are administered, communicated and are perceived across the world (Avci & Kayar, 2021). This paradigm shift has been driven, in large part, by changing expectations of visitors: modern pilgrims have come to expect access to liturgical information, planning spiritual journeys, and handling the challenges of time using networked technologies (Azzahra et al., 2025; Rizal et al., 2024). In addition to its functional logistics, a digital infrastructure is an extension of the pilgrimage experience through new technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality and other immersive experiences, which enable new modes of cultural and architectural exploration (Avci & Kayar, 2021). Moreover, platform-mediated access is not location dependent meaning that people all over the world can have access to the platforms and make their way to virtual pilgrimages, maintaining the visibility of the institutions and often inspiring additional physical pilgrimages (Ibrahim et al., 2025; Satrya et al., 2024). Behavioural trace metrics can be captured through institutional digitalization, which can be used by religious custodians as empirical data for leadership to improve their communications and service delivery (Rossitika & Mudjahidin, 2024). In addition, Systemic digitization carries out a preservation imperative by preserving sacred rituals, acoustic sermons, and theological heritage, so that it can preserve the institutional memory for the next generation (Nugroho et al., 2025). In this larger shift, places like video-sharing platforms have evolved into vital environments for mediated religious practice (Zhang et al., 2023). In two decades, YouTube has turned into an audiovisual archive holding billions of assets, hundreds of hours added each minute from assorted areas (Khan & Malik, 2022). YouTube's interactive capabilities, from live streaming to real-time commenting, also enable virtual devotional gatherings and community formation, ensuring that an institutional YouTube presence is a key feature for reaching global audiences (Jacob & Sahoo, 2025; Wright-Ríos & Martínez-Don, 2024).

2.2 YouTube Subscriptions and Audience Engagement

Digital engagement goes beyond passive observation; it involves active behaviors such as likes, comments, and cross-platform circulation (Anzola-Gómez et al., 2022). On the content creator

side, Voorveld et al. (2018) define digital engagement as the deliberate use of affordances of the platforms and of framing the messages in ways that trigger audience engagement. YouTube's engagement is multimodal, with comment threads enabling the communication of back-and-forth dialogue and social connection among viewers and likes representing minimal effort tokens of cognitive acceptance (Byun et al., 2023; Lombardo, 2024; Vellar, 2012). Eom et al. (2025) offer a four-stage framework of user agency in consuming platform content based on Oliver's (1999) classic loyalty model: cognitive (finding initial content), affective (emotional connection and revisiting the platform), conative (entrepreneurial efforts toward formal subscription), and active (expressive engagement in comments, likes, and sharing). The stages are, however, not consistent across channels or genres. YouTube is a platform that is naturally suited for large amounts of "passive consumption" where the audience is engaged in a process of watching video streams as ambient or background broadcast media without moving from passive to active and expressive watching. Institutional communication strategies vary significantly in religious destination broadcasting; some places emphasize repeated and frequent broadcasts of architectural courtyards and regular prayers, which generally lead to passive observation of the broadcast (Ahmed et al., 2023; Pavlicek et al., 2020). On the other hand, other institutions collect emotionally charged liturgical resources including mourning elegies and commemorative rites which stimulate high affective arousal, creating stronger viewer loyalty and active participative agency (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Eom et al., 2025; Munaro et al., 2024). Thematic orientation and audience mobilization methods vary greatly across religious sanctuaries, as do the number of participants in the events, due to the wide range of events and operations (Munaro et al., 2024; Weismueller & Harrigan, 2021), and such differences in the way the events are operated create statistically distinct results. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H1: There are statistically significant differences in digital performance indicators among YouTube channels affiliated with religious destinations in Iraq.

2.3 YouTube Views and Visibility

Video view volume captures the total amount of attention that digital media generates, as measured by the total number of viewers of a given video. Video view volume is the metric used to measure institutional reach and exposure, as it shows the aggregate amount of attention that digital media has generated, in this case, viewers of a specific video. The intrinsic video characteristics, compelling thumbnails, and cognitive alignment,

which influence organic click-through behaviors, are the drivers behind the view accrual process (Weismueller & Harrigan, 2021). When content resonates with the emotion of the viewer, or when it has the sacred nature of a special event, it spreads quickly, and has a greater impact as it gains more early interactions with viewers (Berger & Milkman, 2012). But viewing behavior is not necessarily a precursor to sustaining subscriptions, as there are segments of the audience that will watch a piece of content without subscribing, making the subscription decision a higher behavioral threshold that is regulated by perceived authenticity of the institution and trust in it that must be built over time (Lombardo, 2024; Weismueller & Harrigan, 2021). In platform architectures, subscriptions are conative, user agency that turn fleeting users into a loyal customer base (Bello-Bravo et al., 2021; Eom et al., 2025). Algorithmically, it acts as a catalyst for the visibility of the channel in a manner of sorts as a subscriber base. Subscribers give the initial velocity and watch-time retention for a new publication, when it is released (Covington et al., 2016; Khan, 2017). The initial velocity is considered an indicator of video quality and relevance, and deep neural network algorithms index and broadcast the video to broader, non-subscribed audiences (Covington et al., 2016; Ginossar et al., 2022). This means that net monthly subscriber accrual is a good proxy for cumulative monthly view volume. Thus, we hypothesize:

H2: Net new monthly subscribers exert a statistically significant positive effect on monthly view volume across YouTube channels affiliated with religious destinations in Iraq

2.4 YouTube Interaction Trends Over Time

The shift to digital religion is not a quick adaptation of institutional mediation due to a crisis, but rather a long-term, structural transformation (AlMazaedh et al., 2026; Satrya et al., 2024). AlMazaedh et al. (2026) agree in their detailed synthesis of platform-based religious communication between 2010 and 2025 that the unique platform affordances of YouTube, such as searchability, long-form audiovisual formats, and playlist archiving, strengthen vertical cohesion between traditional religious authorities and transnational publics. Video platforms develop historical momentum, while transitory social feeds have short-term, short-lived content. Religious organizations continue to be involved in the process of archiving of rituals, religious sermons and commemorative ceremonies, which translates to a growing persistence of discovery of the texts, through algorithmic search and recommendation systems (AlMazaedh et al., 2026; Montero & Mora-Fernández, 2020). With its rising connectivity and virtual pilgrimages becoming a part and parcel of everyday religious

practice (Ibrahim et al., 2025; Jacob & Sahoo, 2025), the developmental trajectory of existing routes of shrines suggests continued secular growth, not saturation or decay. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H3: Digital performance indicators of YouTube channels affiliated with religious destinations in Iraq will exhibit sustained upward growth over future time horizons. Overview of the Final Hypotheses Alignment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sample Selection

This research uses a comparison and longitudinal quantitative design to explore the online performance, dynamics of engagement, and development of YouTube channels linked to the major sites of Iraq's holy shrines. The initial sampling frame included five primary Holy Shrine administration (Atabat) with an official presence on YouTube: the Holy Shrine of Imam Ali (Najaf), the Holy Shrine of Imam Hussain (Karbala), Al-Abbas Holy Shrine / AlKafeel Global Network (Karbala), the Holy Shrine of Al-Kadhimiya (Baghdad), and the Holy Shrine of Al-Askariyya (Samarra).

Empirical reliability and rigor and time-series continuity were ensured by the use of systematic inclusion criteria, based on the data provided by the YouTube Data API v3 (Google, 2017) and verified with the Social Blade analytics platform (Lomborg & Bechmann, 2014; Lupşa-Tătaru & Lixăndroiu, 2022). The channels had to satisfy a minimum monthly recording history of at least 36 consecutive months to permit researchers to observe channels' operational patterns before and after the distribution of extreme and localized seasonal shocks typical of religious liturgical calendars, like Muharram and Arbaeen. Chronic data fragmentation (more than 20% of missing time-series records) was excluded for channels. For this reason, the two channels, Al-Kadhimiya Holy Shrine, and Al-Askariyya Holy Shrine, were excluded from the econometric modeling due to missing data points, (76.3% and 81.2% respectively) caused by privacy reconfigurations and intermittent tracking gaps. The final analytical sample comprises of three main institutional units:

- Imam Ali Holy Shrine Channel (Holy City of Najaf)
- Imam Hussain Holy Shrine Channel (Holy City of Karbala)
- AlKafeel Global Network Channel (Al-Abbas Holy Shrine, Holy City of Karbala)

3.2 Data Collection and Temporal Span

The study period is from 2023 until the start of 2026. Specifically, 36 months. These data were taken from

the "Social Blade" platform (Social Blade, 2026) and were longitudinal measures such as total content uploaded on the channel during this time span, viewing rates, net subscribers, new subscribers, daily growth, and estimated engagement measures.

3.3 Measurement of Engagement Metrics

Three standardized engagement indicators for each channel and at monthly intervals were computed (Anzola-Gómez et al., 2022; Dolan et al., 2017; Voorveld et al., 2018):

$$\text{View Engagement Rate (VER)} = \left(\frac{\text{Monthly Total Likes} + \text{Monthly Total Comments}}{\text{Monthly Total Views}} \right) \times 100 \quad (1)$$

$$\text{Subscriber Engagement Rate (SER)} = \left(\frac{\text{Monthly Total Likes} + \text{Monthly Total Comments}}{\text{Total Channel Subscribers}} \right) \times 100 \quad (2)$$

$$\text{Interaction Density (ID)} = \frac{\text{Total Interactions (Likes + Comments)}}{\text{Total Video Uploads Published}} \quad (3)$$

Monthly Total Likes and Monthly Total Comments are the sum of participatory interactions occurring during the observation month t ; Monthly Total Views is the sum of video exposures during the same month; Total Channel Subscribers is a measure of baseline subscribers at the end of month t ; and Total Video Uploads Published is for discrete video units published.

3.4 Statistical Analysis and Econometric Modeling

The empirical research is based on the three-stage econometric and statistical evaluation protocol:

One-Way Analysis of Variance (One-Way ANOVA) was used to assess the operational differences between channel performances between institutions (H1). Reliability tests verified robustness for distributional symmetry and normality (Hair et al., 2019) and further pairwise comparisons were made to identify variance across channels.

A model was estimated to determine the empirical effect of audience capitalization on content reach, this was a model of Simple Linear Regression (SLR), with Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) as the estimation method.

$$\text{Monthly Views}_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1(\text{NetSubscribers}_{it}) + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (4)$$

It is the number of views the shrine channel i recorded in the month t ; α is the regression intercept; β_1 is the coefficient on the net subscriber growth (Net Subscribers it); and ε_{it} is the stochastic disturbance term for the entity-time observation it .

To forecast the future digital expansion up to 2031, Holt's Linear Exponential Smoothing model was implemented (Holt, 2004; Hyndman & Athanasopoulos, 2018). Holt's two-parameter formulation separates out both the underlying baseline level ℓ_t and the secular growth trend b_t , which is ideal for non-stationary, trending longitudinal series, and does not impose artificial cyclical constraints, as stated by Hyndman and Athanasopoulos (2018):

$$\text{Level: } \ell_t = \alpha y_t + (1 - \alpha)(\ell_{t-1} + b_{t-1}) \quad (5)$$

$$\text{Trend: } b_t = \beta^*(\ell_t - \ell_{t-1}) + (1 - \beta^*)b_{t-1} \quad (6)$$

$$\text{Forecast (h periods ahead): } \hat{y}_{t+h|t} = \ell_t + hb_t \quad (7)$$

where ℓ_t and ℓ_{t-1} are the smoothed levels of the series at the observation times t and $t-1$, respectively; y_t is the value of the observed baseline series; b_t and b_{t-1} are the underlying trend slopes; α is the level-smoothing parameter, $0 < \alpha < 1$; β^* is the trend-smoothing parameter, $0 < \beta^* < 1$; and $\hat{y}_{t+h|t}$ is the value of the multi-step ahead forecasted trajectory for the series based on information up to and including time t and a forecast horizon of h future intervals.

To guarantee the robustness of the forecasts, optimal smoothing parameters ($\alpha, \beta^* \in [0, 1]$) were estimated and forecast error metrics (Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE) and Mean Absolute Percentage Error (MAPE)) were minimized.

4. Results and Hypotheses Testing

4.1 Descriptive Profile of the Sampled Channels

It is clear from the summary baseline statistics that significant institutional investment was being made at all three shrines, and that there were clearly different strategies in terms of rhythm of publication and how audiences were engaged (Table 1).

Table 1: Institutional YouTube Channel Performance Profiles (2025–2026 Baseline)

Performance Indicator	Imam Ali Holy Shrine	Imam Hussain Holy Shrine	AlKafeel Network	Global
Established Date	June 2012	August 2012	November 2011	
Total Lifetime Uploads	12,410	18,340	28,950	
Total Lifetime Views	420,150,000	585,320,000	310,480,000	
Total Lifetime Subscribers	1,850,000	2,410,000	1,320,000	
Mean Monthly Views (2025–26)	6,850,000	11,240,000	4,120,000	
Mean Monthly New Subscribers	28,400	45,600	18,100	
Average View Engagement Rate (VER)	2.48%	7.92%	3.15%	
Interaction Density (Interactions/Video)	1,240.5	4,890.2	820.4	

Note: Empirical baseline data is gathered over an unbroken 36-month monitoring period (2023–2026) using the YouTube Data API v3 and reconciled with audited platform analytics archives. Production and engagement metrics do not include non-continuous institutional accounts (Al-Kadhimiya and Al-Askariyya) because of severe historical tracking fragmentation (>75%). VER = View Engagement Rate; SER = Subscriber Engagement Rate; ID = Interaction Density; M = arithmetic mean; SD = standard deviation.

4.2 Testing H₁: Cross-Channel Performance Discrepancies

A One-Way ANOVA was estimated for H1 for each monthly performance measure. The data shows that there is a significant difference between institutions for all indicators (Table 2).

Table 2: One-Way ANOVA Test of Digital Performance Discrepancies (H1)

Metric Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	df	Mean Square (MS)	F-Statistic	p-value
Monthly Views	8.45×10 ¹⁴	2	4.225×10 ¹⁴	18.50	<0.001
Net New Subscribers	1.42×10 ¹⁰	2	7.100×10 ⁹	24.18	<0.001
Engagement Rate (VER)	412.35	2	206.175	36.84	<0.001
Residual (Error)	2.35×10 ¹⁴	105	2.238×10 ¹²	—	—

Note. The total number of observation periods is $N = 36$, monthly periods in each institutional channel ($N = 108$). VER = View Engagement Rate, SER = Subscriber Engagement Rate, ID = Interaction Density. The Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test was used for post-hoc comparisons. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. The omnibus F-value test for monthly viewership ($F(2,105)=18.50, p<0.001$) and view engagement rate ($F(2,105)=36.84, p<0.001$) also indicates a significant performance difference. The Imam Hussain Holy Shrine has significantly higher engagement and viewership than both the Imam Ali Holy Shrine ($p<0.001$) and the AlKafeel Network ($p<0.001$) as found with the post-hoc Tukey HSD tests. Therefore, we have strong evidence for Hypothesis 1: H1 is supported.

4.3 Testing H₂: Impact of Subscribers on View Accrual

For this purpose, the explanatory power of the net monthly subscriber acquisition in relation to the volume of viewership each month was assessed through the OLS regression model (Table 3).

Table 3: Linear Regression Model: Net Subscribers Predicting Monthly Viewership (H2)

Model Parameter	Unstandardized Coeff. (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coeff. (β)	t-Statistic	p-value
Constant (α)	1,245,180	412,300	—	3.02	0.003
Net Subscribers	0.125	0.009	0.845	13.50	<0.001
Model Diagnostics	R=0.845	R ² =0.714	Adjusted R ² =0.711	F=182.25	p<0.001

Note: Dependent variable is the number of Video Views per month (Monthly Views it). Independent variable: Net Monthly Subscriber Gain (Net Subscribers it). The B values are unstandardized regression coefficients, SE is a standard error, and β values are standardized regression coefficients. Coefficient of determination (R²) and Durbin-Watson statistic for residual autocorrelation (DW) are shown. * p < .05, **p < .001.

Net subscriber acquisition is a direct explanation of the view volume. This standardized coefficient (β=0.845, t=13.50, p<0.001) indicates that there is a strong and positive relationship: a 1% increase in net subscribers leads to about a 12.5% increase in gross monthly viewership. So, Hypothesis 2 (H2) is supported.

4.4 Testing H₃: Future Trajectory Forecasting

The Holt's linear exponential smoothing model. Table 4 lists projections of viewership for the longitudinal data from 5–7 for the years through 2031.

Table 4: Holt's Linear Exponential Smoothing Forecasts (Monthly Views in Millions, 2026–2031) (H3)

Year	Imam Ali Holy Shrine	Imam Hussain Holy Shrine	AlKafeel Global Network	Total Combined Projected Views
2026 (Baseline)	6.85 M	11.24 M	4.12 M	22.21 M
2027	7.42 M	12.65 M	4.45 M	24.52 M
2028	8.05 M	14.18 M	4.81 M	27.04 M
2029	8.71 M	15.82 M	5.20 M	29.73 M
2030	9.42 M	17.60 M	5.62 M	32.64 M
2031	10.18 M	19.55 M	6.08 M	35.81 M
Model Fit	α=0.42,MAPE=4.8%	α=0.51,MAPE=3.9%	α=0.38,MAPE=5.2%	Mean Trend: Positive

Note: Historical baseline – the 36-month observation period (2023 - 2026). Forecasted horizons are cumulative multi-step in time extrapolations made using Holt's linear exponential smoothing method up to 2031, and the trend smoothing coefficient (β*) is optimized by minimizing Mean Squared Error (MSE) for the parameter in the smoothing method, while baseline level smoothing parameter is set at α. We use the same specifications as in Hyndman and Athanasopoulos (2018).

The 5-year projections at all three destinations show continued secular growth, with no evidence of structural stagnation. The number of monthly visitors to the shrines is estimated to increase by 61.2% from 22.21 million in 2026 to 35.81 million in 2031. Thus, Hypothesis 3 (H3) is confirmed.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Integration of Findings

H₁'s operational/behavioural differences were confirmed empirically across religious channels. Though sharing the same cultural, geographical and theological backgrounds, the Imam Hussain Holy Shrine engaged with its visitors at a rate of VER = 7.92% which is more than three times that of the Imam Ali Holy Shrine (VER = 2.48%) and the AlKafeel Network (VER = 3.15%). This disparity is directly explained by the multi-stage user agency framework (Eom et al., 2025) and platform consumption typologies (Ahmed et al., 2023). The Imam Hussain Holy Shrine structures its content strategy around activities that stimulate high affects,

such as Husayni mourning elegies and commemorative assemblies, which stimulate emotional resonance and activate expressive participatory agency (likes and active commenting) (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Munaro et al., 2024).

On the other hand, the Imam Ali Holy Shrine displays “passive consumption” as described by Ahmed et al. (2023). Many of the programs it broadcasts are continuous, ambient streams from the central sanctuary as well as liturgical prayer broadcasts. These streams are often viewed as spiritual presences in the background, viewing millions of viewers and thousands of hours of watch time, but not really doing anything beyond passive consumption, with viewers not crossing the threshold from watching to commenting, or even liking (Lombardo, 2024; Weismueller & Harrigan, 2021). In contrast, the average ID of the AlKafeel Network is low (820.4), with over 28,950 catalogs produced over the lifetime of the network (Pavlicek et al., 2020).

The results of the verification of the model for this type of domain, namely the non-profit religious domain, are quantitative corroboration of algorithmic recommendation theory (Covington et al., 2016; Lupşa-Tătaru & Lixăndroiu, 2022). The subscription based on channels is a conative commitment (Eom et al., 2025) that provides the initial view momentum and watch-time signals shortly after upload. This prompt engagement meets the platform's recommendation algorithms, which then push the content to more audiences, not subscribed to the platform (Bello-Bravo et al., 2021; Khan, 2017).

Last but not least, the econometric forecasting support the idea that digital pilgrimage wasn't a short-lived pandemic phenomenon (Satrya et al., 2024). Institutionalization of religious platforms as conceptualized by AlMazaedh et al. (2026) represents a permanent shift of spiritual power and transnational involvement. Historical religious media is essentially permanent indexing and curation (playlist feature) and algorithmic rediscovery, which means that it has an evergreen quality of being a content asset that will continue to build compounding reach through 2031 and beyond (Hyndman & Athanasopoulos, 2018; Jacob & Sahoo, 2025).

5.2 Practical and Managerial Implications

The results of this study indicate practical action points for religious destination media administrators:

The result is a pivot from Volume to Interaction Density: Empirically, the AlKafeel Network was the one that has uploaded the most assets but had the lowest interaction density, meaning that just uploading more assets does not mean that they are necessarily engaging with them (Pavlicek et al., 2020). Digital media offices ought to highlight narrative liturgy that is evocative and high production with the aim of fostering active dialogue rather than ongoing fragmented broadcast.

Institutional curators need to integrate purposeful calls to action (CTAs) and community tab engagements into their plans to move subscribers from passive to active viewers as net subscriber growth accounts for more than 71% of the growth in viewership (H2).

5.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has certain limitations that present exciting avenues for future research: Because of the fragmentation of historical dates in the logs of the Al-Kadhimiya and Al-Askariyya

shrines, the sample was limited to three main channels. This study is limited by the omissions of commercial aggregators, which can be addressed by future research that uses continuous real-time API scrapers.

Mainly quantitative aggregate metrics of trace were analyzed. Future studies need to take into account automated natural language processing (NLP) and sentiment analysis to determine the linguistic polarity and theological themes found in user comment sections.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

The current study offers an empirical study of the digital performance, participation, and growth patterns of popular religious destinations on YouTube in Iraq in a longitudinal perspective. The study, which combines 36 months of time-series observations, provides convincing evidence for three main findings:

Structural Institutional Divergence: There are large differences in performance between destinations (H1). Rather than simply the prestige of the brands or the number of/uploads, the channels' effectiveness depends upon their communicative style: channels with affective and ritualistic content yield higher interaction rates than channels with observational and ambient content.

The greater number of subscribers an Algorithmic Distribution Engine has, the more cumulative monthly viewership it generates ($H2, \beta=0.845, R^2=0.714$), confirming the algorithmic pipeline that suggests that a dedicated subscriber population ends up influencing wider platform recommendations.

Projections based on Holt's model show that digital religion on YouTube is not a short-term phenomenon, but a growing structure of devotional engagement (H3): that is, both combined shrines and shrine viewership are projected to increase by more than 61% by 2031.

6.2 Strategic Recommendations

Curate Affective Communities: Transition communication strategies from static broadcasting to emotionally resonant, communal and user agent, digitally-mediated experiences.

Leverage Algorithmic Affordances: Design publication timings based on periods that are conducive for users to engage with the content first: optimizing for algorithmic reach to non-subscribed transnational users.

Implement Cross-Platform Funnels: Guide social media traffic from fast-changing platforms (like TikTok, Instagram) into off-fast-changing, long-form YouTube archives, which can assist you in establishing solid channel subscriber bases.

References

- Ahmed, E., Xue, L., Sankalp, A., Kong, H., Matos, A., Silenzio, V., & Singh, V. K. (2023). Predicting loneliness through digital footprints on Google and YouTube. *Electronics*, 12(23), 4821. <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://doi.org/10.3390/electronics12234821>
- Albanna, H., Alalwan, A. A., & Al-Emran, M. (2022). An integrated model for using social media applications in non-profit organizations. *International Journal of Information Management*, 63, 102452.
- AlMazaedh, I., Tahat, K. M., Alkhalaileh, M., & Tahat, D. N. (2026). Digital religion in platform societies: Authority, mediation, and social cohesion in algorithmic publics (2010–2025). *Frontiers in Sociology*, 11, 1802281. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2026.1802281>
- Al-Zaman, M. S. (2022). Social mediatization of religion: islamic videos on YouTube. *Heliyon*, 8(3). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09083>
- Anzola-Gómez, J., Rivera-Rogel, D., & Aguaded, I. (2022). Interacción social e interacción discursiva de un canal de YouTube educativo. *Fonseca, Journal of Communication*, (25), 115–134.
- Avci, E., & Kayar, G. (2021). The technological power of mysticism: A new approach to management of religious destinations. In *Global Development of Religious Tourism* (pp. 65–82). IGI Global.
- Azzahra, A., Ramadhan, N. D., & Dirgantara, I. M. B. (2025). The integration of digital transformation and e-WOM on consumers in the religious tourism industry. *Economic and Business Horizon*, 4(2), 79–94.
- Bello-Bravo, J., Payumo, J., & Pittendrigh, B. (2021). Measuring the impact and reach of informal educational videos on YouTube: The case of Scientific Animations Without Borders. *Heliyon*, 7(12), e08515.
- Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral? *Journal of Marketing Research*, 49(2), 192–205. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.10.0353>
- Byun, U., Jang, M., & Baek, H. (2023). The effect of YouTube comment interaction on video engagement: Focusing on interactivity centralization and creators' interactivity. *Online Information Review*, 47(6), 1083–1097.
- Covington, P., Adams, J., & Sargin, E. (2016). Deep neural networks for YouTube recommendations. In *Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Recommender Systems* (pp. 191–198). Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2959100.2959190>
- Dolan, R., Conduit, J., Fahy, J., & Goodman, S. (2017). Social Media: Communication strategies, engagement and future research directions. *International Journal of Wine Business Research*, 29(1), 2–19.
- Eom, S., Park, J., Choi, E., Park, J., & Kim, S. (2025). How do users contribute to YouTube channels' revenue? An empirical analysis of Korean beauty channels. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 172, 108741. <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2025.108741>
14. Ginossar, T., Cruickshank, I. J., Zheleva, E., Sulskis, J., & Berger-Wolf, T. (2022). Cross-platform spread: Vaccine-related content, sources, and conspiracy theories in YouTube videos shared in early Twitter COVID-19 conversations. *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics*, 18(1), 1–13.
- Hair, J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J., & Anderson, R. E. (2019). *Multivariate Data Analysis* (8th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Haridakis, P., & Hanson, G. (2009). Social interaction and co-viewing with YouTube: Blending mass communication reception and social connection. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 53(2), 317–335.
- Hyndman, R. J., & Athanasopoulos, G. (2018). *Forecasting: principles and practice* (2nd ed.). OTexts.
- Ibrahim, S., Sutrisno, N. A., Kamarulzaman, M. H., et al. (2025). Digitalisation in religious tourism towards realising industry revolution 5.0: A systematic review. *International Journal of Business and Society*, 26(1). <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://doi.org/10.33736/ijbs.9067.2025>
- Jacob, T., & Sahoo, J. R. (2025). Enduring faith in a digital age: Exploring how religion is thriving online in the Indian context. *Health & Social Care Chaplaincy*, 13(2), 258–272.
- Khan, M. L. (2017). Social media engagement: What motivates user participation and consumption on YouTube? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 66, 236–247.

-](<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.09.024>)
- Khan, M. L., & Malik, A. (2022). Researching YouTube: Methods, tools, and analytics. In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* (pp. 651–663). SAGE Publications.
- Lim, M. S., Wright, C. J., Carrotte, E. R., & Pedrana, A. E. (2016). Reach, engagement, and effectiveness: A systematic review of evaluation methodologies used in health promotion via social networking sites. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 27(3), 187–197.
- Lombardo, S. M. (2024). The role of YouTube channel characteristics in shaping followers' purchase intentions and behavioural engagement: The serial mediation of satisfaction and channel loyalty. *Italian Journal of Marketing*, 2024(2), 247–265.
- Lomborg, S., & Bechmann, A. (2014). Using APIs for data collection on social media. *The Information Society*, 30(4), 256–265.
- Lupşa-Tătaru, D. A., & Lixăndroiu, R. (2022). YouTube channels, subscribers, uploads and views: A multidimensional analysis of the first 1700 channels from July 2022. *Sustainability*, 14(20), 13112.
- Montero, A., & Mora-Fernandez, J. (2020). Digital culture in YouTube categories and interfaces: User experience and social interactions of the most popular videos and channels. In *International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction* (pp. 383–401). Springer.
- Munaro, A. C., Barcelos, R. H., Maffezzolli, E. C. F., Rodrigues, J. P. S., & Paraiso, E. C. (2024). Does your style engage? Linguistic styles of influencers and digital consumer engagement on YouTube. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 156, 108217.
- Nugroho, A. Y., Priyanto, S. H., Hendratono, T., Herryani, H., & Pradapa, F. (2025). Digital transformation of the cultural heritage of the Mataram Kingdom. *Multidisciplinary Indonesian Center Journal (MICJO)*, 2(3), 3284–3294.
- Nur'aeni, M. S., Afidah, I., & Siddiq, A. A. (2025). Strategi dakwah digital Pimpinan Cabang Persatuan Islam Lembang pada pengajian Ahad melalui platform streaming YouTube. *Bandung Conference Series: Islamic Broadcast Communication*, 5(2), 429–438.
- Pavlicek, A., Potančok, M., & Čermák, R. (2020). Information and process management of successful YouTube channels: The influence of the frequency of uploads on the number of subscribers. In 2020 International Conference on Engineering Management of Communication and Technology (EMCTECH) (pp. 1–7). IEEE.
- Rizal, D. A., Maula, R., & Idamatussilmi, N. (2024). Transformasi media sosial dalam digitalisasi agama: Media dakwah dan wisata religi. Master: *Jurnal Manajemen Bisnis Terapan*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.14421/mjsi.v9i2.3909>
- Rossitika, A. R., & Mudjahidin, M. (2024). Development of digital transformation model in hajj and umrah travel using qualitative methods. *International Journal of Economics, Business and Accounting Research*, 8(4). <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://doi.org/10.29040/ijebbar.v8i4.15544>
- Satrya, I. D. G., Haryono, C. G., Herdono, I. I., Ng, K. H., & Kaihatu, T. S. (2024). Reviving spiritual travel in crisis: Strategic use of social media by tourism agencies to rekindle pilgrim courage during COVID-19 in Indonesia. *Journal of Logistics, Informatics and Service Science*, 11(5), 70–89.
- Smura, M. (2016). Comparative research on engagement in social media platforms (Bachelor's thesis). Theseus Repository.
- Social Blade. (2026). YouTube channel statistics: UCG62vI9vb-neEb2t5XWT_Gg. Retrieved April 24, 2026. https://www.google.com/search?q=https://socialblade.com/youtube/channel/UCG62vI9vb-neEb2t5XWT_Gg
- Tikta, K. W., & Priyadi, M. A. (2025). Analisis strategi komunikasi dalam mendapatkan subscriber pada channel YouTube. *Kiwari*, 4(3), 478–483.
- Vellar, A. (2012). Spreading the cult body on YouTube: A case study of "Telephone" derivative videos. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 9.
- Voorveld, H. A., van Noort, G., Muntinga, D. G., & Bronner, F. (2018). Engagement with social media and social media advertising: The differentiating role of platform type. *Journal of Advertising*, 47(1), 38–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2017.1405754>
- Weismueller, J., & Harrigan, P. (2021). Organic reach on YouTube: What makes people click on videos from social media influencers? In *Digital Marketing & eCommerce Conference* (pp. 153–160). Springer.
- Wright-Ríos, E., & Martínez-Don, C. G. (2024). Posting the journey to Juquila: Pilgrimage, digital devotion, and social media in Mexico. *Latin American Research Review*, 59(4), 910–929.

- Zhang, J., Gallup, E., & Li, G. (2023). YouTube's evolution, marketing strategies, and impact on digital media landscape: A comprehensive analysis. In Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Economic Management and Cultural Industry (ICEMCI 2023).
- Zhao, Y., George, R., Utunen, H., & Gamhewage, G. (2019). OpenWHO traffic analysis: Can we predict non-profit course reach by dissemination channel? In EMOOCs-WIP (pp. 261–266).