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Digital Reflexive Community as a Healing Force: The Case of *HakSende* Among Alevi People in Turkey

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Abstract. The Alevi community in Turkey, numbering over 15 million, has faced social and political marginalization due to its distinct cultural and religious heritage. In recent years, Alevi culture and identity have provided opportunities to redefine key fault lines in Turkish society. The rise of digital media has enabled Alevis to create online communities and negotiate their spirituality and morality. This study explores the digital spiritual community of Alevi people, analyzing the key characteristics of Alevi spirituality and morality in online spaces. We examine how Alevi individuals use digital platforms to construct their identity, reconnect with their heritage, and engage in moral and spiritual discussions. Our research draws on in-depth interviews with 10 members of an online Alevi community, virtual ethnographic research, and a focus group with 8 participants. We investigate the interplay between reflexivity, spirituality, morality, narrativity, and agency in the digital sphere. The findings suggest that the online Alevi community provides a discursive space for negotiating spirituality and morality. Members use digital platforms to share narratives, seek guidance, and engage in moral discussions. The community's spiritual understanding of the lifeworld is mediated through daily conversations, social media, and other digital practices. We argue that the Alevi community's digital presence is a response to the challenges of modernity and the need for solidarity and collective identity. The online community offers a space for Alevi individuals to re-construct their heritage, negotiate moral virtues, and develop a reflexive self. This study contributes to our understanding of the intersection of digital media, spirituality, and community building. It highlights the importance of reflexivity and narrativity in shaping moral identity and constructing community in online spaces.

Keywords: reflexive community, Alevi culture, storytelling, spirituality.

1. SPRITUALITY, NARRATIVITY AND ONLINE COMMUNITY BUILDING

The concept of community has been central to social sciences since the 18th century, emerging from the need to understand the rural and urban divide during European modernization. The epistemological foundation of

sociology included the concept of structure, where interstitial relationships were revealed as a complex network of events. When Emile Durkheim characterized communities as morphologies, as part of social structures, the issue of meaning did not arise. However, in today's world, with the rise of digital culture and technologies of the self, 'community' can no longer be adequately described solely in terms of institutions and components, as it is now recognized as a symbol to which its various adherents impute their own meanings (Cohen 2013). Regardless of societal configurations, studying communities requires an examination of their power in constructing symbols and subjects who constantly reposition and innovate themselves.

This paper illustrates the process of reconstructing a community through a group of individuals organizing themselves in the digital world, which allows for a series of non-mediated interactions. As will be seen in the following pages, the online community practices we have studied include various discursive features and innovative methods of expression. These practices consist of interpretations of spiritual poems, the sharing of reflexive notes on faith, storytelling, consultations at personal and communal levels, the rearrangement and reinterpretation of narratives on Alevi faith, and moral affirmations. Participants in a digital community receive information and knowledge, which is intertwined with the process of being an author, creating or formulating their own narratives that are uploaded and shared with other members. We argue that this reciprocity and reflexivity establish a network of opportunities for members to develop emotional and cognitive management skills, thereby fostering healing.

As Sommers and Gibson (1994) noted, narratives function as a vehicle for identity. Wagener (2020) describes the power of narratives as both content and a form of agency. Research on authenticity and narrative identity explores how individuals construct life stories that align with their authentic selves. Authenticity, often defined as self-congruence (Kernis and Goldman 2006), plays a crucial role in shaping narrative identity by influencing how people interpret their experiences. Similarly, Adler *et al.* (2016) find that individuals who integrate core values and self-defining themes into their life stories report greater life satisfaction. Overall, the literature suggests that an authentic narrative identity fosters resilience and well-being by enabling individuals to construct a coherent and meaningful sense of self.

In addition to the role of online practices and narratives at a personal level, their significance in reproducing faith communities reveals a unique process investigated by various researchers. As Hidayati notes, since

the 1980s, religious communities have been networking through the Internet. Since then, the research and knowledge on the relationship between religion and the cyber world have developed since (Hidayati 2022). Spiritual online communities have significantly transformed religious experiences, offering new ways for individuals to explore and practice their faith. While these communities provide accessibility, inclusivity, and innovative spiritual guidance, they also raise ethical and theological questions. Online Sufi communities, for example, have significantly transformed the way spiritual seekers engage with Sufism. Digital platforms offer new opportunities for learning, community-building, and global connectivity. However, they also challenge traditional notions of Sufi authority and ritual practice. As Sufism continues to evolve in the digital age, future research should explore how online spaces can maintain the depth and authenticity of Sufi traditions while embracing technological advancements.

Bunt (2022) explores the expansion of Sufism in cyberspace since the mid-1990s, highlighting how Sufis utilize digital media for the reinvention of practices and sociability. Studies in Indonesia (Eko Putro *et al.* 2019) and Pakistan (Waheed *et al.* 2024) focus on how Sufi orders utilize modern communication technologies, including the internet, to maintain their existence and transmit their teachings. These studies also emphasize the opportunities for dissemination and the potential for misinterpretations or aberrations. According to Karaflogka, online communities facilitate new forms of religious practice and identity expression, particularly among younger generations. However, these communities also present challenges related to authenticity, misinformation, and the potential for radicalization. The interplay between online and offline religious engagement is a significant area of research, as is the influence of social media algorithms and evolving gender dynamics within these virtual spaces (Karaflogka 2002). These ambivalences in the dynamics of online community building offer a new research area where the power of spiritual rituals and narratives should be studied through different linguistic devices, which serve as clues to investigate meaning-making methods within the community itself. For example, to what extent do shared narratives, such as stories, provide unity or diversity? When and how do people innovate new rituals to form new claims for their identities? How do spiritual narratives play a role in their healing practices? These and similar questions require the delineation of a series of discursive patterns.

As Newsom (2013) notes, three key traits of traditional storytelling – variability, performance, and collectivity – are evident in specific instances of contem-

porary participatory storytelling. Each of these traits draws from a pair within a recursive loop: variability refers to the storyteller's ability to work within the boundaries set by tradition and custom; performance represents the negotiation between the storyteller and the community during the storytelling process; and collectivity reflects the influence of the community on the growth and evolution of the story over time. As we will see in the following pages, the members of the community investigated in this paper employ and rearrange these traits of storytelling on a new scale, whereby participants redefine the boundaries set by their tradition. They constantly allow members to open up a space for balancing discursive acts, which display their performativity. They develop mechanisms to evaluate the process of growth and evolution of the story they create. The following evaluations provide an insight into the community selected for this paper.

2. ALEVI CULTURE IN TURKEY

Turkish society exhibits sociological characteristics rooted in the intersection of secular and non-secular cultural dimensions in everyday life, an amorphous sphere where Sunni and other religious groups interact, and modern and traditional public and cultural symbols are employed in the process of mediatization presented as popular and political cultural itineraries. These tensions largely stem from attempts to reconcile constructivist and essentialist arguments, which seek different epistemological frameworks to understand contemporary political and cultural issues within Turkish society. A vast literature exists on Alevi identity and historiography, which occasionally functions as an ideological force in framing the phenomenon of Alevi communities in various national and transnational contexts. The Alevi people are the most significant minority group, accounting for twenty percent of the population according to some historical sources (Shindeldecker 1998). The major fault lines in Turkey, secularism versus Islam, modernity versus tradition, could never be addressed without considering the symbolic power of Alevi historiography and what Dressler (2017) terms 'religiography.'

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Alevi communities is their social organization, where spiritual leaders at different levels guide their followers in developing moral selves through deep commitment. Culturally constructed institutions serve the community through conflict resolution methods. When people join gatherings such as *cem* ceremonies, which guide individuals morally and spiritually, they are motivated to par-

ticipate in spiritual conversations (*muhabbet*) with their spiritual leaders, shaping their reflexive selves. During these rituals, they can formulate questions for the spiritual leaders to discover possible ways for reconciliation and self-evaluation. Moreover, Alevi rituals and gatherings differ from most Sunni practices in their allowance of the joint participation of men and women. Spiritual conversations, consultations with community leaders, and engagement in storytelling are key elements of the tradition, where oral tradition is strongly embedded in narrative and moral teachings.

The role and position of mysticism and spiritualism in this tradition have been central to intensive and strongly contested debates within Turkish society. A comprehensive understanding of the spiritual characteristics of Alevi theology necessitates an examination of its metaphysical basis and the development of its spiritual perspectives. In the religious worldview of Alevism, the distinction between *batin* and *zahir*, and the belief in the immanence of God, are fundamental principles (Dressler 2002)¹. The reflection of this theological understanding in everyday life can be observed in routine activities and the organization of social life. Healing practices, the belief in reincarnation, and the transmigration of souls are among the characteristics shared in various settings among Alevi people.

Alevism is a broad umbrella term for Muslims belonging to the House of Ali, those descended from Ali. This term was used for Hz. Ali and his descendants after the passing of Hz. Muhammad. Approximately in the 7th century CE, Alevis, who were descendants of Ali, found it impossible to live in the Arab lands and migrated to various regions. Khorasan, near Iran and Afghanistan, was one of the primary regions they migrated to. The shamans and Manichaean priests in Khorasan welcomed these newcomers warmly and integrated them into their own lineages through marriage. Consequently, this process led to the introduction of positions such as *ocaklık* (hearth/lineage), *dedelik* (elderhood), and *pirlik* (spiritual leadership) to the Turks. Alevis are individuals who accept the descendants of Ali as their *pirs* (spiritual guides) and are bound to them by a relationship of *taliplik* (discipleship). In this sense, almost all Alevis either claim descent from the Prophet or hold the bond of

¹ The *batinyya* worldview is based on a distinction between the *batin*, the "interior" or "hidden," and the *zahir*, the "exterior" or "visible." According to the Alevi interpretation of *batinyya*, the inner meaning of religion is paramount. Through reference to the *batin*, Alevis de-emphasize both the literal meaning of the Quran and the practical religious duties (especially ritual prayer, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and fasting) prescribed by orthodox Islam. For Alevis, these practices are merely *zahir* and are not essential for those who seek the "Truth" (*Hakk*), that is, God" (Dressler 2002).

Evlad-ı Resul (descendants of the Prophet) above all else. The most widespread and powerful understanding of Alevism is also defined by many researchers as *Ocakzade* (descendants of a spiritual lineage). The *Dede-Talip* (spiritual guide-disciple) relationship takes its roots from Alevi theology. Built on the foundation of consent (*Rizalik*), it accepts the production of high moral standards as the most fundamental principle of worship (İşık 2017).

Concepts related to Alevism are also affected by the conceptual confusion currently prevalent in Turkey. Thus, at the forefront of these concepts, which are used and interpreted by being diverted from their historical contexts, is the term "Alevi" itself. As is known, contemporary Alevis insist on using this term for themselves. There seem to be two reasons for this: Firstly, the term is derived from the name of Hz. Ali, who stands at the center of Alevi belief. Secondly, compared to other derogatory names historically given to them from outside, such as *Kızılbaş*, *Rafizi*, *Zindik* (heretic), *Mülhid*, and similar terms, it does not reflect a demeaning meaning. On the contrary, it is exalting because it is derived from the name of the Prophet's son-in-law (Ocak 2000). Consequently, the markers of identity-making practices have manifested within a discursive space, transmitted through diverse historical and political forces observable in contemporary cultural politics.

The ways in which cultural characteristics manifest themselves reside in the differences between Sunni and Alevi lifeworlds. The so called *cem* ceremonies where men and women participate in the same sphere are accompanied by musical and spiritual poetries. Alevi women are not required to wear a hijab. The history of Alevi culture reveals a series of institutional practices that balance potential tensions within the community and family, allowing for spaces of negotiation, discussion, and reinterpretation of faith and traditional wisdom. In contemporary Turkish society, numerous Alevi foundations and associations, which aim at maintaining the Alevi traditions, base their validity claims on different cultural and historical narratives, rendering problematic the issue of agency and the political space for religious freedom and coexistence.

Social and global transformations have impacted Alevi culture, which has been undergoing modernization and secularization, rendering traditional communal structures contested, if not obsolete. Processes such as urbanization, religio-secularization (Dressler 2008), changing population dynamics, digitalization, transnationalization, and de-traditionalization have all characterized a variegated sphere of faith and belief systems. With the rise of digital culture, Alevi culture has begun to reflect characteristics of mediatization. Akin (2021),

for example, investigates the online platform dedicated to one of the prominent figures of Anatolian Alevism, Haji Bektashi Veli, which has nearly twenty-eight thousand confirmed members. Established in 2012, the group averages ten posts per day. Besides the words attributed to the historical figure, whose motto 'always read and teach so that you can learn what is good, beautiful, and right' is used by the group, members share *nefes* (spiritual poems) and *deyiş* (sayings/hymns) written for or attributed to Haji Bektashi Veli. Öze and Soyer (2021) analyze the role of two associations that protect Alevi people's rights in Northern Cyprus (TRNC) by examining posts that contribute to the formation of socio-cultural identity through the associations' social media usage practices. In her study of Alevi people in a transnational setting, Emre Çetin (2023) argues that Alevi television serves as a significant case for understanding how citizenship is enacted through media, enabling us to view the community media of minorities across different countries and stateless communities in a different light. Şahin, on the other hand, claims that virtual and transnational communities in Germany are cognitive structures of this symbolic construction process. Two virtual communities based on associations and forums are offered as case studies, displaying the transition from ritual to faith (Şahin 2019).

Diverse interpretations and reimaginings of Alevism now shape prominent discussions about Alevi culture. The historiography of Alevism is intensely debated, a reflection of the political tensions within today's cultural landscape. Consequently, numerous social, historical, and political processes affecting Alevi people have been redefined in relation to key societal divides, such as the secular-religious worldview and Islamism. According to Çamuroğlu (1998), political dynamics were key to igniting Alevi revivalism in Turkey. One significant trigger was the collapse of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. This period saw politically frustrated Alevis reclaiming their *Alevi* identity, which evolved into a distinct ideology. A second, equally powerful factor was the escalation of Islamic fundamentalism in Turkey. The Alevi community's defensive posture against this rising Islamism became tragically clear with the Sivas massacre on July 2, 1993, when a cultural festival turned into a horrific killing of participants. In addition, the highly negotiated and contested identity of Alevi people, as Delibaş notes, has been facing challenges deriving from modernization, globalization, urbanization, and mass migration (Delibaş 2016).

In today's late modern world, so to speak, different interpretations on Alevism also amplify the markers of political projects and ideologies. Problems which

have been formulated as challenges in the literature on Alevi culture emphasized Sunnification (Erol İşık 2021; Jongerden 2003), exclusion from governmental positions, different tools for discrimination at cultural levels, isolation from political projects for political coexistence, and recognition of religious freedoms. These macro level problems bring about micro level expectations for unity and community building, which is one of the engines for formulating the problem in this paper. The case study we chose focuses on such a communal effort by which a large group of people among Alevi population constitute a topic for investigation.

3. THE ONLINE REFLEXIVE COMMUNITY OF HAKSENDE (HS): A SITE FOR THE RE-PRODUCTION OF SPIRITUALITY AND MORALITY

The community investigated in this paper is called *HakSende (HS)*, which literally means “The Mighty is within you,” referring to the individual’s inner strength in discovering the true path in their life. In 2012, a group of people with Alevi cultural background took the initiative to create an online presence by producing short videos on YouTube. Their primary goal was to inform others about the Alevi path, which significantly facilitated interaction within their community. Sharing knowledge and the authentic tradition of Alevi faith led to the design of a series of materials on Instagram, where they declared the community’s mission as follows:

“The HS website is a community formed by people who believe that humanity is a universal being, accept that the soul is a trust from the Creator, desire to live a life in accordance with the command and consent of *Hakk* (Truth/God), are connected to wise and enlightened individuals (*erler and erenler*), and seek what is right and true both within the country and abroad, in all four corners of the world” (M.Y.).

According to one of the founders of HS:

Well, if you ask, “What is Hak Sende?” Hak Sende is that the spirit which came into existence through the breath of the Creator is Hakk (Truth/God). It is what makes the human spirit dominant over the body. Humankind is the one who lives and governs through the spirit, and in this sense, is Hakk. Don’t forget that your spirit is within you and wants you to take control of your body with your free will. I look at you as Hakk, as a being with a spirit; receive the influence of truth coming from my spirit as truth with your spirit (T.A.).

This community operates with a dispersed membership across Turkey. Its structure is composed of three

tiers: 1) core management members, 2) secondary management members, 3) subgroups, and 4) viewership. HakSende is particularly notable and worth studying because of its diverse web of activities focused on re-interpreting Alevism.

The sustainability of both their online and face-to-face practices is highly organized. This structured environment encourages members to actively position themselves within the community. Some members also take part in organizations of foundations which aim at becoming a voice in Alevi affairs. Furthermore, some members have been developing ties with Alevis living in Germany by organizing forums and activities. These gatherings allow people to come together and discuss the theological and organizational aspects of Alevi community-making practices.

In 2017, the founders of the community, from diverse occupational backgrounds, established the YouTube channel @HAKSENDE. They initiated online discussion groups focused on theological insights into Alevi beliefs and encouraged people to organize online activities. This diversity of voices, attempting to assert Alevi agency politically and culturally, appears to have been significant in the formation of this community, which presents itself as a family, a school, a path, and a source for seeking the truth, that is, *Hakk*.

The majority of the members preferred to address one another as *can* or *canlar*, meaning soul or souls, respectively, according to the Alevi theology². In other words, the ways in which daily recognition rituals are characterized by spiritual identification. In other words, daily recognition rituals are characterized by spiritual identification.

According to the founders we interviewed, the core management of the community comprises approximately 90 individuals, followed by 250 people whom they guide, although these individuals are afforded opportunities for independent decision-making in organizing various activities. The rest of the community (around 1000 people) can be categorized as followers, some of whom actively participate through their social media member-

² The terms scholars most commonly use to acknowledge the concepts of soul/spirit are largely derived from esoteric readings and interpretations of the Quran, which emphasize the significance of the transcendental world. Furthermore, the keywords ‘soul/spirit’ can be evaluated based on the distinction between the material world (embodied by our bodies and psyche) and the immaterial world, signified by the spiritual dimension. The human body is the ultimate entity symbolizing the material world. Accordingly, ‘Can’ (soul) is the embodiment of spiritual beings reflected through our bodies. It is also possible to emphasize ‘can’ as the power of enabling forces (Uludağ, 2012). ‘Can’, therefore, influences *Ruh* (spirit), which is believed to imply the animated breath of life breathed into a living being, which departs from the physical body at the point of death. Members of the community greet one another with the word *Canlar* (souls), reflecting the emphasis on the *Batin* dimension in Alevi culture. See: (İşık 2007).

ship. The social media managers of *HS* restrict access to certain activities for all followers, aiming to protect the privacy of those playing crucial roles in determining activities and negotiating identity-making claims, due to the sensitivity of some spiritual issues and the prioritized themes of discussion³. It can be argued that *HS* is a semi-private or semi-public community that seeks sincerity in membership candidates who are seeking the right path. The working groups described above prepare discussions on daily matters, spiritual concerns, and interpretations of diverse written and non-written issues, leading to the construction of narratives and discursive markers with unique rhetorical forms. As discussed below, since one of the key puzzles in the spiritual and reflexive identity-making process appears to be the sustainability and reproduction of meaningful moral claims, the activities, practices, and narratives of *HS* as a community are based on a series of online and offline negotiations, discussions, and consultations. Some of the activities and discursive practices listed below include face-to-face interactions where members strengthen their commitments and affiliations with both Alevi identity and group membership. These practices also facilitate networking on non-spiritual matters, which is crucial for establishing solidarity among members.

The community also employs other social media outlets and strategies: specific WhatsApp groups where members can pose questions to spiritual guides, and weekly Instagram presentations where individuals listen to diverse topics and issues ranging from historical and cultural subjects to everyday life concerns. Additionally, they collectively publish books that interpret spiritual poems and analyze how minstrels refine them.

Certain groups within the community organize weekly online meetings where presentations are delivered to discuss spiritual or everyday challenges faced by individuals. They also hold online sessions to interpret the spiritual meaning of specific texts (e.g., the spiritual poetry of dervishes, or theological poems) and organize meetings where individuals' questions are addressed by spiritual leaders. These practices foster a space for reflexivity and agency, enabling individuals to share the personal impact of these consultations and participatory opportunities.

The activities of *HS* can be summarized as follows:

Table 1. Data on Social Media Membership (*HS*).

Social Media	Numbers
The Number of Produced Videos	1219
The Number of Views (Youtube Videos)	1,421,368
YouTube Membership	6030
X Membership	135
Instagram Membership	8109
Facebook Membership	1200

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Category 1: Content Creation and Dissemination

- a) Creating and sharing video content on YouTube. This serves as a common method for reaching a broader audience and disseminating information, teachings, or event details.
- b) Live broadcasts on various social media platforms. This enables real-time interaction and the sharing of events, discussions, or teachings.
- c) Writing and editorial work, encompassing text analysis, proofreading, blog post creation, and the preparation of visual content with text for social media. This focuses on written communication and content development.

Category 2: Spiritual and Educational Activities

- a) Interpretation of *Kelam*, which can refer to sacred texts, teachings, or discourses within a spiritual or philosophical context. Specifically, theological poems are discussed within the group.
- b) Quranic studies: learning and understanding the Quran.

Category 3: Healing and Well-being

- a) Healing group: activities related to physical, emotional, or spiritual healing practices.

Category 4: Skill Development and Arts

- a) Diction training and voice-over work: focusing on the improvement of speaking skills and potential audio content creation.
- b) *Saz* course and education: instruction on the traditional Turkish and Alevi stringed instrument, indicating engagement with music and cultural heritage.

³ The social media links are: <https://www.youtube.com/@HAKSENDE>,
^{a)} <https://www.haksende.com>

^{b)} <https://www.instagram.com/hak.sende?igsh=MWZmY3M3Z2RvNDNzcA>
^{c)} https://x.com/hak_sende?s=09

^{d)} https://m.facebook.com/?wtsid=rdr_0aDyH5IJ4pQOJGicj&_rdr

Category 5: Community Support and Practical Involvement

- a) Financial support group: a group potentially focused on providing financial assistance, although its current status requires verification.
- b) Gathering and support for the Hak Sende Hazelnut Orchard: indicating practical involvement in a project related to agriculture or community resources.

Category 6: Ritual and Observance

- a) Attending the *Cem* (Alevi religious gathering/ritual) of the spiritual guides and participating in service: a core aspect of Alevi religious practice.

Category 7: Youth Engagement

- a) Young members in the youth branches of *Cem Evi* (Alevi cultural and religious centers) organizing various events: activities and initiatives led by the younger generation within the community.

Members participating in the activities of these groups belong to WhatsApp groups, where the group leader organizes a division of labor, overseeing tasks and providing feedback to group members. Each group is encouraged to develop annual plans for activities and the assignment of roles. Accountability and transparency is required for these activities.

The members of this community, most of whom reside in different cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, and Izmit, meet both online and offline, depending on their diverse activities and intentions. Members living in the same city convene for specific occasions, such as *muhabbet* (a spiritual discussion), routine dinners, special holidays, and other events. One of the community's major characteristics is to reproduce and cultivate their faith in a spiritual manner. The second significant identity marker appears to be their effort to develop modes of interaction that facilitate a method for re-evaluating their lives and themselves, which leads us to the issue of reflexivity. Data analysis reveals that the two aims formulated in this paper are interrelated.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

To explore how digitalization empowers a community, our research questions required employing qualitative methods, including netnography, in-depth interviews, thematic analysis, and archival research. Accessing

all members at the management level proved challenging due to time restrictions. Given our methodological reliance on interviews, our primary objective was to schedule these interactions based on participant availability. We conducted both in-depth interviews and focus group sessions, with their arrangement being contingent on accessibility and voluntary participation. These factors played a vital role in securing authentic responses. As evidenced by the focus group data, the participants' willingness to provide comprehensive answers substantially contributed to the robustness of the study's methodological design.

4.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The first step of our research was to collect data from the people responsible for designing the social media pages, managing online meetings across various groups, and coordinating numerous activities within these groups. These preliminary interviews served to elucidate the structure of *HS*, and were subsequently followed by interviews with other community members. These members, as well as the participants in the focus group interviews, volunteered for the research, which presented further opportunities to incorporate more insightful questions.⁴

The majority of participants originate from urban centers, while four were born in cities and towns considered more traditional. There are members who reside in Europe, which makes the community transnational in addition to its local and national connections.

Members of the group became affiliated through connections with individuals, exposure to social media

Table 2. Social-demographic features of participants.

Age	Gender	Occupation
32	Female	Optician
29	Female	Security Guard
32	Male	Accountant
26	Female	Graduate Student
40	Male	Technician
57	Male	Retired Worker
48	Male	Retired Military Official
53	Male	Retired Worker
44	Male	Government Official

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

⁴ The preliminary questions and the consent form were distributed to the participants via Google Forms.

Table 3. Method for discovering the community.

Method of Discovery	Description
Social Media	Found the group through platforms such as Instagram.
Personal Connection /Meeting Individuals	Direct interaction or introduction by individuals affiliated with the HS group or its community.
Online Video Platforms	Discovered the group through online video platforms, specifically YouTube.
Verbal Information/Recommendation	Learned about the group through word-of-mouth, advice, or general spoken information.
Family Member (General)	Learned about the group through a family member, without detailed information about the initial encounter.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

pages and videos, and interaction with family members. All but two participants actively engage in the organization of group activities. Five of the participants are part of a group that convenes every Monday evening (21:00-23:00) to share and discuss Alevi poems. We also participated in this group, employing a virtual ethnography technique, which revealed a highly systematic group discussion on the interpretation of theological poems known as *kelam*. The participants receive the poems a week prior to each meeting. The group leaders prepare a preliminary analysis to guide the discussion of potential meanings within the poetry. When questioned about the rationale behind preparing this analysis before the online discussion, the leaders explained that this strategy serves as a necessary tool to mitigate potential deviations and to foster a more systematic group dynamic. During the online meetings, participants share their reflections by explicitly articulating their opinions, drawing upon observations, knowledge of other teleological markers, and their emotional and cognitive inspirations. This process of self-reflection and life contemplation appears to be shaped by an intense pursuit of a true path and an authentic interpretation among peers, drawing from deep-seated moral frameworks. Some participants, for instance, reflected on their past selves before their involvement with this community for sharing their spiritual inquiries, drawing a comparison between their former and current states. They concluded that engaging with these texts, some of which are in the form of poems or parables circulating among Alevi people, has led to spiritual empowerment or refinement. Consequently, the collective reading of poems renders their subjectivity more enriched and empowered, which directly correlates with a sense of strength in addressing practical issues. The session on reading theological poetry is not intended to impose specific meanings on the participants. Conversely, they are encouraged to discern a personal path in the process of constructing a reflexive self, which is then shared publicly.

One of the key questions that helped formulate a problem concerning membership within the online community is associated with the major discursive patterns in individuals' characterizations of their motivations. The participants identified five primary categories:

- spiritual growth,
- understanding truth and reality,
- providing service to others,
- receiving guidance from others,
- personal conduct.

These are intertwined with questioning and re-evaluating their roles in the community, seeking cognitive and spiritual tools for self-empowerment, and negotiating their moral selves and social roles. When asked about the most significant activities within the group, community building, gatherings, continuous engagement as a means of addressing daily challenges, fostering self-knowledge, achieving balance, and practical application in life were listed as the main themes, which were complemented by their motivations for participating in HS.

When we asked them to describe the community they are affiliated with, the answers were as follows. HS is a community, emphasizing:

- Spiritually Focused and Seeking Truth (*Hakk*)
- Personal and Spiritual Development
- Unity, Solidarity, and Sincerity
- Learning and Understanding (especially teachings)
- Spreading and Applying Truth (*Hakk*)
- Balancing Spirituality and Worldly Life

The ways in which participants characterized their community appear to rely on negotiating a personal and collective identity-making process embedded in spirituality. As noted in the analysis of the focus group interviews, the participants' sensitivity to balancing worldly activities with spiritual idiosyncrasies is far from simplistic or one-dimensional. The seeker identity they internalize is elevated to a level where they resist the cessation of exploring their spiritual path, even though the repetitiveness of rituals and the circulation of the same texts and meanings in teachings may occasionally

Table 4. The categorization of the motivations for following HS

Category	Motivations
Category 1: Spiritual Growth and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. to develop myself both spiritually and in terms of willpower. b. Its closeness to spirituality and how it keeps me from getting caught up in worldly anxieties. c. It allows me to see my shortcomings and deficiencies, adding depth to my understanding and inner state. d. The presence of spiritual purification practices. e. Completing our personal development. f. Spiritual purification. g. The transformation of a person from humanity towards perfection. h. Spiritual purification and cleansing practices on people. i. Humanity's struggle to know itself and connect with its spirit.
Category 2: Understanding Truth and Reality (<i>Hakk</i> and <i>Hakikat</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. to gain new knowledge and experiences in the name of reality. b. Explanation of the truth within the path. c. My desire to be within this reality. d. My wish to discover new and accurate information with a different perspective. e. We believe that this is the truth and the way of <i>Hakk</i> (God/Truth). f. Learning new information, applying and living according to what is right (<i>Hakk</i>). g. Spreading what is right (<i>Hakk</i>). g.1. The true purpose of life. g.2. The right way of living, which we call <i>Hakk</i> (Truth/God) and <i>hakikat</i> (reality/ultimate truth). g.3. Interpreting the Word (<i>Kelam</i>), understanding the meaning of what is heard and said.
Category 3: Service and Support for Others/Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. To serve and support other people. b. Taking a role [in the group] not only helps the potential within us to be revealed but also allows us to see the things that prevent this potential from emerging. c. Doing something for unity and togetherness. d. I want to provide all kinds of support to the group because I believe that we will rise together, not alone. e. Thirdly, the people who join HS knowingly and with belief give me confidence. I enjoy being in the same environment as them. f. Those who connect with their spirit supporting the awakening of other brothers and sisters.
Category 4: Guidance and Learning from Leaders/Teachings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. We consider some people here to be our guide. b. We believe that trying to understand and interpret these words contributes to personal development and is educational. b.1. I first learned about creation and the path from the leaders, my <i>Pir</i> (spiritual guide), and my <i>Rehber</i> (guide) within HS. Firstly, I feel a responsibility towards them.
Category 5. Personal Conduct and Alignment	It enables me to seek and see what is right within a universal perspective, and it always keeps the goal directed towards what is right.

impede the process of self-development. Although the intensity of seeking guidance and constructing a frame of reference for their lives may vary among individuals, the online and offline activities, rituals, and discourses have significantly shaped their definition of how they perceive HS and themselves.

The participants were also questioned about their level of reflexivity concerning their membership in HS, specifically, changes in their spiritual lives after joining the community. Their responses centered on increased spiritual awareness and understanding, personal and ego transformation/struggle, positive shifts in perspective and life outlook, experiencing a spiritual situation *Hal* and spiritual flow, and general positive spiritual development.

Another question concerned members' advantages or disadvantages in sharing Alevi culture during online activities. Their responses include: gains in understanding and disseminating authentic Alevi culture, challenges related to reactions and comprehension from non-members, limited reach to external audiences, personal choices and social considerations affecting disclosure, positive personal growth and development, and social impact on personal relationships. Some members express the possibility of not reaching out to other groups, becoming isolated. The issue of authenticity points to a wider problem within Alevism in terms of identity and agency. In other words, as noted above, Alevi culture has become one of the most significant symbols through which diverse voices have attempted to offer their own ideological and political definitions based on a revised

historiography. The participants of *HS*, as the focus group interviews clearly show, expressed their frustrations with these ideological tensions, articulating an ultimate collective goal: seeking a moral path without becoming instrumentalized by those attempting to disassociate Alevism from its core values and reconstruct a new culture.

4.2. Focus Group

To gain further insight into the primary issues addressed in this paper, an online focus group discussion was conducted on April 5, 2025, from 21:00 to 23:30. The community leaders selected the participants, suggesting that those with extensive volunteer experience would provide more informative perspectives; consequently, they invited ten members. Two individuals had also participated in the semi-structured interviews, which did not present any issues when they were asked about volunteering twice. The online focus group research was organized to analyze the main issues and arguments at a deeper level, employing a reflexive approach. All participants articulated their opinions and feelings analytically and comprehensively. Space limitations preclude a full account of all responses and their relevance. However, the following explanations of the questions we asked are worth evaluating in order to remember our main task: interpreting the main amalgam of the online community and reflexive self-formation through online activities and narratives.

Accordingly, participants were asked questions regarding their own interpretations of the identity of their online community, *HS*. Their responses were as follows:

A place where spirituality is emphasized more, where people support each other to feel each other's souls and connect with their souls... in addition, this is a community where misunderstandings about Alevi culture are corrected. (INT 1)

What keeps us together, all of us? We are making progress. Day by day, our understanding changes and develops, and in fact, we can see our own evolution because between our yesterday and today, a capability is developing for us to both correct our behaviors, understand the other person, and find what is Right, or at least trace its path. [...] So, we can say that the missing pieces, the gaps, or the flawed parts within our previous framework of thought are both being improved, repaired, and healed over time. And this process shows that our system of thought is becoming more mature, more holistic, and more perfect day by day. We are experiencing a kind of mental and spiritual evolution. (INT 2)

Spirituality, if we need to summarize the inner dimension, looks to me exactly like a military order. So there's always a command and control system. There's a superior, and

a superior above that. There too, there's a 'Hand in hand towards God' system because there's a private, there's a corporal, there's a sergeant. Here too, in the same way, there are souls performing duties, and there are individuals in higher positions who carry out these duties. Because of this, I see this solidarity in the middle as the struggle of conscious beings who are aware of the war, right here right now. (INT 3)

Together with solidarity, the HS group is based on three main fundamental principles: 'sharing, love, and being solution-oriented'. This sharing is both material and spiritual. Along with this, it's based on love, but specifically among those who are believers and progress based on faith, and furthermore, without actually pursuing any commercial gain or self-interest [...] Yes, you're right. As you also stated at the beginning, therapy and many similar things actually have pieces of all of them here. Therefore, it simultaneously has both a foundation in psychology and a foundation in social solidarity, and there's a piece of support within all the things that professionals who practice positive sciences also do in many areas. (INT 4)

As you also expressed, the fact that all souls in HS are in a spiritual quest, I also think that our souls feel and seek that energy, as our dear ones (canlar) mentioned at the beginning. It's this energy that brings us together. So, because the soul has a kind of insatiability or a need, this sincerity and warmth in HS what has brought us to these places. (INT 5)

In their responses, the participants prioritized collectivity through online sharing and production, a solution-oriented group identity, and a moral quest or path. The community's identity was defined by a de-emphasis on explicit Alevi affiliation, which fostered a more universal moral perspective. When questioned about this lack of Alevi emphasis, most participants highlighted their engagement in the process of discerning the right path or acting ethically. Nevertheless, two participants highlighted the value of belonging to an Alevi community over distancing themselves from their cultural ties.

Regarding the problems within the community, the participants' responses were as follows:

No matter how much this community is based on spirituality, we can make mistakes when given responsibilities. When there are errors, we can make mistakes in the services provided. Due to these mistakes, people can sometimes, even if occasionally, be left with or face misinformation on this matter. This also actually occurs not due to the imperfection of the service here, but because we turn towards our own ego. (INT 1)

We can try to isolate ourselves from that community. We start to withdraw into our own shell. Of course, things happen within ourselves too. I think these assumptions occur, and they can happen due to what we feel. That's generally what I've observed. (INT 7)

While there's a constant occurrence of this information being presented in a way that other people could also ben-

efit from, we're perhaps a group of 100-150 people, and if we include our spouses and children, this number increases even more. In a place with so many people, we need to be more productive in this sense. We are experiencing a problem here as well. For example, in our (online) group for interpreting the Alevi poetry, there are 18 people. Actively sending comments and participating in the commentary that evening are 6 or 7 people. The remaining 10 or 11 people are in the background with their screens off and no sound. They are just listening. (INT 4)

Now, we have problems, it's not that we don't. So, we're not in a position to paint everything rosy right now. After all, we all carry egos. I fundamentally see these problems under two main headings. Firstly, we all initially came with a certain level of understanding, and we are all striving within the material world. Our common ground is that the more we enrich ourselves in terms of both the apparent and the inner, both spiritual and material knowledge, the more we mature spiritually in this sense. We evolve. Therefore, a person makes mistakes in proportion to their level of perfection. Not everyone comes at the same level and on the same path. However, there's one constant thing. We all know that with these efforts, our understanding matures. We have truly experienced purifications in a spiritual sense. We can truly tolerate our negative thoughts at certain levels and everyone is sure of this: we are trying to find what is Right. However, despite this, very sharp and different opinions can emerge. (INT 5)

As the participants' responses indicate, the majority define the community as a spiritual venue providing opportunities for the psychological and spiritual evolution of their souls and selves. Second, they appear to internalize the significance of *HS* as a source of moral identity, intended for application in everyday challenges and tensions. Personal growth and communal evolution are viewed as interconnected, as their statements heavily emphasize altruism and collectivism. Individual spiritual growth is framed as dependent on the strength of communal virtue. Problems are characterized as having both personal and communal origins. The *batin/zahir* distinction discussed earlier appears to play a key role in shaping the members' worldview. Experiencing and discerning the spiritual meaning of fundamental life questions seem to be articulated within the context of a communal meaning-making process, heavily influenced by their seeker identity in what they term a moral quest.

During the online focus group session, one participant expressed concern that their responses were not sufficiently sophisticated to address the questions posed, although the researchers did not insist on obtaining answers from every individual. After the focus group, the participant sent us a twenty-line stanza, a poem inspired by our group discussion, which is defined as having a spiritual energy that created a lively and productive exchange. The following extract from the poem reveals

their interpretation of the situation (*hal*), suggesting a need for re-evaluation.

*I have embarked on a long journey, my companions,
"There is death, there is no turning back," the wise ones
said.
"The path is difficult," they said, I accept, my companions,
"Continuous struggle," the wise ones said. (INT 7)*

The manner in which a focus group participant expresses his insight by writing a spiritual verse, in order to reconstruct his ideas and emotions, reveals a process of meaning-making in which reflexivity is at the core of the practice online spiritual community-building practices. Evidently, their conviction, expressed in verse, transcends the shared conversation among participants. Our questions triggered a novel mode of thought, or an internal conversation (Archer 2003), culminating in the creation of a poem-a personal expression and a tool for collective healing. Such texts are products of intersubjectivity, mediated by online practices and norms, thereby establishing a discursive space for both innovation and, at times, inhibition.

When participants were asked about potential problems associated with their membership, they cited the routinization of activities if members lack sufficient energy and initiative to develop and organize new activities, facilitate the sharing of diverse perspectives, and keep the community management informed. Another challenge identified was the tendency of some members to categorize non-members as 'others,' potentially creating divisions within the community. The overemphasis on sharing verses, reading poems, and creating social media content, they argued, could pose a threat to the erosion of the core spiritual heritage of Alevi people. In essence, the members of *HS* seem to be aware of the difficulty of maintaining and reproducing a well-balanced, structured, transparent, and equitable community serving *Hakk*.

5. CONCLUSION

The long-investigated rural versus urban distinction in Turkish society's morphology has traditionally informed evaluations of community function. However, understanding the ongoing features of community-building practices necessitates accepting community as an entity reproduced through situated and embodied performance and practice (Wills 2016). To illuminate the practices and performances of an online community established by a group of Alevi individuals presenting themselves in a socio-theological and spiritual manner, this

study has analyzed the ways in which they create a symbolic universe where subjects revitalize their convictions.

Characterized by political tensions and struggles, Alevi politics have fostered cultural discourses on Alevism that have evolved to the point where the digitalization of the world has not led to community erosion. On the contrary, traditional rituals are being transferred to urban settings where individuals have formed associations, foundations, and online forums as a means of reconstructing their culture, supported by diverse anthropological and theological features. While attempts to demythologize Alevi culture have historically served as political tools to reassemble Alevi politics, it has been observed that traditions, perceived as non-monolithic, adapt and find new remedies and functions. At the political level, Alevi communities have witnessed hegemonic markers such deep scrutiny by non-Alevi forces, which made negotiations over religious freedom, the processes known as Alevi openings in 2008, necessary. These perceived unholy alliances have strengthened their motivation to reclaim their identity and rights at the macro level. Simultaneously, cultural public spheres have emerged via new digital innovations at the meso level. In this context, *HS* stands as one such community serving to revitalize the path for seeking a reflexive community under spiritual leadership.

Various factors have driven the community's formation, with personal storytelling, the construction of moral narratives, and communal gatherings for spiritual energy and zeal serving as guiding principles. The healing power of this online community stems from the ways in which a series of narratives and discursive practices provide ontological security, which has been eroded by the vicissitudes of a highly politicized cultural realm. The traditional characteristics of Alevi culture, as previously described, have been exposed to national and transnational repositioning efforts, potentially obscuring intimate spiritual dynamics and practical theological concerns.

The online community investigated in this paper, *HakSende*, offers a partially structured and partially accessible space that primarily organizes itself in the digital sphere. The members' activities and practices have cultivated a habitus where their narratives about Alevi identity are negotiated, reinterpreted, and reflected upon. The discourses of this community exhibit characteristics of building a space for reflexive spirituality. Despite varying interpretations regarding the role of Alevism in the virtual space, the members of this online community emphasize a significant marker: striving to follow a path towards a consensus on a moral way of living. The online and offline practices and narratives of *HS* affirm the group as a collective storyteller. As noted

earlier, their initial motivation was to share short videos on social media platforms to foster an authentic understanding of their faith. These practices evolved into the formation of groups where diverse activities could produce a form of hermeneutical negotiation often lacking in everyday life conversations. Such awakenings at the group level have spurred the innovation of other groups and activities with specific narratives, driven by virtuous and morally insightful intentions.

The community engages in various activities encompassing different styles and operations. However, the common thread uniting them is participation in a moral path, identified as *Hakk*. All narratives are integral to this path, presenting themselves as stories. In other words, *HS* has formulated its own storytelling procedures, revealing features of variability, performance, and collectivity (Newsom 2013). Variability refers to the storyteller's ability to operate within the boundaries established by tradition and custom. Most members of the online community expressed their commitment to respecting the common ground for safeguarding their tradition in understanding the divine and the moral within certain parameters. For instance, when the reading group encounters atypical interpretations of a verse or poem, the majority typically agree on teaching the most reasonable caveats and potential methods for understanding the interpretations. Performance represents the negotiation between the storyteller and the community during the storytelling process. Most online sessions allow for a space of negotiation and the creation of a forum with equal opportunities, although a spiritual leader may occasionally intervene to redefine the situation. Participants' performances are expected to be highly contributory. Lastly, collectivity reflects the community's influence on the story's growth and evolution over time. The ways in which participants expressed the degree to which they are affected and transformed by the collective aura and motivations highlights the significance of reflexivity as a healing force.

HakSende articulates its mission as protecting membership on the right path, empowering individuals, fostering healing, and providing an accessible venue for their quest to find meaning-making practices. Whether or not they achieve their goal lies beyond the scope of this paper. In today's digitalized, commodified, and alienated world, the role and function of social media carry significant ambivalences that impact all dimensions of everyday life. However, the reintegration of community in this context empowers individuals in ways that spirituality, as a cultural category, provides an agency to address their predicament stemming from definitions imposed by the historiography of their culture. Discovering and

reproducing their voices can lead to an authentic existence and a more virtuous human presence.

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