

## **Finding God in Today's Digital World – Digital Religious Media Use of Christian Adolescents and Young Adults**

The digitalization of religion opened up the digital sphere to experience faith and religion through religious offers and content on digital platforms (Tsuria & Campbell, 2022). Especially young believers are still in the process of experiencing and finding their *religious identity* (Lövheim, 2004). As they tend to use digital media more frequently and adopt them faster to their everyday lives than adults (Hugger, 2014), digital media play an increasingly greater role in experiencing and building their faith (Lövheim, 2004). Even though different studies investigated the usage of *digital religious media*, only a handful focused on the digital religious media use of religious young people by using quantitative surveys (Díez Bosch et al., 2017). Even less studies investigated digital religious media use patterns of young believers across platforms. We argue for a holistic approach to investigating digital religious media use by analysing an array of different media, as digital media vary in their functions and their need satisfaction (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006).

Our study builds on previous research in the field of digital religion, on the Uses and Gratification approach and it puts special emphasis on the religious functions of meaning-making (Schnell, 2008) and social integration (Knoblauch, 1999). We follow a holistic approach by including an array of the most relevant digital media platforms to 1) quantify today's religious media use, 2) specify the religious content that is encountered, and 3) understand the gratifications provided by using these contents. The empirical basis is a mixed method approach with qualitative interviews (N=9) and a quantitative survey among young Christians aged 14 - 27 in Germany, Austria and the German-speaking part of Switzerland (N=576). To recruit the participants for the quantitative survey, we contacted Christian youth-group and/or church leaders and invited them to share our survey with their adolescents and young adults.

The results showed that especially Instagram, WhatsApp, Spotify, YouTube and religious apps are used by young Christians for religious purposes (s. table 1). Thereby, digital religious media use is not limited to one specific medium, but religious identity is explored across a variety of different media. Using a repertoire approach, we found six main repertoires, ranging from "religious multimedia use" to "digital religious media use avoidance". Regarding the content, we found that a variety of contents, from sermons and testimonials to Christian memes, were sought out to live

and experience religious identity in different digital formats. On each platform, content can be purposefully curated by young believers to fit their tastes and preferences (Novak et al., 2022). Lastly, we found that each digital religious medium we queried fulfilled different religious media use gratifications. Even though they differed, the function of meaning-making was present across all digital media. However, primarily messengers provided young Christians with the building and maintaining of relationships hence fulfilling the function of social connection.

By providing a broad overview of digital religious media use, our study aims to help future researchers interested in the field of digital religion to deeper understand media use behaviour in young believers

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**Table 1**

*Digital religious media use frequency*

Media type	Digital religious medium	Participants using medium at least rarely (in %)	Mean frequency of usage (1=never, 7=very frequently)	
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social Media	Instagram	91	4.66	1.80
	TikTok	75	3.18	1.78
	Pinterest	67	3.04	1.95
	Twitter	47	2.00	1.35
	Snapchat	35	1.61	1.05
	BeReal	21	1.48	1.16
Messenger	WhatsApp	89	4.01	1.84
	Telegram	55	2.88	2.20
Music Apps	Spotify	84	4.40	2.21
	Apple Music	69	3.50	2.28
Streaming Services	Netflix	58	2.13	1.30
	Disney+	38	1.74	1.17
	Amazon Prime	49	1.96	1.30
	YouTube	88	3.71	1.75
Religious Apps		95	4.17	1.76