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How Relevant Is Community, and How Digitable Is Religion?

Emic Viewpoints on Digital Religion among Digital Natives in Switzerland with a Migration History

Abstract: As part of Module A, the *Digital Relationships and Local Religious Communities* project added a study to URPP phase I that includes various religions. We focused on researching the online and offline community experiences of digital natives in Switzerland – in particular, persons with a migration (family) history who possess very different religious backgrounds.

We were interested in the role that the online and offline natures of communities played – especially religious communities – in the importance of these communities as critical spaces for acquiring religious knowledge, seeking religious guidance, influencing religious practices and beliefs, and shaping the day-to-day lives of young persons with migration histories (e.g. finding support locally or online after migrating). In addition, we asked how digitable all these dimensions of community experiences were – that is, which dimensions of religious (community) experiences are easily translatable into digital spaces, which dimensions are a digital-only phenomenon for the research participants, and which dimensions of religious (community) experience are not digitable from an emic perspective. Finally, we examined the roles of local and online (religious) communities and the different interrelationships between them. Subproject 1 focused on our research involving young refugee or asylum-seeking migrants in Switzerland; Subproject 2 addressed persons with a migration history who possess a permanent residence permit. All research participants were either born into a religious tradition – of any kind – and/or claimed to be religious or spiritual.

After over one year of in-depth participant observation, we found that the importance of community experience among digital natives with a migration history seemed to be quite low but for different reasons in the two sample groups. Concurrently, the importance of religion was rated higher among persons with a residence permit than among refugees and asylum seekers.

Das Projekt *Digitale Beziehungen und lokale religiöse Gemeinschaften* ergänzte Modul A um eine Perspektive, die höchst diverse religiöse Ausrichtungen miteinbezieht. Wir konzentrierten uns auf religiöse Online- und Offline-Gemeinschaftserfahrungen

von Digital Natives in der Schweiz mit Migrationsgeschichte. Wir fragten, inwiefern es eine Rolle spielt, ob religiöse Gemeinschaftserfahrungen online oder offline stattfinden – und was Letzteres für die Bedeutsamkeit dieser Gemeinschaften hinsichtlich religiösen Wissenserwerbs, der Suche nach religiöser Orientierung, des Einflusses auf religiöse Praktiken und Überzeugungen sowie der Gestaltung des Alltagslebens (etwa bezüglich Unterstützung in migrationsbedingten Ankunftssituationen) junger Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund ausmacht. Darüber hinaus stellten wir die Frage, wie *digitabel* all diese Dimensionen der Gemeinschaftserfahrungen sind – also: Welche Dimensionen religiöser (Gemeinschafts-)Erfahrungen sich leicht in digitale Räume übertragen lassen, welche Dimensionen für die Forschungsteilnehmer:innen ein ausschließlich digitales Phänomen darstellen und welche Dimensionen der religiösen (Gemeinschafts-)Erfahrung aus einer emischen Perspektive nicht digitalisierbar sind. Zudem untersuchten wir die konkreten Wechselwirkungen von lokalen und Online- (religiösen) Gemeinschaften. Teilprojekt 1 konzentrierte sich auf die Forschung mit jungen Geflüchteten und Asylsuchenden in der Schweiz; Teilprojekt 2 beschäftigte sich mit jungen Personen mit Migrationshintergrund, die eine Niederlassungsbewilligung besitzen. Alle Forschungsteilnehmer:innen waren entweder in eine religiöse Tradition – jeglicher Art – hineingeboren worden und/oder bezeichneten sich als religiös oder spirituell. Nach über einem Jahr intensiver Feldforschung überraschte uns in der folgenden Analysephase die Entdeckung, dass die Bedeutung von Gemeinschaftserfahrungen bei Digital Natives mit Migrationshintergrund offenbar eher gering war – allerdings aus unterschiedlichen Gründen in den beiden interlocutor-Gruppen. Ausserdem entpuppten sich religiöse Erfahrungen und Zugehörigkeiten bei den untersuchten Personen mit Niederlassungsbewilligung als bedeutsamer als bei den Geflüchteten und Asylsuchenden.

1 Introduction

Forms of being affected by digital religion, and the acknowledgement of digital religion's transformational potential, have typically been researched among persons who regard themselves as part of – or as attached to and communicating in the context of – religious online organisations or digital religious exchange spaces (Evolvi 2022; Hutchings 2017; Kołodziejska and Neumaier 2016). In addition, a relatively common traditional notion in academia and public opinion is that immi-

grants find and connect with other immigrants in religious communities[1] when they arrive in new sociocultural environments (Baumann 2000; Nagel 2012). This notion is often true but overlooks the fact that (transnational) religious networks and migration frequently exist separately (Chen, Dean, and Kuah 2023). In essence, digital religion is usually researched intrareligiously, and migration is often researched within the confines of specific groups of individuals possessing the same country or region of origin. This approach has good methodological rationales – foremost of which are avoiding the trap of comparing apples and oranges as well as undue over-generalisation[2] – but conceptualises the researched people predominantly as being members of *their* religious or migratory group even though this may not form an important part of their identity.

Consequently, when our study and its two subprojects were conceptualised, we were primarily interested in providing a slightly new perspective on the nexus of religion, migration, digitality and community: We did not want to focus on the religious or ethnic commonalities of our prospective research participants as the starting point of the research; rather, we wanted to step back from the focus on religious creed in favour of researching larger and less narrowly defined groups that primarily share characteristics other than religion or ethnicity. In the context of digital religion research, we proceeded from the *digital* instead of the *religious* level of digital religion research. Our focus was on digital natives and their thoughts, associations and practices with respect to the interplay between religion, digitality and community. We tried to re-focus on neither hierarchising nor singularising, overemphasising, exotising or excluding any kind of religiosity that we might find in the field, which is a crucial approach lying at the heart of the study of religion – the discipline that we represent in the URPP "Digital Religion(s)".

The specific contexts of migration or religion were not of predominant interest to us in this study. However, in addition to being digital natives, all the re-

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1 For general information on the term community in regard to religion and how the study of religion sees the intertwinedness of community and religion, see Lüddeckens and Walthert (2018).

2 Without enlarging this issue beyond the scope of this study, we want to add that we also considered this valid concern as a possible counterargument for our approach to defining our prospective research participants broadly. However, the variations within intra-religious and intra-ethnic groups are also immense; hence, we tend to consider only factors such as socioeconomic stance, class, education and gender. Therefore, we decided to include two more factors – religious and ethnic backgrounds – along which these groups vary to facilitate a truly broad exploration of the potential trends in the emically assumed and the factual relevance of the experience of digital religion and community as perceived and lived by digital natives with migration histories and any kind of religious rootedness.

search participants shared the characteristic of labelling themselves as religious/spiritual or having been born into a religious tradition along with having a migration background. Numerous studies have demonstrated the link between digital literacy and a history of migration (Nedelcu and Soysüren 2020). It is well established that migrants are highly skilled in using digital tools to, for example, navigate and find information online during their migration journey (Dekker et al. 2018), find alternative means of self-expression as members of a minority group (Candidatu, Leurs, and Ponzanesi 2019; Nedelcu and Soysüren 2020) or maintain communication with transnational contacts (Marino 2015; Oiarzabal and Reips 2012). However, notwithstanding this digital literacy, these online activities do not necessarily evince a sense of belonging to an online (religious) community. This is why we aim to apprehend the various ways in which our participants' experiences of community can be translated into a digital space and whether digital religion is relevant to community experience from an emic perspective.

In this study, we present a short overview of the research subprojects, the findings and a glimpse into a probable conclusion from our research, which has spanned the last four years – a conclusion that focuses on the relatively new idea of *post-social media* and the potential explanations that this approach may offer for our findings.

2 Theoretical Basis and Methodology

In this research project, we aimed to apprehend the relevance and perceived meaning attached to digital religious communities while paying attention to the communities and community experiences that are less or neither digital nor religious as well as to the – digital and non-digital – religious experiences that were not necessarily connected to – the experience of – community. We also wanted to capture the notions of hierarchisation that people may have in mind or practice with respect to digital versus non-digital communality and religiosity.

We grounded our research on two basic assumptions regarding digitality and (religious) community. The first basic assumption is drawn from (2021), who postulates that digital realities and non-digital realities are, in principle, emically distinguishable; although they may interact closely, they fundamentally possess some distinct attributes. Which aspects of religiosity are digitable (i.e. primarily or exclusively function digitally) and why, and how are the digital aspects of religiosity perceived in relation to its non-digital aspects? This is the main question we formulated based on our research approach, which differs slightly from other

perspectives emphasising that digital and non-digital realities would increasingly blur and become, at least emically, indistinguishable.

Our second basic assumption is inspired by the work of Dylan Trigg (2021/ 2022), who explores the effects and (co-)creation of atmospheres and shared emotions: Shared moods and emotions and communally experienced ambience are central to any sense of reality, community and communality. In principle, this applies both online and offline; however, online and offline forms of reality or community may be compared with each other and positioned emically in their assumed hierarchical relation to each other. This assumption made us attentive to taking shared moods and emotions and communally experienced ambiences seriously, even in non-digital contexts. Furthermore, it prompted us to place further emphasis on the fact that different kinds of reality and community (i.e. online and offline realities and communities) may be implicitly or explicitly ranked in terms of meaningfulness, status and weightiness by our research participants.

Apart from our focus on the experience of community, we are interested in something we have labelled "digitability." In the context of our research, digitability refers to the potential and actual extent to which elements of a phenomenon – in this case, religion – can be imagined or realised as digital in the broadest sense (Menzfeld 2024). This definition encompasses the question of whether aspects of a given phenomenon can be visually represented digitally (e.g. pictures of holy scriptures) or exist solely in digital form (e.g. online-only witch rituals involving code and binary logics). Digitability also indicates how fully a phenomenon can be digital. In essence, digitability depends on the number of (potentially) digital aspects a phenomenon possesses while allowing for hyper-digital and non-digital versions of the same phenomenon (MacWilliams 2002), and it can be expressed in binary terms (i.e. completely digitable vs. not digitable). A challenging aspect of the concept is that digitability is also subjective, as what appears relatively or entirely digitable to one person (e.g. receiving a blessing and having sex) may seem completely undigitable to another.

With the main theoretical assumptions and concept formulations outlined, we explain the methodology in this and subsequent paragraphs. Our methodology focuses on long-term participant observations, digital ethnography and repeated qualitative semi-structured interviews (Fischer 2017; Pink 2021). By relying on long-term fieldwork with maximum effort towards anonymisation, we successfully navigated the challenge of gaining trust among precarious and sometimes even criminalised subgroups (e.g. Salafis and illegal immigrants). In addition, conducting more than one year of fieldwork allowed us to acquire a significant level of insight into the actual practices and lifestyles of the research participants; merely meeting with them once for an interview – in retrospect – would have produced dramatically shallow and even untrue responses to our interview ques-

tions, as many research participants, especially those with limited or no residence permits, have to be careful with what they say to strangers whom they do not yet trust.

Subproject 1 is focused on research with refugees and asylum seekers who do not have permanent residence permits. In Subproject 2, we have persons with migration histories possessing permanent residence permits as the subjects. In total, we recruited about 50 research participants, and the research languages were French, English and Swiss German. The majority of the participants in Subproject 1 were between 18 and 25 years of age, with the youngest participant being 15 years old. Of the twelve men and ten women that the responsible researcher observed and interviewed, six had emigrated from Syria, five from Afghanistan, four from Ethiopia, three from Eritrea, two from Iran, one from Somalia and one from Turkey. Fifteen of these participants are Muslim or were born into a Muslim family, and five are Orthodox Christians; the others belonged to different groups. All participants have been contacted via a trusted person ("gatekeeper" according to de Sardan 1995) and accepted individual interviews. The research participants in Subproject 2 were between 18 and 35 years of age, except for one person (a digital religious influencer) who was 40 years old. All Subproject 2 participants possessed permanent residence permits for Switzerland and had varying international backgrounds. The details of their countries of origin are withheld to ensure anonymity, which was promised as a condition for informed consent; however, for the case examples presented in this study, consent to reveal their countries of origin was requested by the responsible researcher and granted by these participants.

All participants were either born into a religious tradition and/or claimed to be religious or spiritual; they could be classified as *digital natives*, as they all lived their adult lives with the ubiquitous presence of digital devices and broadband internet access. Although we acknowledge that there are issues with using the term *digital natives* without critical consideration (Thomas 2011), we found it quite valuable in the context of our fieldwork, as it highlights a significant difference between the day-to-day experiences of our research participants and persons who grew up without the constant availability of fast and easily accessible internet via mobile devices.

Online ethnography, also called netnography (Kozinets 2015), was employed alongside local participant observation. The netnography methodology allows us to consider various data available online, such as websites, images and photos, and other digital artefacts. Given that online (religious) communities are at the heart of this research, online observation complements offline fieldwork, thus facilitating an understanding of the broader context and the bidirectional influences between the online and offline worlds (Scheifinger 2016). We searched for cer-

tain keywords in English and in the national languages of the concerned countries on specific social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok to emically determine whether online communities exist (Kok and Rogers 2017; Nedelcu 2009). Several websites were also explored, such as the websites of mosques and migrant associations. However, the online explorations did not yield relevant results, which supports the final findings regarding whether (religious) communities are digitable and what is the relevance of their digitability to their target audience. Thus, the emic perceptions of the research participants regarding their digital media use are highlighted and not the netnography perspective (Jordan 2009). Within this framework, we attempt to understand why online communities hold little importance in the eyes of migrants, notwithstanding migrants' longstanding use of digital devices and platforms.

Because we conducted this ethnographic study to detect the most recent trends among our research participants regarding perceived digitability and the relevance of community in the context of (digital) religion, our research or the research results were not intended to be representative of the target population. As is the case in all studies in the field of cultural anthropology and contemporary qualitative research on religion, during our fieldwork, we found ambiguities, conflicting trends, and individual counterexamples that complicate the broad picture. Therefore, although the main results of our data analysis are presented in the subsequent paragraphs, they do not present an exclusive summary of how digital religious communities and the digitability of religion are experienced by digital natives with migration histories.

3 Main Findings

Virginie (main researcher of Subproject 1) worked with young individuals in Switzerland who were asylum seekers or had a refugee permit, ranging from secular Iranian dissidents to unaccompanied immigrant Eritrean minors. She found that most of these individuals felt disconnected from and/or did not belong to any local or digital community. Even the attachment to their communities in the countries from which they emigrated was quite loose. Most importantly, however, neither digital nor non-digital religious communities played a role in their day-to-day lives. They were consumed with organising – sometimes precarious – living circumstances and finding a way to get along with the Swiss asylum system. They barely consulted communities – not even for practical reasons, such as obtaining advice on the asylum process.

First, Subproject 1 participants were randomly selected to avoid over-representing any single community, which would introduce bias into the results. Indeed, the research question of Subproject 1 compares the roles of and interrelations between local and digital communities with respect to young immigrants in Switzerland. The aim of Subproject 1 was to determine whether these individuals belong to (religious or non-religious) communities and, if so, to determine the nature of these communities. According to Wellman's (1983) network analysis theory, beginning with the individual instead of a particular community as the focal point of research allows for an emic elaboration of the individual's diverse networks, including the type and intensity of ties. This approach avoids the bias of focusing solely on one community and observing results that confirm the individual's belonging to that community.

Most young immigrants from the countries mentioned earlier often arrive in Switzerland alone. The majority are placed in federal asylum centres, where they may spend several weeks or months. This location (i.e. federal asylum centres) represents the primary source of local networks, as most immigrants have a local network comprising individuals they met at these centres; these networks rarely evolve, regardless of the number of years they live in Switzerland. Similarly, schools for immigrants serve as a source of local networks. Furthermore, study participants who migrated with their (nuclear) family or were later joined by them had a local network centred around their family. However, employment is not a source of local networks, as most immigrants awaiting residence permits in Switzerland are not allowed to work. Regarding religion, religious communities do not provide relevant support or a sense of community (Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev 2011). For Muslim participants, attendance at religious programmes is for individual spirituality, not to seek communality. Among the Orthodox Christian interlocutors, the Eritreans get to feel a sense of community through their church, but this is largely a minority result. The Ethiopian participants in the study also described individual spirituality as the purpose of their religious practices. Consequently, young immigrants do not meet the individuals in their local networks through a religious community. Finally, the unstable and precarious situations of immigrants in Switzerland, along with psychological issues stemming from past experiences in their home countries and during migration, also hinder the development of optimal mental health, which is necessary for local network development. Thus, the local networks of young immigrants remain rather limited and generally do not develop significantly. Most of our research participants expressed a significant sense of loneliness.

There is the question of the role of online communities and whether affiliation with digital communities is of specific importance to young immigrants, given that they experience a dearth of local communality. According to Campbell

(2005), when no offline option provides a sense of community or spiritual connection, individuals seek online religious communities as substitutes. From this perspective, young immigrants in Switzerland who do not find a local community to which they have a sense of belonging would seek an online (religious) community. Notwithstanding the study populations' possession of high proficiency with digital tools (particularly smartphones), the immigrants who participated in this study were not involved in any form of digital community. Regarding online religious communities, the research participants did not feel the need to maintain a link with a transnational community in their country of origin. Several Muslim participants explained that maintaining a link with a mosque or a particular religious community in their country of origin was unnecessary; what mattered to them was having a mosque they could visit for their religious and spiritual activities. Some Orthodox Christians tried to digitally attend religious events in their country of origin via online channels – especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these experiences did not provide them with a sense of community; being alone behind a screen exacerbated their loneliness. The only regular use of digital religion is for pragmatic purposes: applications that communicate prayer times and the direction of Mecca for Muslims, for reading the Bible or the Quran online, and for listening to religious songs or watching religious video content on streaming platforms. Therefore, digital religion does not function from the perspective of communality for the research participants.

Consequently, the results of our qualitative data analysis confirm a relative unimportance of digital and non-digital (religious) communities to the young immigrants interviewed in this research. The digital seems to reflect what happens locally for young immigrants: The ties individuals develop online are analogous to their offline relationships (Wellman 1998). For the participants in Subproject 1, the absence of online (religious) communities in their everyday lives reflects their loneliness and the dearth of local communities. Ultimately, (religious) communities are not digitable for these migrants, who instead use digital religion for pragmatic purposes. For a more comprehensive analysis and detailed discussion, these results will be further elaborated on in a dissertation thesis by Fazel, which is scheduled for publication in 2026.

Mira (main researcher of Subproject 2) worked with persons with migration histories in their personal or their parents' biographies, including imams of online mosques, Salafis and self-declared witches. She found that most of her interlocutors imagined many aspects of religion to be "digitable," that is, transferrable into the digital space or even translated into or created in digital format. Some thought that in-person community experiences would be different from digital community experiences but that, for them, this difference would not impact religious legitimacy

or affect aspects such as religious credibility and efficacy. In contrast, many inter-locutors thought that the absence (or weakening) of real-life group dynamics in dig-itally lived (or digitally inspired) religion would even improve their feeling of being "in touch" or "in line" with the contents, rules, rituals and norms of their religion because other believers would not have as great an influence over them in digital spaces as they possess in in-person meetings.

In this project, we were careful to ensure that the study sample cut across a variety of religious traditions. The focus of this subproject was young individuals possessing intersecting traits, such as being a digital native, identifying as reli-gious or spiritual and possessing a transnational or transmigratory family biogra-phy while simultaneously being part of Swiss society by virtue of a permanent residence permit. The objective was to gain a purely explorative perspective of the full spectrum of emic notions held by migrants on the digitability of religion and lived practices in online and offline religious communities. Hence, it was nec-essary that the exact religious or spiritual orientation of the research participants be diverse to facilitate identifying whether there were any trends or identifiable disparities as well as describing a broad spectrum of perspectives on digital reli-gion. Subproject 2 is based on the basic assumption that digitality has the poten-tial to enrich, transform and expand religiosity (Neumaier 2016) and that the in-terwovenness and multi-site nature of online and offline spaces (Campbell and Bellar 2022) are a reality – a reality, however, that does not necessarily result in the blurring or indistinguishability of the digital and non-digital elements of reli-gion, which are emically experienced as closely intertwined yet distinguishable (Boellstorff 2021).

The digital natives recruited as participants in this study typically trusted the accuracy, effectiveness and reliability of religious practices and the knowledge that they acquired, found, performed or saw communicated digitally. Many of the participants argued that when it comes to finding inspiration for lived religiosity or identifying the assumed stance of one's religion regarding a specific question, the ability to browse multiple online sources for religious knowledge provides more reliable results than relying solely on in-person interactions, which also provide less variety. There was a general conviction that online religious practi-ces are just as effective as those conducted in person. The necessity of community in religious practices was often viewed as a personal preference rather than a requirement for the enhanced efficacy or truthfulness of the acts.

The findings of this study reveal four main perspectives among digital natives regarding the digitability of religiosity. These perspectives are not intended to represent exhaustive or mutually exclusive emic views, but they represent the most frequently observed viewpoints in this subproject and can thus be considered an overview of trends in the viewpoints on digital religion among digital natives in Switzerland with a migration history.

Perspective 1: Religion is largely digitable but community is not. There is a strong perception that non-digital communities are valued more than digital communities, although this does not impact the validity or effectiveness of religious practices – the latter "work" online and offline alike.

Example: Nabil is the founder and imam of an online-first mosque community that had also developed into a real-life community. When answering religious questions online, he noticed that his followers did not question the credibility of his message because it was communicated digitally or had been found on a social network. He mentioned that there was no difference between digital and non-digital lived religiosity in terms of "better" or "lesser" religiosity but stressed the fact that the meandering and simultaneity of communication, as well as the collective physical presence during real-life prayers, cannot (yet) be adequately replicated digitally, which makes digital religiosity not a lesser kind of religiosity but a religiosity without crucial aspects of community.

Perspective 2: Religion is fully digitable, and the absence of community or belonging to a digital community is preferred over a non-digital community in religious contexts. The hierarchy perceived is as follows: no community > digital community > non-digital community.

Example: Lisa performs individualised sessions she describes as witch rituals, which are based primarily on inspiration she finds on Instagram. Lisa says she finds a lot of helpful and "true advice" online and identifies her main task as a ritual performer as distinguishing between things that Instagram influencers promote for monetary profit (which she feels is not needed in her rituals) vis-à-vis things that reflect a "good way to connect [to and with supernatural powers]." She does not readily grasp the concept of linking community experiences to religious rituals because "as soon as there are others, you start to lose energy. You do not want to, but you think, 'How does my hair look?'" which is rather counterproductive when it comes to connecting to supernatural powers.

Perspective 3: Preferred access to religiosity – whether online or offline – depends on geographic proximity to a preferred religious context, such as a person or place, and there is a slight hierarchical perception of non-digital communities as preferred over digital ones in religious matters.

Example: Said equates religion to family, which means that the family in his country of origin is critical to his belief system, and his most pious trait is his loyalty to his family – especially to his maternal grandmother in Morocco. Whenever he is with her, he feels closer to God and closer to himself and the person he wants to be. He prefers to pray when she is around – that is, when he is in Morocco; however, when this is not possible, blessings via digital channels "do the trick, too." He goes to the local mosque to pray sometimes, but he does not socially connect much with the people there – "they are not brothers to me, though they say 'brother' here, 'brother' there."

Perspective 4: Religion is completely digitable; non-digital communities are viewed with scepticism. Online environments and private practices based on online sources are seen as safeguards against "distorted" communal religiosity. The hierarchy is as follows: no community > digital community > non-digital community.

Example: Theo's religiosity consists primarily of him digitally consuming the prayers of American evangelical preachers, reading the Bible and obtaining religious information online via various sources. He very much values the detachment he can exercise when comparing online sources to find the most convincing resource, which is impossible in a live dialogue in which "the conversation or the atmosphere sucks you in, and then you – maybe – adopt an opinion that is wrong because the one that says it is charismatic." In fact, contact with people is – from his experience – often the first step in distancing from oneself and from God, whereas private and individual contemplation makes him a more stable person and believer.

In summary, although religious activities and knowledge are generally digitable for digital natives with migration histories in Switzerland, communality is not digitable. The degree to which religious community can(not) be experienced digitally is perceived as either particularly appealing or particularly unappealing. A more detailed discussion of this finding can be found in Menzfeld's (2024) research paper.

4 Conclusion

As discussed in the preceding sections of this paper, the importance of religion and community of any kind are not emically conceptualised as inherently intertwined. Although many refugees and asylum seekers did not feel a sense of belonging to any (digital or non-digital or religious or non-religious) community – often simultaneously missing community, in general, but not religious community – many migrants with a permanent residence permit expressed a need for

religion but not necessarily via a specific (non-digital or digital) community; if they did not belong to a religious community, this was often experienced as empowering, not as a reflection of loneliness. Thus, there is the question of what explains the relative irrelevance of (religious) community we found in this study and the relative separation of religiosity from the experience of community or the search for communality as well as the question of what is to be gleaned from these findings with regard to digital religion research.

One fresh approach to explaining the rare attachment to (religious) communities, especially among refugees, and the surprising separation of religion from communality – especially among digital natives with permanent residence permits – would be to focus on post-social media characteristics as a factor. Our data support the recently assumed post-social media trends, which are characterised by the following: (1) re-particularisation, flanked by the evolving of increasingly smaller echo chambers (Crul 2022), and (2) a re-hierarchisation of consumer versus producer roles (Benway 2023). The latter is mirrored, for example, by the fact that only 10% of users on social media platforms experience themselves as creating some kind of content, and only 9% identify themselves as being influential persons within these networks. As the online religiosity approach of many of our research participants was receptive instead of involved-productive, we choose to view our findings in light of a probable broader re-hierarchisation of the online content producer–consumer roles while simultaneously refraining from conflating productivity with authority or receptivity with the absence of agency. On the contrary, our research participants perceived themselves as highly empowered and selective with regard to accepting religious authority via being the ultimate selector of content, uninfluenced by a close religious community and uninterested in influencing a larger community themselves.

Our research participants, especially those with a permanent residence permit, expressed and showed that online or offline communities are not necessarily sources of (religious or non-religious) identity and are not even an especially desired mode of interaction. Instead, they found digital religiosity attractive because it promised religious inspiration without intense social immersion, which was viewed as aggressive and undesirable, even possibly estranging from God and other higher powers. For refugees and asylum seekers, digital religiosity enables certain religious or spiritual practices to be perpetuated daily in a pragmatic manner. Their few experiences with online religious communities failed to provide a sense of belonging. This notion of community experience as undesirable and distracting, even as altering religious experience in an unwanted way, has – to our knowledge – not yet been extensively discussed in digital religion research; however, from our point of view, it helps to explain why some young people

claim to be religious and yet do not become part of any religious community, on-line or offline.

We realise that other researchers investigating digital and non-digital religion in different settings and with different (and differently aged) categories of mi-grants found community and religiosity to be especially important to their re-search respondents, with non-digital religiosity and community not being the least in their ranking (Isetti 2022). All our findings, from our point of view, do *not*, however, decisively contradict studies that find online (or offline) religiosity to be very important, life-immersive or community-building, nor do they oppose find-ings in other contexts that reveal the authority-blurring and participation-empowering aspects of digital religiosities. However, our research findings make clear how seriously digital religion research has to take seemingly counterintui-tive findings when it comes to young, transnationally rooted digital natives. Con-trary to the expectations that one may have, many of these individuals are not relying on (religious or other) online networks; rather, their behaviour is more akin to choosey recipients than to input-creating discourse shapers, as they apply agency by picking rather than by producing. They not only notice but also cherish the absence of real-life religious experiences in digital spaces while not disputing the digitability of religion and religious experiences in many cases. This group of people exists, just as people with opposing perceptions and lived experiences of digital religiosity exist. Recognising this immense heterogeneity beckons us as scholars to constantly bear in mind that digital religion and digital religious com-munities are always highly context sensitive and that non-digital, qualitative in-depth methods are essential to truly gaining an understanding of digital reli-gion(s).

5 Future Research Direction

Because our intent was to apprehend current trends in religious digitability and the perceived relevance of digital religious communities among digital natives with transnational family histories and migration biographies, the next step would be to investigate whether the trends we have sketched in this study do in-deed reflect – or contrast with – the opinions and experiences of (a) people in other age groups and people who are non-digital natives, (b) people without mi-gration and/or transnational family histories, (c) religious expert-only migrant groups and (d) people in other countries.

An interesting and promising future research direction from our subprojects would be to investigate further reasons why some people rate online and offline

(religious) community experiences as frightening, undesirable, disturbing or distracting, or simply as an unnecessary effort that consumes time they would much rather spend doing something else. This would be a fruitful question not only for religious studies but also for cooperation projects with disciplines such as psychology, theologies (in plural, to allow for comparisons between religions), cultural anthropology, sociology and cultural studies.

Investigating the digitability of religion as various persons attached to a specific religious background imagine it to be (in contrast to what we have done in this study – that is, focusing on cross-religious trends that were common to digital natives with migration histories and not to persons with multiple origin histories and of various cohorts that are part of one and the same specific religious community or tradition) will also be a fascinating addition to the explorative research presented in this article.

6 Acknowledgements

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