

Jasmine Suhner and Thomas Schlag

(Inter-)Religious Education in Digital Society

Abstract: The digital reality profoundly impacts religious pedagogy, creating new opportunities and risks in religious education, and influencing theology itself – especially in terms of (inter-)religious learning processes and the challenges of navigating broader cultural transformations in the digital age, well beyond the changes precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the project “(Inter-)Religious Learning in a Digital Society” focuses on the consequences, transformations, and responsibilities arising from this dynamic for a wide range of religious education stakeholders. This article explores two sub-projects of this URPP project in detail: firstly, a research project on the digital transformation of religious education organizations, conducted at the intersection of religious pedagogy and (organizational) psychology, in collaboration with nearly 60 Swiss educational organizations; secondly, the use of digital media and digitalization within confirmation work, the non-formal educational program of Protestant churches, especially in Europe. The findings of both sub-projects offer insights into factors influencing the decision to offer or participate in digital Religious Education (RE) courses; outlining the elements that contribute to readiness for cooperation in the digital educational domain; and identifying the challenges and opportunities of digital RE for learning and ‘theologizing’ in the current technological and societal context.

Die digitale Realität hat tiefgreifende Auswirkungen auf die Religionspädagogik, indem sie neue Möglichkeiten und Risiken in der religiösen Bildung schafft und Auswirkungen auf die Theologie selbst hat – insbesondere auf (inter-)religiöse Lernprozesse und die Herausforderungen, die sich aus den Wandlungsprozessen in einer Kultur der Digitalität und weit über COVID-19 hinaus ergeben. Daher konzentriert sich das Projekt „(Inter-)Religious Learning in a Digital Society“ auf die Konsequenzen, Veränderungen und Verantwortlichkeiten, die sich aus dieser Dynamik für eine Vielzahl von Akteur*innen im Bereich der religiösen Bildung ergeben. Dieser Artikel befasst sich eingehend mit zwei Teilprojekten dieses UFSP-Projekts: Erstens mit einem Forschungsprojekt zur digitalen Transformation religiöser Bildungsorganisationen, das an der Schnittstelle von Religionspädagogik und (Organisations-)Psychologie in Zusammenarbeit mit fast 60 Schweizer Bildungsorganisationen durchgeführt wurde; zweitens mit der Nutzung digitaler Medien und der Digitalisierung in der Konfirmationsarbeit, dem nicht-formalen Bildungsprogramm der evangelischen Kirchen, wie es insbesondere in vielen europäischen

Ländern angeboten wird. Die Ergebnisse beider Teilprojekte bieten Einblicke in die Einflussfaktoren, digitale religiöse Bildung anzubieten oder daran teilzunehmen; die Elemente zu formen, die zur Kooperationsbereitschaft im digitalen Bildungsbereich beitragen; sowie die Herausforderungen und Chancen des digitalen Religionsunterrichts für Lernprozesse und das Theologisieren unter den aktuellen technologischen und gesellschaftlichen Umständen zu identifizieren.

1 Introduction

“We want to move beyond the emergency mode.” This statement by the umbrella organization *plusbildung*–Switzerland’s ecumenical association of nearly 60 religious education (RE) organizations—exemplifies the starting point for the research and various sub-projects within the larger framework of “(Inter-)Religious Learning in a Digital Society,” which was as P9 part of the URPP “Digital Religion(s)” in its first phase 2021-2024. In this concrete organizational statement, “moving beyond the emergency mode” refers to the deliberate adaptation to the digital reality of (inter-)religious education, particularly in light of the interim solutions hastily developed during the COVID-19 crisis in many Swiss and European educational organizations.

Behind the intention to move beyond this crisis mode lies a more general understanding of current technological developments, their societal impact, and the potential consequences for RE. This finds its expression in the following quotation: “There is a new world coming, and it is coming much faster than most people realize” (Mercer and Trothen 2021, 3). The new world ushered in by digitalization is leading to a fundamental societal transformation: It shapes processes of perception, thinking, and acting, taking hold of societal production of values, knowledge, dialogue, and sense-making, and affecting all kinds of learning processes.

This is reflected by the exponential growth in the number of publications in the field of “digital learning,” with the sector of “Educational Technology” (Ed-Tech) expected to see a 16% growth between 2022 and 2026 (Global Data 2022). In 2020, the OSCE announced that: “Digital technologies can play an integral role in celebrating and upholding freedom of religion or belief when harnessed for outreach and dialogue. At the same time, the rise in intolerant discourse and hate speech directed at religious or belief communities during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the risk of the digital space becoming a forum to incite discrimination, hostility or violence on grounds of religion or belief” (OSCE 2020).

This complex field of research and action, with its corresponding opportunities and challenges for (inter-)religious education, is where the URPP project P9 positions itself. To appropriately contextualize the study and its results, this article begins with a brief outline, from a meta-perspective, of the conditions and possibilities of digital education as a unique didactic form (2). Following this, and based on related transformations in the context of RE, the article outlines two sub-research projects of P9:

First, this article discusses the challenges facing RE organizations in terms of navigating the post-digital pivot. It addresses the issues of changing forms of teaching and learning, dealing with shifts in authority, and the growing need for collaboration and shared strategies among RE organizations in post-digital society. A participatory research project involving nearly 60 Swiss RE organizations investigated how these organizations are dealing with digitalization – analyzing the perspectives of organizational leaders, teachers, and learners – through mixed methods (3).

Second, the article describes a second subproject addressing the importance and impact of digital media and digitalization in confirmation work. Based on current empirical studies on confirmation work in Switzerland and Europe, which P9 was involved in, the focus is on the media usage of confirmands as well as their expectations and experiences within the context of this non-formal RE program. Correspondingly, the article also addresses findings related to the thematic assessments of the staff involved (4).

Thus, these two subprojects offer generational perspectives on non-formal education programs – from the perspective of adults on the one hand and from adolescents on the other. Both projects provide insight into factors influencing the decision to offer or use digital RE courses; elements contributing to the readiness to cooperate in the digital educational field; while identifying the challenges and opportunities of digital religious education and ‘doing theology’ more generally. Both projects identified the need for deeper professional engagement with both digital methods and current digitalization dynamics to shape digital RE in a future-oriented and high-quality manner within the framework of education-oriented organizational development.

2 Conditions, Possibilities and Research Gaps in the Field of Digital Religious Education

2.1 Digital Education as Its Own Didactic Form

At this point, the focus is less on examining methods or models for concrete teaching and learning practices in digital culture, and more on considering, from a meta-perspective, the conditions and possibilities of digital education and RE as a distinct didactic form. The internet, with its seamless space-time integration, described by philosopher Luciano Floridi as the “infosphere” (Floridi 2015), allows for the connection and synthesis of various media into a unified learning context, transforming it into a hypermedium independent of spatial and temporal constraints. Learning and teaching can take place anywhere and at any time, establishing a ubiquitous didactic presence. This does not replicate traditional in-person learning. Instead, new forms of learning emerge through virtual reality and digital environments. The infosphere can be understood as both a receptive educational space and a performative space for thought and action, structured through non-linear networks (Noller 2022, 33–44). The altered logic of space and time in the digital age brings learning objects closer together, creating a context of knowledge that grows in complexity through relational connections.

This complexity is not merely quantitative, in terms of an increase in information or data volume, but qualitative, arising from the networking and compression of information. In other words, the internet as a hypermedium differs fundamentally from “analogue” teaching tools, not simply by providing faster access to information, but by representing a new form of information organization—one based on interconnectedness in a very specific, but nevertheless “real” and even “embodied” sense.

Additionally, learning in post-digital contexts is inherently procedural and up-to-date, meaning it is not updated in periodic intervals as is the case with “analogue” educational materials that rely on newer printed editions, which may even have had to undergo a process of formal recognition by the respective relevant authoritative institution.

The procedural nature of learning materials and processes is explicitly open to cooperation, participation, and exchange, even including content that may not always represent an obvious added or common value. This phenomenon – of continuous, new content creation – by no means only applies to certain online resources that are constantly expanding and, at the same time, being updated almost incessantly. Rather, large language models such as ChatGPT and corresponding image generation programs are now creating ever more customised learning content and

entire learning formats based on the users' own creative authority. It seems as if, in an etymological sense, the term 'learning resources' is increasingly characterised by the image of a constantly gushing wellspring or fluid 'source' due to the dynamics of hypermediatisation.

Moreover, the traditional distinction between teachers and learners – which was already becoming blurred in pre-digital contexts (Hattie 2008) – is also increasingly fluid in the age of interconnected networks and the semantic "web," though not entirely erased. Research highlights a shift in digital society away from traditional educational settings, where authority is clearly assigned to instructors, towards a more autonomous, learner-driven process. In this model, teachers act as facilitators who provide individualized support: "As teachers became more proficient with tablets through training and cross-cultural networking, they adapted their teaching style and approach, thus becoming facilitators of learning rather than teachers on the stage" (Shonfeld et al. 2021).

The digital learning environment is often not characterized by verticality, but by horizontality. While horizontal structures certainly existed in traditional contexts, they lacked the flexible hypertextual structure of the internet, which allows for an even greater degree of horizontal interaction and engagement. The role of individual-oriented versus group-oriented learning settings has also been extensively studied in terms of their respective learning processes and outcomes. Research in this area highlights the importance of communication and collaboration for effective knowledge exchange and learning results in digital environments (Kümmel et al. 2020).

From a sociological and philosophical perspective, it is essential to note: the ubiquitous availability of learning settings in digital society – forms of learning that are available any time and anywhere – represents both an expansion and a restriction of freedom. Paradoxically, the digital shift increases the number of educational options, while simultaneously reducing diversity in another sense: there is a greater number of learning settings, but fewer internal differentiations among them.

The background to this paradox is as follows: non-digital environments are characterized by a high degree of indeterminacy, while the digital realm is based on strict determinacy (Luhmann, 1976 [1964]).¹ Luhmann also emphasizes the importance of informal processes, even within highly formalized structures, for

¹ Paradoxically, the digital demand for precision and determinacy in order to capture and process data leads to actual blurring and inaccuracy in the recording of this data. Anyone who has ever filled out a questionnaire knows this. The request, for example, to tick personal characteristics on a questionnaire when applicable always results in a reduction of actual social complexity.

maintaining the functionality of systems/organizations. Actions that take place within the framework of a digital, information-based structure are highly determined and precise, which inherently limits flexibility, spontaneity, and pragmatism. Even in the most structured and regulated non-digital social situations, actors generally retain the ability to perform actions that were neither anticipated nor planned – actions that might be the result of affect or spontaneity, or which require informal processes, such as those based on goodwill or discretion. These unanticipated, sometimes spontaneous actions are only possible because the underlying structure of the social situation does not exclude or prohibit them from the outset.

Therefore, continuous dialogue about the foundations of an emerging didactics of digitality is an essential task for both general and subject-specific didactics, in both theory and practice: “new skills and sensibilities are needed to understand the world and design for it. We need to make explicit what these new abilities are and place the means for learning these skills at the heart of society. The alternative is the gradual curtailment of democratic processes, as people lose their power to contribute to debates about their future, the services they wish to use, even the systems in their homes.” (Cook and Light 2006, 52).

This emphasizes the critical importance of developing didactic frameworks that reflect the rapidly evolving digital environment and its “power structures”. Didactics must not only adapt to these changes but also actively and critically shape the skills and competencies needed for individuals to navigate and contribute meaningfully to a digitalized society. (Savin-Baden 2021; 2024). In other words, a “(post)digital pedagogy” that is both theoretically and empirically substantiated is required.

It has to be mentioned here that, in this article, both the terms “digital religious education” and “(post-)digital religious education” do not appear coincidentally but rather as a matter of deliberate choice. The rationale behind this dual nomenclature is grounded in the increasing but yet not fully-established use of the term “post-digital” and the debate surrounding this concept, which denotes a perspective that moves beyond the novelty of digital technology, focusing instead on its pervasive integration into everyday life, culture, society and thus also religious communication. This term does not therefore imply a rejection of digital media but rather a shift in discourse, where digital technologies are no longer seen as extraordinary but as embedded, ubiquitous, and often invisible. In this sense, the “post-digital” is not an era after digital technology but a mode of engagement that recognizes its deep entrenchment in contemporary life (Cramer 2014).

The term itself also indicates a certain critical perspective, insofar as post-digital thought interrogates the social, political, and aesthetic implications of digital saturation, addressing issues such as surveillance or algorithmic governance,

questioning techno-deterministic narratives and highlighting the entanglement of human and non-human agencies. Rather than celebrating digital innovation per se, post-digital critiques examine the consequences, ethics, and conditions of post-digital labor (Coeckelberg 2023), promoting just and inclusive pedagogies for higher education while considering ways to ensure learning remains an ethical and political experience (Savin-Baden 2021; 2024, though using the term “postdigital” without hyphen!) and is therefore fruitful as a critical perspective on the processes of religious education.

2.2 The Organizational Level and Non-Formal Part of Digital RE: A Research Gap

The particular challenge of this thematically-oriented research project within the URPP, and also its potential contribution to knowledge, lies in the fact that the field of digital RE has been woefully neglected as a topic in international digital religion research. It is true that for about twenty years, this field of research has included a wide range of empirical studies and theoretical classifications of religious practice under the conditions of digital mediatization. However, surprisingly, hardly any corresponding studies can be found for the area of RE, at least in the research initiated and conducted in the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian contexts. Researchers in these contexts seem quite removed from the formal educational context of school and even more so from the non-formal educational contexts in churches and religious communities.

The situation is somewhat different in the German-speaking context, particularly regarding the school-related context, where much more intensive thought has been given to the connection between digital mediatization and RE in recent years, and numerous theoretical debates and empirical research projects have already been conducted (Pfister and Dietzsch 2021; Nord and Petzke 2023; Schlag and Nord 2021; Nord 2019; Schlag 2025). Since the COVID-19 pandemic especially, this research has increasingly and deliberately incorporated aspects of strategic organizational planning and thus also of the institutional self-image of various religious stakeholders.

In this respect also, the insight that digital society not only shapes the actions of individuals but also has a profound impact on organizations as systems holds true and has considerable significance for the field of RE and its organization logic. Behind this insight is the conviction that focusing on learners and educators is just as crucial as an examination of the organizational factors that contribute to an effective transformation of teaching and learning processes in a digital society (Petko, Prasse and Cantieni 2018).

However, the organizational consequences of the education sector in the context of digital society remain a peripheral issue in research, especially in the field of RE. “While there are extensive studies on the influence of new media on teachers and those that receive the knowledge, especially at the level of educational organizations, the relationship between the organization, actor, and digital transformation has so far been little examined.” (Dörner and Rundel 2021; Ifenthaler and Egloffstein 2020).

Upon further examination, another gap in research becomes evident in that, while the challenges of digitalization in teaching and learning processes have been discussed for more than three decades, the focus of these discussions has primarily remained on school settings. “(E)xisting models of educational technology adoption and integration predominantly focus on school settings as well as on individual factors explaining the assimilation process” (Ifenthaler et al. 2021). This highlights the need for further exploration of how digital transformation affects educational organizations beyond the school context and how these institutions as systems adapt and integrate digital practices in non-school settings. Both research subprojects presented here, on the one hand, mark this desideratum, and on the other hand, they also aim to encourage a more substantial engagement with these topics – the interplay between individual and organizational levels of action, and non-formal RE – in the future.

Overall, based on this context and the identified research gaps, P9 has addressed the corresponding research and action requirements in various fields: the transformation of RE organizations (Suhner 2025b), youth theology and digitalization (Schlag and Suhner 2023), religious communication between power and empowerment (Müller and Suhner 2023; 2025), social media as a space for new articulations of transreligious experiences (Suhner 2025a) and digital media in confirmation work (Schlag et al. 2024b).

3 Navigating the Post-Digital Transformation of RE Organizations: Results of a Swiss Participatory Research Project

3.1 Theoretical Basis and Methodology

As a central research project, P9 conducted an accompanying study with nearly 60 educational organizations, in collaboration with the Swiss association “plusbildung,” an umbrella organization comprising educational institutions, competence

centers, and organizations from the Catholic, Protestant-Reformed, and ecumenical sectors. It offers a range of RE for adults, including interreligious, spiritual, personal development, and cultural, educational offerings (Dachverband Plusbildung 2024). The individual member organizations operate within both the ecclesiastical and the public education and service markets. Their transition to digital means is driven by the need to remain competitive in a rapidly changing educational landscape and to improve their educational offerings, pedagogical efficiency, and economic performance, while also continually reviewing the educational content to determine how and in what ways the digital education market presents new competitors, options for collaboration, and new educational content. As of 2019, “*plusbildung* includes 59 formal member organizations across the linguistic regions of Switzerland (German, French, Italian) (Dachverband Plusbildung 2019).

The accompanying research was carried out using a participatory approach, aiming to reflect both the methodological importance and the increasing relevance of shared power dynamics in a digital society. To achieve this, a combination of the following four methodological approaches was employed: a) A case study at a representative member organization, specifically focusing on one of its digital education modules (participant observation and individual interviews with participants of this educational module); b) a quantitative-exploratory online survey; c) qualitative expert interviews with teachers and leaders of the member organizations; d) web scraping and topic modeling of all *plusbildung* member-organization websites (Schneider 2024). The design was exploratory, factoring in various hypotheses.

Three central research questions were established:

1. What are the most significant factors influencing the intent to offer/use religiously themed digital educational offerings? That is, who uses and who offers digital RE services at *plusbildung*? Why?
2. What are the contributing factors that influence a positive experience with digital/hybrid RE offerings and practices? That is, which digital offerings are perceived as most successful by teachers and learners? Why?
3. Which factors most influence the willingness of individual member organizations to see digitalization as a call for shared strategies and further joint development? That is, what next?

The following section presents one main finding from the online survey segment of the study (more detailed results in Suhner 2024) and, therefore, outlines its theoretical basis. From the beginning, the co-researchers concentrated on operational questions related to methods, structure, and the implementation of religious educational processes in digital environments. Examples include: Which

methods are effective in a digital setting? Which tools enhance specific methods? However, narrowing the focus solely to particular methods would be too granular to yield meaningful insights. To address these questions (see Research Questions 1 and 2), the framework developed by theologian Karlo Meyer was utilized as a foundation: Meyer's meta-analysis of contemporary didactic approaches to interreligious learning resulted in a four-part model designed to classify most of the models commonly discussed in the academic discourse on interreligious education. This model emphasizes not the educational content itself but the "mode" – the way educational content is perceived, processed, and potentially further explored during teaching and learning. These modes reflect the goals of the educational process from both a didactic and motivational perspective. While the modes are not directly tied to specific methods, certain methods and forms of presentation can be loosely linked to them. Importantly, the four-part framework is applicable not only to interreligious educational settings but also to religious ones, especially when the term "experiences" is added to the title and additional "opening aspects" are incorporated into the third and fourth modes:

The first mode – "subject-specific and methodological learning" – refers to the ideal profile of a scholar of religious studies, initially concerned with the objective perception and interpretation of phenomena, statements, and sources in general. The particular hermeneutic emphasis is on scientific objectivity.

The second mode – "existential learning and reflecting" – puts the focus on the ideal profile of the existential thinker. The particular hermeneutic emphasis is on *personal reflection*, which leads to the reconsideration or first emergence of one's own positioning and is expressed verbally or otherwise creatively.

The third mode – "learning for/through encounters" – refers to a situation-sensitive, socially and ethically justified handling of religion-specific situations. This mode includes not only *encounters* in everyday situations where religious topics play a role but also *behavior* in "indirect" encounters with religious representatives, religious traditions but also with religious experiences.

The fourth mode focuses on acts – "learning and preparing for action". Regarding general RE, this mode can be divided into religious-community-specific engagement and general engagement.

To explore these approaches to religious traditions and experiences, a questionnaire was developed comprising 34 items in total. One set of questions examined the intentions of teachers and the perceptions of learners concerning the educational contexts provided by the umbrella association *plusbildung* in general, regardless of the specific educational format. Another set of questions focused solely on digital educational contexts. Respondents could select multiple options for both sets of questions, with answers recorded on a 5-point Likert scale. Each of the 34 items aligns with one of Meyer's four modes of religious engagement.

3.2 Main Findings

When the aforementioned items are grouped according to the four modes, the following trends emerge regarding *general educational intentions* for both educators and learners: *Teachers* concentrate primarily on Quadrant 3, with a high agreement rate of 90.8%. Quadrant 1 follows as the second-highest priority, with 78.2% agreement. Lower levels of agreement are observed in Quadrants 4g (72.5%), 2 (64.1%), and 4e (54.1%).

For *learners*, the priority is on Quadrant 1, showing a strong agreement rate of 87.1%. The second-highest emphasis is on Quadrant 3, with 78.3% agreement. Quadrants 4e (69.3%), 2 (64.4%), and 4g (60.5%) receive comparatively lower levels of agreement.

Quadrant / modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences	General educational settings	
	Teachers	Learners
1 subject-specific and methodological learning	78.2 %	87.1 %
2 existential learning and reflecting	64.1 %	64.4 %
3 learning for/through encounters	90.8 %	78.3 %
4 learning and preparing for action	4g: 72.5 % 4e: 54.1 %	4g: 60.5 % 4e: 69.3 %

Figure 1: Table comparing the values of teachers and learners in terms of their intentions or perceptions of the mode of religious engagement in general educational settings. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place. Shading: darker background colors indicate higher values.

The results for *digital educational settings* differ significantly. *Teachers* prioritize Quadrant 2, with a high agreement rate of 89.7%. Quadrant 3 is the second most emphasized, with 71.3% agreement, followed by Quadrant 1 (70%) and Quadrant 4 (57.5%), which show lower ratings.

From the *learners'* perspective, the primary emphasis shifts to Quadrant 1, with a strong agreement of 72.7%. The second highest priority is Quadrant 2, with 54.8% agreement, while Quadrants 3 (40.4%) and 4 (34.2%) receive comparatively lower ratings.

Modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences	Digital educational settings	
	Teachers	Learners
1 subject-specific and methodological learning	70.0 %	72.7 %
2 existential learning and reflecting	89.7 %	54.8 %
3 learning for/through encounters	71.3 %	40.4 %
4 learning and preparing for action	57.5 %	34.2 %

Figure 2: Table comparing the values of teachers and learners in terms of their intentions or perceptions of the mode of religious engagement in digital educational settings. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place. Shading: darker background colors indicate higher values.

These findings offer valuable insights when comparing general and digital educational settings. Two key observations stand out: First, in digital teaching and learning environments, the primary focus for teachers shifts significantly – whether intentionally or not. In general settings, the emphasis is on encounter-based learning (90.8%) and academic-methodological learning (78.2%). However, in digital settings, the focus transitions to existential learning (89.7%) and, to a lesser degree, encounter-based learning (71.3%). Second, a notable divergence emerges between teachers’ and learners’ perceptions. The two modes prioritized by employees (leaders and teachers) in digital contexts – existential learning and encounter-based learning – are rated significantly lower by learners. Specifically, existential learning is rated at 54.8% by learners, and encounter-based learning at just 40.4%.

Overall, the findings point to substantial potential for specific methods in the digital domain, especially for promoting social, encounter-oriented, and personal-existential learning. So far, the teaching methods used for these purposes have rarely been perceived as effective by learners. Supplementary qualitative results from the study illustrate that analog didactic approaches have predominantly been carried over into the digital space, neglecting the unique features and opportunities of a digital pedagogy – potential that still needs to be (further) developed. Given the fact that RE, from a theological perspective – and explicitly from the viewpoint of the providers of the educational formats in this study – is fundamentally about encounter, it must be asked what specific kind of learning RE

Quadrant / modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences	GENERAL educational settings		DIGITAL educational settings	
	Teachers	Learners	Teachers	Learners
1 subject-specific and methodological learning	78.2 %	87.1 %	70.0 %	72.7 %
2 existential learning and reflecting	64.1 %	64.4 %	89.7 %	54.8 %
3 learning for/through encounters	90.8 %	78.3 %	71.3 %	40.4 %
4 learning and preparing for action	63.3 %	64.9 %	57.5 %	34.2 %

Figure 3: Table comparing the values of teachers and learners in terms of their intentions or perceptions of the mode of religious engagement in general and exclusively digital educational settings. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place. Shading: darker background colors indicate higher values.

aims to offer in a digital society. This perspective raises the question of how this task may be reimagined within a digital context with its own didactic forms – and what implications this holds for the potential and responsibilities of RE. There is an urgent need for evidence-based development of encounter learning and affective learning in digital education. To further address this need, interdisciplinary educational research is essential (Gegenfurter et al. 2021).

4 Digital Media and Digitalization in Confirmation Work in Europe

The following results are part of the so-called third European study on confirmation work (Ilg et al. 2024), which was conducted between 2021 and 2024, and is, regarding the time frame and especially the research approach, strongly connected with the URPP as a whole and especially with the research questions of P9. This study builds on the first European study which was conducted in 2007/08 (Schweitzer, Ilg, and Simojoki 2010) and the second study which was carried out five years later in 2012/13 (Schweitzer et al. 2015), which also included a longitudinal follow-up survey (Schweitzer et al. 2017). This study continues a long-term re-

search process which – in its continuity, its scale, and the scope of its international-comparative design – is unparalleled in the field of religion-related youth research. The nine countries involved in the third study were Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. This large-scale quantitative study included responses from more than 9000 confirmands and about 1600 workers in t_1 (autumn 2021) from mainly online questionnaires, with responses from more than 6000 confirmands and almost 900 workers in t_2 (spring 2022). The specific Swiss study also included research on nonformal education at the primary level, which was conducted in the same time frame (Schlag et al. 2024a).

4.1 Methodology and Thematic Research Questions

Since confirmation work is, like other forms of non-formal education, mainly characterised by in-person interaction and embodied community experiences, the previous two studies hardly included any references to the use of digital media and digitalisation in confirmation work. Given the fundamental importance of digital communication for today's young generation, it was time to pay more attention to this issue based on recent research. The main research questions – which also integrate the dimension of organisational transformation – were:

1. Is the competent and intensive use of digital media crucial for confirmation work to be high quality, successful, and 'well received'?
2. Is 'digitalisation' an important, or possibly even *the* central topic of this church education programme, and does this have wider relevance in the broader perspectives of education-related church development?
3. If confirmation work, according to its theological-pedagogical claim, aims to focus on and thematise the life and everyday world of young people (Simojoki et al. 2018), should it not also make the reality of digital media use and the dynamics of digital transformation a central theme and consideration in church design practices?

To this end, the present study interweaves two perspectives: Confirmation work in a "culture of digitality" and digital learning in confirmation work. The broader horizon was operationalised by asking the confirmands about the role of digital media in their life. Aspects of the "learning" dimension included whether phenomena of "religion online/in the internet" should be addressed in confirmation work, how much their experiences with social media were issued, the use of digital media by the workers, the importance of digital media for group communica-

tion and also formats of digital learning. In order to approach these complex questions, also basic insights from the so-called CONTOC (“Churches Online in Times of Corona”) studies have been taken into consideration (Schlag et al. 2023; 2025), in order to arrive at the best possible well-founded orientations with regard to the key questions mentioned above.

4.2 Main Findings

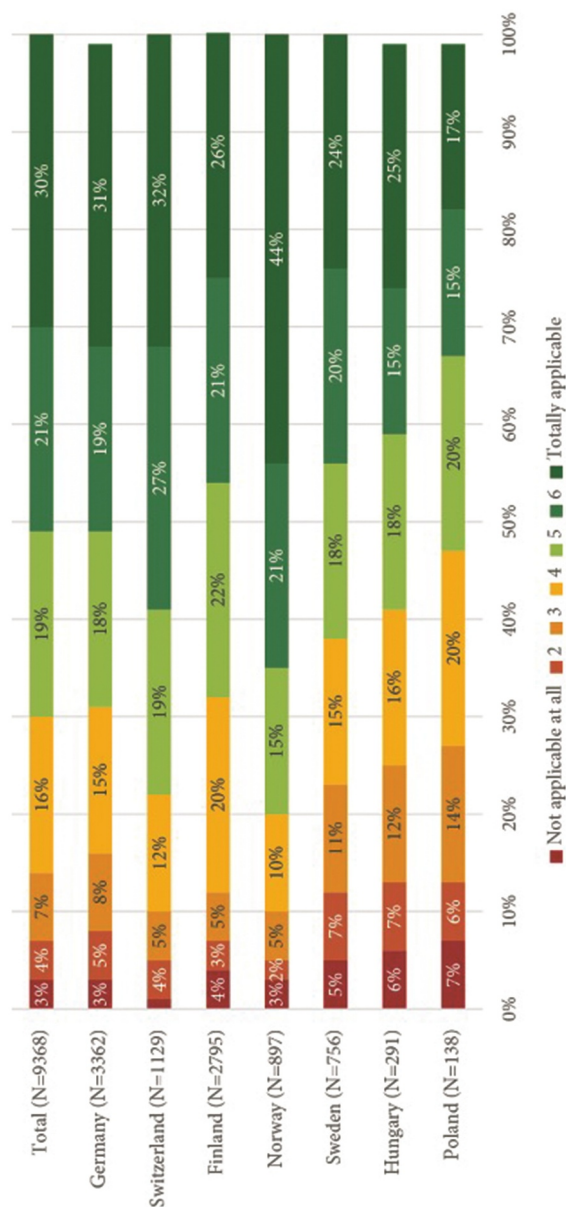
One thing should be said in advance: The keywords ‘digital media’ and ‘social media’, as we used them in the questionnaires of the studies – admittedly not uniformly – were probably not primarily associated by the young people with specific tools, but rather with the everyday self-evidence of digital media as social media. The confirmands are likely to have associated precisely this everyday practice in their answers, so that the results of the study not only allow conclusions to be drawn about the technical use, but also about their everyday, personal and perhaps even strongly emotionally determined use. The answers may also reflect how the confirmands perceived the church representatives’ approach to digital dynamics and their own life world. In this respect, these answers can also be interpreted as an expression and indicator of how young people fundamentally assess the relevance and timeliness of church in the current situation of digital transformation.

4.2.1 Importance of Digital Media

In order to determine the confirmands’ initial self-assessment of the importance of digital media, we asked the confirmands what role these media play in their lives (t_1). Here, the international study shows as an average value that digital media play an important role in the lives of 70% of the confirmands. A comparative look at the results of the individual countries reveals a very similar trend overall, with some minor deviations. If the three positive agreement options of the 7-point scale, i.e. 5–7, are taken together, the ‘lowest’ agreement with this item is found in Poland with just over 50% and the highest agreement in Norway with 80%. For the vast majority of confirmands, digital media are also an important part of everyday life and the communication practices that take place within it.

However, the question now is what this finding actually means for confirmation work itself. After all, the fact that digital media play a major role in everyday life does not necessarily mean that confirmands want to see this reflected in their confirmation time. For this reason, we used a thematic questionnaire to ask the young people about their expectations (t_1) as well as their experiences (t_2) with digital media. We

CE52: Digital media play an important role in my life.

Figure 4: The role of digital media in the lives of confirmands by country (t₁).

also asked the employees about their own expectations (t_1) and experiences (t_2) with the use of digital media, which can't be presented in this article in further detail.

4.2.2 Confirmands' Expectations Regarding the Use of Digital Media in Confirmation Work

This shows that at the beginning of the confirmation period, the possible use of digital media in confirmation work is particularly popular in Finland (61%), Switzerland (60%), Norway (58%) and Germany (57%). The approval rate is lower in Poland (40%), Hungary (28%) and Sweden (26%). In this respect, the picture is more mixed than for the question about the important role of digital media in one's own life, and the country results themselves diverge considerably more. It may come as a particular surprise that the result for Sweden, which is highly developed in terms of digitalisation, is much lower. This gives the impression that the use of digital media is not necessarily on the agenda for a large proportion of confirmands – at least that was the expectation at the beginning of the confirmation period.

The question now arises as to what has actually become of these expectations at the end of the confirmation time. For this reason, a corresponding questionnaire was designed for the t_2 questionnaire.

4.2.3 Confirmands' Experiences with Digital Media in Confirmation Work

These results should be mentioned in advance: Due to the weaker participation of some of the countries that took part in t_1 , only the data from Germany, Switzerland, Finland, Norway and Hungary could be analysed in t_2 . The picture here is as follows:

Digital media was primarily used as a *means of communication* in all of the countries analysed. This is shown by the fact that 64% of confirmands stated that they used digital media for communication in the group (KT34). Compared to the high approval rates regarding the use of digital media as a *means of communication*, the use of digital media as a *learning tool* was significantly lower. All of the country results integrated here show low values: Only 20% of the confirmands state that they used social media for creative work (KT36) and only 18% state that they used online games in class (KT37). Only 26% of all confirmands took part in online lessons. This figure is less than 20% in the individual countries, with the exception of Germany with 41%. Germany also has the highest figure for online

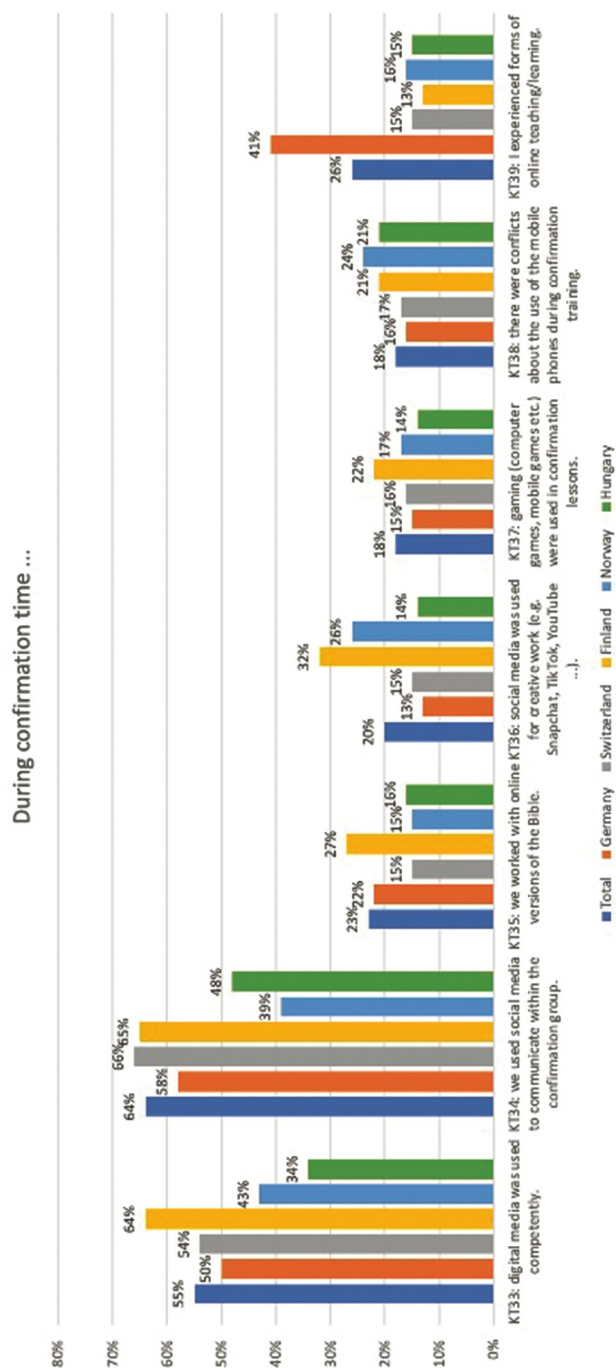


Figure 5: The use of digital media from the perspective of the confirmands (t₂).

church services and prayers at 35% (KS21). Both of the latter results are presumably due to the special restriction measures during the coronavirus period.

It is also striking that only around half of the young people who participated in the study considered the use of digital media by workers to be competent (KT33). From a broader perspective, this may well be seen as a revealing perception of how young people assess the technological affinity – and thus, as already indicated above – the continued relevance of the church and its representatives in general.

To come back to the initial question: How important is the use of digital media for a positive and quality-perceived confirmation time? Further in-depth calculations have shown that there is no statistical correlation between the use of digital media for communication purposes and the feeling of connectedness within the group during the coronavirus pandemic. There is also no statistical correlation between experiences of using digital media and the confirmands' impression that employees stayed in contact with them during this time! A further correlation analysis shows that there is no correlation between overall satisfaction with the confirmation period and the desire to use digital media more often! Our calculations have also shown this: The *more satisfied* the confirmands were with their use of digital media, the *less* they thought that digital media should have been used more.

There are certain reasons for this almost systematic reluctance to increased digital use: On the one hand, these reasons may relate to the experience of digital oversaturation in general; on the other hand, this may have to do with the fact that those involved on all sides expect more intensive forms of personal encounters during the confirmation period – after COVID-19, anyway. The objectives of this program are obviously strongly geared towards a culture of personal encounters and community. This can also be seen from the fact that, despite sometimes very different technological developments and equipment between different countries, the basic picture is quite similar in an international comparison.

Due to the above-mentioned '24/7 online' practice of young people (and adults!), it is possible that confirmation work is seen as a good opportunity to at least temporarily (even if only for a few hours!) refrain from using these media. Another reason could be that the workers' skills in the creative use of digital media ultimately do not appear to be so convincing that the young people would have liked more specific programs in this direction. In any case, the results make it clear that this specific church education program does not have to conform to the logic of the everyday digital forms of communication experienced by young people.

5 Conclusion and Outlook

In this final section, we will draw conclusions from the results of this subproject of the URPP to date and identify prospects for further research and practice. In doing so, we deliberately take a broad view of the possible, albeit not yet foreseeable, further development of digital technologies, since this will, in any case, have a significant influence on the challenges of (post-)digital religious education and its potential for acquiring critical “digital literacy”.

The CONTOC² study clearly identifies that the successful digital experiments of the COVID-19 period were often scaled back again after the pandemic in favour of an ‘old normal,’ and that there are also insufficient resources available for professional digitalisation strategies – findings which offer considerable food for thought regarding the future of digital RE. For the further development of high-quality digital RE work, we strongly recommend not taking the path that leads back to the “old normal.” If CONTOC² also very clearly shows a not-insignificant discrepancy between digitally enthusiastic and savvy church media users on the one hand, and rather aloof church leaders on the other (Yadav 2025), then there is a considerable need for action. In the ‘worst case’ scenario, there is even a risk that both the educationally attractive digital communication formats and the wider digital dynamics will once again fade into the background in terms of their significance for a responsible organisational practice.

To ensure that RE is experienced by users in a way that is consistent and coherent with their own digitally dynamic everyday experiences, the potential of digital media use and the necessary thematisation of the opportunities and dangers of digitalisation should be addressed more strongly than before.

On the one hand, further analysis should be conducted on whether there is a considerable need to expand the professional-creative pedagogical use of digital tools. It seems that educational staff are not yet fully aware of the educational potential of digital media, which also stems from the fact that, at least in the field of RE, a differentiated digital pedagogy has not yet been developed. A wealth of innovative formats that already exist on a broad basis often do not seem to be ‘on the radar’ and have therefore not yet been sufficiently used. In order for digital tools to actually provide ‘added value’ in RE, it is therefore essential that responsible stakeholders expand their own expertise. The findings of the CONTOC² study clearly show that there continues to be a lack of sufficient offers and measures for training in this area.

Furthermore, in a ‘culture of digitality’ such high-quality sustainable RE will be needed, which concerns not only the ever-changing and accelerating modes of use, but also completely new potential forms of active digital media use, and the

creation of new hybrid contact platforms (Beck, Nord, and Valentin 2021). Digital RE will therefore be in demand in several respects in the future:

Firstly, through a stronger integration of digital formats which make it easier and more engaging to research and retrieve certain relevant information. For example, the conscious use of the possibilities of religious robots (Puzio, Kunkel, and Klinge) and religious chatbots as an expression of certain creative forms of theological productivity (Schlag and Suhner 2023) and also the creation of digital formats such as podcasts, short films or digital storytelling. What seems necessary here is a good mix between the use of digital media and analogue methods in order to do justice to the digital natives – for example, their gaming skills – while at the same time responding to those who want a break from digital media during RE (Schlag and Yadav 2023).

Secondly, it is important – especially regarding interreligious sensitivity, exchange and connectivity – to consider digital networking beyond the circle of one's own "interest" group, for example by building relations with other, 'distant' religious groups in different locations.

Thirdly, in the sense of critical media education, it should be considered how the organization of RE and its representatives want to position themselves, especially with regard to certain indoctrinations taking place via the Internet, especially in the area of religion-related topics and in the sense of productive interreligious dialogue.

Fourthly, the already foreseeable trans- and post-humanist developments are an essential topic of RE. For it is precisely these techno-religious promises that offer considerable opportunities to debate questions about the image of God and man in an intensive and theologically productive way. This can now be studied in an impressive theological treatise from an Islamic perspective and also transferred to RE work (Karimi 2024). If users feel that RE addresses these central questions in a way that is challenging and appealing to them, this is also likely to have a lasting impact on the credibility *of*, the feeling of connection *to* and the willingness to bond *with* the church or other respective religious organizations.

Through such a diverse approach, users could experience that RE thematises both *digital developments as a specific organizational offering* and *its development as a specific digital offering* in a theologically profound way. And this not primarily in the sense of technical use, but in the sense of a creative, timely (Schlag 2024), and critical use of digital possibilities, allowing for reflection about one's own questions, longings, and future prospects.

Success, in these cases, means that all those involved can experience the extent to which RE is an essential component of any learning organization, one that is relevant to everyday life, capable of development, and open to transformation in digital society.

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