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Religious "Bubbles" in a Superdiverse Digital Landscape? Research with Religious Youth on Instagram

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Abstract: Religious activities are no longer confined to local religious communities, but are increasingly taking place online. In that regard, social media is of particular importance for young believers that connect with their peers via platforms such as Instagram. There are conflicting views on the functioning of social media platforms: they are either conceptualized as superdiverse spaces, in which social boundaries can be overcome, or as resulting in separate bubbles that foster exclusive exchanges between like-minded people sharing certain characteristics, including religious affiliation. This article assesses online religious activities based on qualitative research involving 41 young, urban, religious Instagram users of different faiths. We demonstrate how young believers' interactions on social media produce thematically bound content bubbles that are considerably homogeneous when it comes to religion, but superdiverse in other areas. Religious activities online often have an affirmative effect on religious belonging. This is especially true for young people that perceive themselves in a minority position and search for like-minded people online. We have found that religious content bubbles are clustered around religious traditions. Interreligious exchange (e.g., between Christians and Sikhs) is largely absent, whereas intrareligious boundaries (e.g., between Lutherans, Catholics, and Pentecostals) become blurred. This suggests that differences within religious traditions are losing significance in a digitalized world, while interreligious boundaries remain.

Keywords: religious youth; social media; digital religion; diversity; belonging

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates the social media activities of young people of different religious traditions. It is aimed at reaching a better understanding of transformations in religious belonging online. It is based on the research project *Young Believers Online*, which assesses the significance of on- and offline spaces in the religious lives of people of different faiths living in Vienna. Hence, religious diversity (Kühle et al. 2018; Mıhçıyazgan 2016; Triandafyllidou and Magazzini 2021) as well as religion in digital spaces (Campbell and Evolvi 2020; Peterson 2020; Moberg and Sjö 2020) are important aspects of our study. Interestingly, so far, the one scarcely included the other, showing that they have evolved as mostly segregated strands of social-scientific inquiry. Furthermore, qualitative studies on the social media usage of people with different religious backgrounds have been neglected thus far. Our study addresses these research gaps.

Whereas research on religious diversity has primarily focused on the aspect of governance, interreligious dialogue, and religious conflict (Mıhçıyazgan 2016; Weiße et al. 2014; Bader 2003), research on religion in digital space investigates ongoing transformation processes concerning religion and the digital sphere (for an overview see Peterson 2020). These range from early studies on Second Life (Radde-Antweiler 2008) to investigations of religious practices during the COVID-19 pandemic (Huygens 2021), or various aspects

of the online behavior of religious minorities (e.g., political activism, modesty culture, sociolects) (Mishol-Shauli and Golan 2019; Mejova et al. 2017; Gärtner 2016). The focus of scholarly work mostly lies on activities and encounters within a single religious tradition. Neither religious diversity nor the interactions among people of different faiths in online spaces has attracted much attention (among the few exceptions, see Neumaier 2020). This is surprising, considering the great scientific interest in interreligious encounters offline (Meister 2011; Triandafyllidou and Magazzini 2021).

Regarding the interactions in digital spaces in general, there are two contrasting lines of argument. Some perceive the internet as a site of (super)diversity that enables encounters (Hoechsmann et al. 2018), while others argue that online activities largely take place within filter bubbles (Geschke et al. 2019; Reviglio 2017). The term "filter bubble" was coined by technology activist Eli Pariser in 2011. It describes the personalization of online content through algorithms, which moderate the online experience of users and result in segregated online spaces (Pariser 2011). Depending on the perception of social media as either facilitating or hindering social exchange across differences, we are bound to harbor greatly diverging expectations regarding religious encounters in online spaces.

To investigate what really happens in digital spaces, we conducted research with urban, religious Instagram users between 16 and 25 years of age. Having grown up in superdiverse contexts (Vertovec 2007), these "digital natives" (Wang et al. 2013) are well acquainted with religious diversity. At the same time, however, they are conscious of ongoing societal secularization processes (Aichholzer et al. 2019). These have the effect that young followers of religious traditions experience being othered for being religious, regardless of the extent of social representation that their religion might have (Gärtner 2016; Davie 2006), and sometimes even regardless of "their religion" being in the "majority" demographically (Poulter et al. 2016). In that sense, social media activities might not only influence religions as such, but also provide a different social context to engage with and develop one's own religious belonging.

Our empirical study on religious Instagram users shows that religious content often takes the form of what we term an Instagram content bubble. Such bubbles emerge in relation to certain topics that users consider particularly interesting (e.g., news, sports, hobbies/activities, religion). They are created through an interplay of individual user behavior (liking content, following accounts, and hashtags) and algorithms. Our findings on religious diversity online neither fit the view of online spaces as being dominated by strictly closed-off bubbles, nor the enthusiastic notion of a truly superdiverse digital sphere. Rather, we find signs indicating both, and therefore take a closer look at the configuration and effects of content bubbles, while paying special attention to the religious sphere.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, we present the theoretical foundations of our study by discussing current conceptualizations of online space in relation to religion. Building on the literature that enquires whether or not online spaces are superdiverse, we outline the relation between social media platforms and individual users, before discussing religious transformations in contemporary society. We go on to describe how we approached religion on Instagram, and provide an overview on the methods and data collection. The focus of the empirical results lies on the religious content bubbles we have identified on Instagram. We argue that these bubbles consist of five elements, which we present in detail. Finally, we illustrate how interreligious boundaries tend to be fortified online, while intrareligious boundaries blur.

2. Researching Religion in the Digital Age

For many years, empirical studies have mostly focused on the specificities of the internet, without challenging the notion that on- and offline worlds were considered inherently separated spheres. It was only in the last decade that research on digital religion became increasingly concerned with "the embeddedness of the internet in everyday life and its impact on nondigital venues" (Campbell and Evolvi 2020, p. 7). Nevertheless, it is useful to note some particularities of religious activities on- and offline. While offline religiosity

is usually tied to the setting of a local religious community and its places of worship[1], religion online transcends geographical distance, and does not require a community in the traditional sense. Younger people, especially, encounter both religious life and diversity in online spaces.

As mentioned before, research on diversity online has been divided into two conflicting approaches: Some consider social media as superdiverse spaces, i.e., spaces in which the interaction between people of highly diverse backgrounds takes place, and where social boundaries eventually lose their power of keeping people apart. This could even entail a certain digital conviviality (Gilroy 2010), where people recognize connecting communalities instead of separating differences through mundane interactions. Being part of digital communities can also have an empowering effect on individuals (Hoechsmann et al. 2018). Those who argue that digital spaces tend to create filter bubbles (Geschke et al. 2019; Reviglio 2017), see social media as resulting in homogeneous social spheres. Thus, one could expect a lack of religious diversity and negligible interreligious encounters, as users would remain within parallel, mostly segregated spheres.

Consequently, both approaches are important to us, as we are interested in the functioning of online spaces and the effects that online religious encounters have on the construction of religious belonging. Following Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 202), we understand religious belonging as "emotional investments and desire for attachments" to religious (online) communities. In the following sections, we will elaborate on this discussion and develop a better understanding of (a) the relevance of transformations in religious landscapes, and (b) the potentials and limitations of online spaces, and their significance for religious belonging.

2.1. Religious Landscapes in Transformation

When analyzing the contemporary transformation processes of religions, we equally need to take on- and offline spheres into account. Traditionally, local religious communities are assignable to a branch[2] of a larger religious tradition, e.g., a Roman-Catholic community as one confession within the field of diverse Christian tradition, or a Sunni Mosque community as a branch of the Islamic tradition. The growing diversity within religious traditions and their branches that is currently observable in many societies, represents a central dynamic of current transformations of religious landscapes. As Burchardt and Becci (2016) argue, the process of religious diversification concerns the internal differentiation of religious traditions, as well as the general diversification of religious landscapes in the course of migration movements. Not only are there more religions in Europe than there were before the Second World War, there are also changes within religions, e.g., Western Christianity is being internally diversified by migrants from Asia and Africa (Burchardt and Becci 2016, p. 5). In terms of online spaces, many of the religious communities present in offline spaces can also be found online. At the same time, research on digital religion has pointed towards the emergence of particular religious online formats and new forms of communities that do not necessarily have an offline counterpart, which further broadens the spectrum of religious traditions and branches present in the religious landscape (Huygens 2021; Helland 2016). Most profoundly, ongoing secularization processes continue to reshape the environment for religions, whether digital or not.

Offline religious presence is mostly organized according to the different branches of religious traditions. Hence, most prayer sites are attended by religious, relatively homogenous groups. Interreligious meetings and gatherings do occur (e.g., interreligious dialogue initiatives), but they remain the exception (Körs 2020). Intrareligious as well as interreligious dialogue is often said to be an elite project, or the agenda of a small group of enthusiasts, and not representative of the day-to-day experience of most believers. Anna Neumaier (2020) reported that individuals engaging in interreligious activities on platforms such as YouTube or Facebook are mostly also active in interreligious initiatives offline. In more general terms, it is yet to be seen whether, and how, everyday interreligious encounters take place online.

For both on- and offline spaces, it is important to point out that religious diversity involves not only the parallel existence of clear-cut religious traditions, but also the messy situations resulting from the societal transformation processes[3]. Overall, there has been a broadening of the academic perspective that has come about as a result of religious studies paying much more attention to the limits of ethnocentric classifications and attempting to deconstruct the concept of religion. For our study, we take this into account by building on the self-identification of individuals, when referring to religions, religious groups, and religious content on- and offline.

2.2. Superdiverse Bubbles and Religious Belonging Online

The term superdiversity was originally coined in 2007 to conceptualize new migration patterns in Great Britain. Since then, it has been widely used in different disciplines. In accordance with the original meaning of the term, we understand superdiversity to capture "the diversification of diversity" (Vertovec 2007, p. 1025). For migrants as well as non-migrants, past and present mobilities have resulted in changing societal configurations of social categories. By going beyond an exclusive focus on ethnicity or country of origin, superdiversity also helps us to see how different religious landscapes transform in migration societies. In providing a conceptual tool for understanding the lived realities in those contexts, it helps to grasp the transformations in religious belonging resulting from unruly multiculture, hybridities, and social interactions (Gilroy 2010). However, although the concept of superdiversity has seen many different applications (Vertovec 2019), it has not widely been applied to research on social media outside of sociolinguistics.

Nevertheless, some research suggests that the internet does hold the potential for qualifying as a superdiverse space. Across different webpages, platforms, and applications, the possibilities of expressing one's identity seem endless. Equally, users find themselves confronted with an "unprecedented access to potentially diverse perspectives and realities" (Hoechsmann et al. 2018, p. xxii). Social media would thus give rise to a new modernity that is essentially bound by communicational rationality. The notion of "living together" in contemporary society transforms towards "communicating together" in media 2.0 in general, and on social networking sites in particular (Hoechsmann et al. 2018, p. xxii). Consequently, the internet can be considered a pluralizing force that "creates a new space through which individuals must navigate competing truth claims and ideas about what is ultimately important" (McClure 2017, p. 494). As part of their online experience, users are confronted with "worldviews, beliefs, and religious ideas" (McClure 2017, p. 494) that encourage them to broaden their perspective.

Some argue that social media platforms empower their users by "giving [users] agency over the construction of their own images" and helping them "to disrupt hierarchies that have long defined who is considered worthy of public visibility" (Caldeira et al. 2020, p. 1074). This is even true when users do not actively engage in producing content, as passive consumption can also have positive effects on users (Rieger and Klimmt 2019; Pirker 2018). Lucero (2017) argues that social media allow people to "express and explore" (Lucero 2017, p. 119), and to construct identities in digital spaces. Social media thus provide environments where people can find and become part of a like-minded community. Similarly, Campbell and Golan (2011) show how digital enclaves offer spaces of safety for their members, while at the same time being tools of social control by religious authorities.

In this sense, we use the term superdiversity in our research to highlight the potential of online spaces for religious belonging, whilst keeping in mind that the actual realization of this potential is often shaped or limited by the way in which online spaces function. This is particularly true for social networking sites. While social media can provide more people with the opportunity to interact, it can also become an instrument of control (Campbell and Golan 2011; Hinton and Hjorth 2019), and can produce negative psychological effects (Pirker 2018; Rieger and Klimmt 2019; Sebastian 2019; Wallace and Buil 2021). Another point casting doubt on an overly optimistic perspective on the emancipatory potential of

social media is that online communication is also said to foster radicalizing tendencies (Frischlich 2021).

As previously discussed, filter bubbles (Reviglio 2017, p. 281) are seen as one of the reasons for the lack of exchange among different groups online. Users do not encounter all the information available online; they only see content that targets their established interests and aligns with their personal taste. However, the impact of filter bubbles is disputed among scholars, arguing that algorithms do influence the content we see online, although users themselves remain the most decisive filters through their preferences (Bruns 2019; Fouquaert and Mechant 2021; Geschke et al. 2019; Self 2016). For example, in their study on ultra-Orthodox Jews online, Okun and Nimrod (2017) found that certain communities are using unique visuals and phrases as defense mechanisms "preventing any outsider who reads members' comments from fully understanding what is actually happening in the community" (Okun and Nimrod 2017, p. 2837). This societal fragmentation driven by personal taste is a phenomenon already observed within offline spaces (Bellah et al. 1985), and is therefore inherent to identity work on- and offline.

These aspects are particularly relevant to the study of religious youth that tend to find themselves in a minority position vis-à-vis what seems to be an increasingly secular society (Gärtner 2016). Due to their age, young people's voices are often overheard or not taken seriously within offline religious communities. Being part of a religious minority can also limit access to offline sources of religious knowledge (Limacher 2019). Online, they can be part of vast networks of like-minded people that are not confined to a particular place or community (Mattes 2019). There, they encounter spaces where established power hierarchies within religions are challenged by users—some of whom belong to their own generation—who exchange thoughts and ideas, and act as religious influencers (without necessarily qualifying as conventional religious authorities) (Baumann et al. 2017).

3. Research Design

Through our investigation of Instagram usage of the religious youth in Vienna, we wanted to understand the role that religion plays in research participants' online activities. Is religious content something they consume via Instagram at all, and if so, what kind of content do they follow? Do the online spaces that they frequent qualify as superdiverse, or do they take the form of homogeneous bubbles? We conducted qualitative interviews with 41 Instagram users (20 female, 20 male, 1 non-binary) between the ages of 16 and 25 years, living in the metropolitan region of Vienna. This age cohort is interesting for several reasons: First, it has been argued that, at this age, young people become more independent, which marks an important formative phase in life (Backes and Bonnie 2019; Grob 2001). Second, people in this age group were "born into the digital age", and can be assumed to be "inherently technology-savvy" (Wang et al. 2013, p. 409). Furthermore, having grown up in a superdiverse urban context, these digital natives are familiar with religious diversity.

Participants had to identify as religious, and as belonging to one of seven religious traditions pre-selected by us (Alevism, Catholic Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Orthodox Christianity, Protestant Christianity, Sikhism). The decision of which religious traditions and branches[4] to include was based on their importance for the religious landscape of Vienna (Goujon et al. 2017; Mattes 2021), in terms of their size as well as their historical embeddedness (Catholics, Muslims, Lutherans, Jews, Orthodox Christians). Additionally, we included comparably small religious communities (Sikhs and Alevis), which allows for comparisons according to different criteria, including, for example, offline infrastructures. Recruitment took place via religious (youth) organizations, gatekeepers, and snowballing. Interviews took place between February and August 2021.

Our decision to focus on Instagram was based on several observations: First, Instagram has a great appeal among young users, as it has been one of the most widely used and fastest growing social networking platforms among our targeted age group for the past ten years (Auxier and Anderson 2021). Second, Instagram analyzes the personal preferences of users and, through this, creates a tailor-made virtual environment that constantly learns from

user behavior (Bruns 2019; Cotter 2019). Geschke et al. (2019, 132f) argue that the emergence of bubbles is conditioned by individual preferences and interests, and pre-existing social relations (friends, family), which are transferred to the online space and algorithms. Third, Instagram is as much an advertisement space and a marketplace for goods as it is for (non-)commercial ideas, including political and religious ideologies (Frischlich 2021).

Each interview consisted of three stages: First, a narrative biographical problem-centered interview (Scheibelhofer 2008). Second, a tour of the participant's Instagram profile, which we call social media tour[5]. Finally, we asked participants about their (religious) life in the city. In this paper, we build on the insights from the social media tours. During these tours, participants logged onto their account and explained how, and for which purposes, they used Instagram. While taking us on a tour of their profile and their feed, we asked them about the (religious) content they consumed, the accounts they liked, the content they posted, and the role religion played for them on social media. Meanwhile, screen-capture software recorded everything that happened on-screen as well as the explanations given by participants. The screen recordings were not analyzed as visual data, but helped us understand the information provided (e.g., when they talked about a specific account or posting). Due to COVID-19 restrictions, some of the interviews were conducted online.

We combined inductive and deductive coding strategies in our content analysis (Reichertz 2014; Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Different researchers trial coded selected material (Schreier 2014), ensuring a high degree of intercoder reliability (O'Connor and Joffe 2020). Subsequently, different coding results were discussed. This informed a coherent coding strategy, allowing the categorization of content and accounts in different clusters (e.g., news, sports, religion).

Ethical considerations included the need to avoid exclusive foci on either majority or minority religions. Instead, we recruited participants with diverse religious backgrounds from larger as well as smaller religious communities. We were obliged to select religious groups carefully due to the limited number of participants. Consequently, we did not include additional religious groups, even though they might be larger than, for example, the Viennese Sikh community. Being aware of the negative effects of social-privilege differentials in research contexts (e.g., due to race, age, profession, and religious background) (Novak 2019), we took interactional aspects critically into account during the interview sessions. In planning our research, we had sought to balance these through an innovative, accessible research design, while also remaining critical of privilege biases throughout the analytical phase. During the interview sessions, it was important to us that we approached participants as collaborators rather than as mere informants. For this reason, participants continue to be involved with the project through exclusive access to preliminary research findings and discussion rounds.

4. Empirical Results: Insights into Young Believers' Instagram Usage

The social media tours provided us with information on the general interests and preferences of participants. It became clear that accounts were clustered around specific interests. We call these thematically clustered accounts "content bubbles". In contrast to the popular notion of filter bubbles as obscured "disruptions to information flows" (Bruns 2019, p. 2), content bubbles serve to analyze the digital environment that Instagram users build for themselves based on their personal preferences. Consequently, the concept of content bubbles is not normative, but a tool for empirical research, which was developed inductively, based on the accounts shown to us by our research participants. Each content bubble is unique in the sense that it is composed of different accounts focusing on a single topic. Hence, the sports bubbles of users A and B can vary in appearance, since users may favor different kinds of accounts or sports, whereby there may or may not be partial overlap between the sports bubbles of users A and B.

All participants consumed content from several bubbles. One of our participants describes her content bubbles in the following way: "That's a good mixture, I think. (. . .) A

mixture of memes, Christian postings, some political stuff (. . .) and educational stuff. And sometimes also regular people, but you see, there's not so much from friends, but lots of memes" (03-cath-f)[6]. Aside from religious content bubbles, which we will discuss in greater detail below, the most common content bubble in our data was news (many users indicated that Instagram was their main news source), followed by sports, photography, politics, food, travel, and music bubbles. While each of these content bubbles is tailored to the specific interests of a user, there are some accounts that many users have in common, e.g., @zeitimbild (the Instagram account of the most popular Austrian evening news program).

Furthermore, most participants use Instagram as a private communication tool with their peers. The patterns of interaction with public profiles and with accounts of friends differed: while the interest in (semi-)public accounts was of a content-related nature, following private profiles of individuals was based on personal ties. Aside from staying in touch with friends, the most common motivation to use Instagram was to get some distraction, kill time, or know what others were doing, yet also to read the news and stay up to date. While we will not discuss the question of how users produce content in much detail, it should be noted that most participants were conscious about their appearance online, and carefully curated their own content (Caldeira et al. 2020; Yau and Reich 2019).

Religious Content Bubbles

In the following, we refer to religious content bubbles in the plural to account for the great variety of bubbles among our interviewees. Yet, in our data, we identified striking similarities between different religious content bubbles, as content almost always fell within one of five basic categories (Figure 1). Of course, not every participant's religious content bubble consisted of all five elements. In general, the role that religion played on Instagram varied among participants, with a minority avoiding religious content, while most followed religious accounts and some even disclosed their own religious affiliation on their profile.

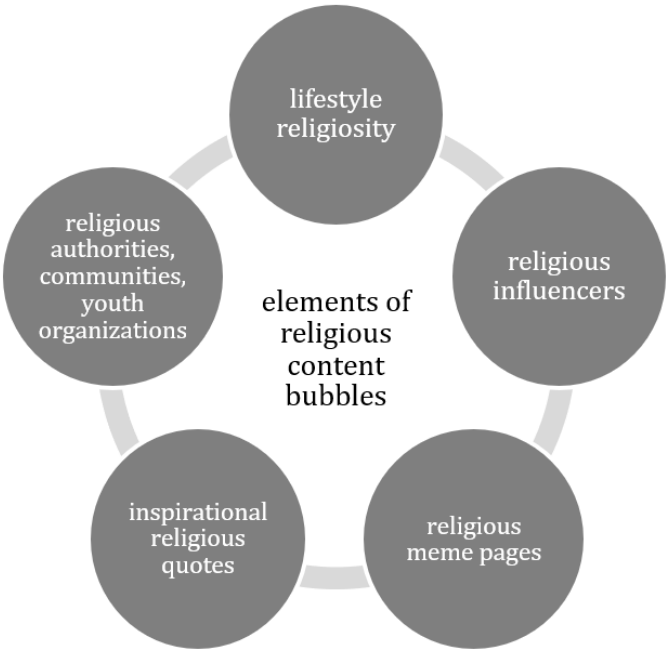

Figure 1. Elements of religious content bubbles.

The elements in Figure 1 describe the ideal types developed from our inductive codes. This means that accounts and postings may fall into more than one category (e.g., a youth organization announcing an event using a meme). Nevertheless, the categorization provides a comprehensive glimpse into the most important aspects of religious content bubbles. We argue that four of these categories are genuine online or Instagram-specific elements, as their manifestations are largely conditioned by the platform: religious memes;

inspirational religious quotes; religious influencers; lifestyle religiosity. In contrast, religious youth organizations, local communities, and authorities exhibit strong connections to religious life offline.

Accounts of religious youth organizations were especially important for Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish Instagram users. These participants were often very active in the respective religious youth organizations offline. Furthermore, some of our interviewees were involved in running such accounts. Religious youth organizations' accounts were particularly relevant for staying up to date with on- and offline activities, and for engaging in networking activities. Accounts of (local) places of worship and communities had a similar function. Many Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians followed the official accounts of the church (or churches) they also visited offline. When talking about the account @klostermariaschutz, a participant stated: "Yes, the monastery in Burgenland. That's the page [account] of my spiritual father. They often post something from their YouTube channel" (13-orth-m).

Furthermore, participants followed accounts or hashtags that focused on places of worship across the globe (the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem; Christian Orthodox monasteries in Greece; graves of Alevi martyrs in Turkey; the Sikh Golden Temple in India, etc.). Local leaders and personal religious mentors appear to be more important than prominent religious figures. People followed offline religious authorities of their own religious affiliation, yet not necessarily the top dignitaries (among Catholic users, nobody followed Pope Francis, for example). Accounts of pastors were the main source for religious content on Instagram among Protestant participants. Those religious leaders often have an influencer-like online presence, sharing personal aspects of their lives and religious reflections (for example @juliaandthechurch). Among other religious groups, however, accounts of local religious authorities played a comparatively insignificant role. One participant explained this by stating: "Most scholars have no social media [account] or are not using it, or its appearance is bad, unappealing or so" (18-musl-m).

Influencers constitute a category that is specific to Instagram. The term is used to describe people who have a certain number of followers and advocate a particular lifestyle—in this case relating to religiosity and faith. Often, they are famous primarily for their online activities (Casaló et al. 2018; Erz et al. 2018). These accounts are strongly person-centered, and usually address an array of questions, e.g., how to live a religiously devout life in a secular society, how to deal with phases of religious doubt, or how to interpret religious teachings. They post personal experiences, discuss excerpts from scripture, and share their thoughts on them. Furthermore, influencers seek to interact with their followers and encourage them to engage in discussions or to repost their content. A Muslim participant described her interest in the content of a religious influencer as follows: "She is Muslim and states her opinions on practical aspects of life as a Muslim woman (. . .) she speaks about life in general, life as a migrant and life as a Muslim minority" (03-musl-f).

Another category is constituted by inspirational quotes from religious texts or important religious figures. These accounts often have motivational purposes and provide religious input on a regular basis. To the question whether he followed such accounts in order to be reminded of religious ideas, a Sikh participant replied: "I wouldn't say it is a reminder but just to be able to read the quote as it is always translated into English it is easier for me to understand what it is about. Also to have a positive influence on the day. When I spend ten hours on the smartphone, something meaningful should pop up from time to time" (27-sikh-m). Such accounts were followed by participants from all religions, and they were indicated as a major source for religious impulses online.

Meme pages play a central role in religious as well as non-religious content on social media, a phenomenon which is referred to as "meme culture" (Warf 2018). Memes are images—mostly references to popular culture—to which a specific caption or text is added, which in combination serve as an (insider) joke (Wiggins 2019, p. 40). In general, such content can only be properly understood by a specific audience that has knowledge of the specific topic. Religious meme pages exist for all religious groups included in the sample,

yet some participants were very critical of them and considered them rather blasphemous. Interestingly, those accounts often cater to all people following a religious tradition, not addressing a specific branch, which is already indicated in a rather general account name (e.g., @hilariousmuslim or @memesforjesus) or hashtag (e.g., #jewishmemes). Regarding @epicchristianmemes, a participant stated: "That's one of those Christian meme pages. It's quite famous among Christians (laughter) (. . .) it's run by a pastor from the US, I think. (. . .) Even though he's a pastor and a strong believer, he likes to provoke Christians as well, sometimes. I think it's funny" (03-cath-f). Content from religious meme pages often is reposted, and shared with friends and family through direct messages, chats, or Instagram stories.

Finally, there is the element that we call "lifestyle religiosity". In this category, we see content at the intersection of daily routines, practices, and interests in religion, which partially mirror non-religious bubbles and interests. This includes photography, sports, and/or traveling. The religious lifestyle category thus consists of a broad spectrum of different accounts, ranging from religious music and poetry (e.g., @gatewayworship) to accounts that illustrate the variety of ways in which people enact a religious tradition around the globe. For example, the account @hasidiminusa presents photography from Hassidic Jewish daily life in New York. Furthermore, we included religious celebrities in the category of lifestyle religiosity. These are well-known individuals (e.g., athletes or musicians) that also happen to identify as religious. For example, a Muslim participant followed the soccer player Mesut Özil, who "posts something religious almost every Friday" (04-musl-m). Taking an example from Sikhism, lifestyle religiosity includes accounts that address the history of Sikhism, the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 in India, and/or that focus on Gatka, a martial art practiced by Sikh men. Depending on the religious tradition, different symbols, scripts, and elements of visual culture play a crucial role, and inform the aesthetics of many accounts (e.g., Hebrew letters, eye of Fatima, the Alevi saz).

The five characteristic elements of religious content bubbles provide a useful analytical framework for the in-depth study of the religious landscape on Instagram. In the following, we build on these empirical insights to ask whether those bubbles exhibit signs of superdiversity and allow for exchange across religious traditions, or rather fortify religious divisions.

5. Discussion

From our data, we found evidence for both superdiversity and fortified boundaries of content bubbles. We found non-religious content bubbles to be superdiverse in the sense that people come together regardless of personal backgrounds (race, nationality, religion, etc.). Here, the shared interest in a topic is the connecting element. For religious content bubbles, we see that they are strictly tied to one specific religious tradition. Consequently, we did not find religious content bubbles comprised of content from different faiths; only separate Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, etc. bubbles. However, we observed that the boundaries within a religious tradition become blurred. This means that a Sunni Muslim is unlikely to follow the account of a Christian influencer or a rabbi, yet they may consume religious content regardless of, for example, the Shia–Sunni distinction.

We observed intrareligious blurring among users from all religious traditions. Among Catholic Instagram users, for example, some followed charismatic non-Catholic congregations (e.g., @hillsong) as well as influencers with an Evangelical background (e.g., @godisgrey). A person belonging to a Serbian Orthodox community in Vienna also followed Greek Orthodox and Romanian Orthodox pages. A young Alevi woman, for example, also followed accounts with more general Muslim content (e.g., Sunni). Jewish participants followed orthodox and liberal influencers, and celebrities alike. This blurring of boundaries within religious traditions seems in line with the general idea of superdiversity, which emphasizes that boundary categories partly lose their social significance (Gilroy 2010). Yet, while boundaries are blurred by people consuming content that goes beyond their

own religious branch, the overall affiliation, i.e., Christianity, Islam, Judaism, remains the connecting element.

The blurring of intrareligious boundaries can be observed mostly with accounts relating to religious lifestyle, religious influencers, religious meme pages, and inspirational quotes. However, as far as accounts of religious organizations, authorities, and places of worship are concerned, we observed that many users choose to follow the communities online that they are also involved in offline. Only a few people in our study followed local religious communities that they did not engage with offline. This points to differences between on- and offline constructions of religious belonging. A Catholic user, for example, described this blurring in her religious content bubble and indicated the difference, compared to her offline affiliations: "My home church is obviously Catholic, but all the other influencers I just mentioned are from free churches[7]" (03-cath-f). This echoes findings on WhatsApp groups of Haredi Jews, which expand the "legitimate moral scope" as compared to other public Haredi media, allowing for "pan-Haredism and inter-Jewish connections" (Mishol-Shauli and Golan 2019, p. 12).

We discovered that, through the curation of content bubbles, people engage in online identity work and make themselves part of larger online communities, where they meet people who have similar interests. This is especially true for those elements that relate to online spheres, e.g., memes, religious quotes, influencers, and lifestyle. There, one can go beyond the religious communities one belongs to offline, and engage in exchanges with like-minded people from around the globe. We identified a great variety of languages and geographical references linked to personal experiences abroad, family histories, and religious affiliations. Instagram usage, as a form of online identity work, thus relates to the notion of empowerment in online spaces. On the one hand, belonging to (online) communities is, by itself, an important aspect contributing to one's self-image (Guibernau 2013; Yuval-Davis 2011). On the other hand, Instagram provides a means of virtually engaging with content and people that might not be accessible offline.

Concerning religion, this seeking for community is strongly linked to the feeling of marginalization, either as members of minority religions or as a religious minority vis-à-vis a non-religious majority. This feeling was also emphasized by our Catholic interviewees, despite the fact that Catholicism is by far the largest religious group in Austria, where close to 60% of all people living there still identify as Catholic. One interviewee stated, for example, that "the biggest confession is the non-confession of atheists" (07-cath-f), and another participant told us that she is regularly confronted with "the assumption that 'we are all atheist and can make fun of religion'" (06-cath-f). In their search for like-mindedness, Catholic interviewees often searched for international Christian groups that focus on young believers, e.g., @hiighholder. Here, the sense of belonging to a community of Christians sharing common values is dominant, while boundaries between religious branches play a minor role.

This, as well as the absence of accounts with an explicit focus on interreligious exchange, is another indication of the formation of bubbles around religious traditions. The few accounts that focus on interreligious topics do not have many followers and appear to be elite projects or initiatives (e.g., @cafeabraham, an initiative of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish university students). Influencers and religious lifestyle accounts seldom address people of other faiths, although openness and tolerance towards other religious traditions might be part of the content. The online content provided by religious authorities, as well as local religious communities, is largely directed at the same people to whom they address in their offline activities. Interestingly, even those participants that emphasized that they were open to and curious about other religious traditions did not follow religious accounts from other religions, despite the low barriers to finding such accounts on Instagram. Thus, boundaries of religious traditions were scarcely crossed, which appears to be tied to the internal logic of Instagram (i.e., algorithms and search functions), personal preferences, and linguistic barriers alike. This is supported by Boy and Uitermark (2020, p. 8), who

demonstrate that boundaries between bubbles can be overcome, but that it requires the active engagement of users (for further information, see Self 2016, p. 38).

Does this prove the characterization of online spaces as superdiverse meeting places wrong? Our findings present a mixed answer. Bubbles may qualify as superdiverse online spaces, even though the interaction within content bubbles is usually limited to a specific topic. For example, almost all our participants followed @zeitimbild, many of them subscribed to accounts relating to certain sports, and users of different faiths might be fans of the same actors or shows. Here the religious affiliation of followers, however, is not subject to the content of the account or the discussions taking place there. As different religious affiliations are seldom mentioned, it is questionable whether these bubbles do in fact facilitate exchange and mutual understanding between religious groups. Whereas superdiversity manifests in those spheres as a plurality of people with different backgrounds following the same accounts (Vertovec 2019), what seems to be lacking is meaningful exchange, which could inform a convivial sense of belonging surpassing religious boundaries (Gilroy 2010; Yuval-Davis 2011). This finding is in line with empirical studies demonstrating that Instagram usage is primarily of a passive nature, meaning that users tend to consume content by others, but often refrain from actively engaging in exchange (Rummler et al. 2020).

Our data suggest an imagined homogeneity within content bubbles, which builds on being oblivious to personal characteristics and preferences unrelated to the specific topic of the bubble. This imagined homogeneity appears central to online identity work, and provides users with opportunities to create a digital space tailored to their unique sense of belonging. The fact that some social boundaries appear more robust than others (e.g., the idea of religious traditions) challenges the conceptualization of social media as inherently superdiverse. We argue, however, that we must not perceive these different imaginaries as contradictions, but as complementing each another. While religious belonging continues to align with religious traditions, believers' unique bubbles emerge from an already diversified religious online space, where they can interact with people from all over the world. This conceptualization of online interactions goes beyond the notion of unbound superdiversity and of limiting filter bubbles, and thereby allows us to comprehend the various constructions of belonging on social media platforms.

6. Conclusions

Our study provides insight into the transformation of religious landscapes through the perspectives and practices of young believers online. It is yet to be determined whether the intrareligious boundary-blurring that ourselves and others (e.g., Mishol-Shauli and Golan 2019) have observed online will, in the long run, be accompanied by changing religious practices offline. As some interviewees did report attending the religious services of other branches (e.g., Catholics attending free churches), we may already be seeing an open-minded attitude towards intrareligious exchange. Further research is required to assess the extent to which this is happening across religious traditions.

Regarding the conceptualization of Instagram as a superdiverse space, we observed differences between religious and non-religious content bubbles. Whereas the latter exhibits superdiversity in the sense that people with multiple backgrounds (covering a broad spectrum of religious traditions, languages, and geographies) all consume the same content, we found little evidence for interreligious encounters online. Direct exchange among users remains the exception, and discussions rarely move beyond the specific topic of the content bubble. The predominance of passive usage, together with the lack of interreligious content and accounts, cast doubt on the idea that online spaces, such as Instagram, facilitate religiously diverse encounters. Consequently, we consider it necessary to adjust the notion of superdiversity (Vertovec 2007, 2019) in order to obtain a conceptual hold on what is going on in online spaces, and to understand the effects of the contemporaneous online presence and the interactions of diverse individuals on their notions of belonging (Reviglio 2017).

We found that Instagram may provide a source of individual empowerment (Caldeira et al. 2020), and also in terms of religious belonging. Most of our interviewees created religious bubbles with content that affirms their religious identity and personal interests in an increasingly secular world. This tends to widen the scope of their religious belonging through the inclusion of accounts associated with religious branches other than their own. We discussed this as imagined homogeneity to highlight how people carefully curate content to create online spaces in which they want to be part of and can relate to. The notion of imagined homogeneity connects the concepts of superdiversity and limiting filter bubbles, and seems to be most suitable for characterizing belonging in online spaces. This line of thinking needs to be subjected to further inquiry, as it holds the potential to better understand the current state of religious diversity and ongoing transformation processes.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to concerns for the privacy of research participants.

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Notes

1 Although we are aware of the scholarly debates on individualization and privatization processes concerning religion in contemporary society, local religious communities do remain important to believers (e.g., Zachhuber 2021).

2 We identify religious traditions, such as Judaism, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam etc. by building on the history of religion (Figl 2003) while being aware that these classifications remain difficile and incomplete (McCutcheon 2018). Within all of these religious traditions, we find intrareligious diversification. Depending on religious contexts and disciplinary backgrounds, scholars speak of sub-groups, denominations, branches, confessions, or schools (Martin 1962; Schilling 1995; Okon 2009). We use the term *branches* and refer to intrareligious boundaries to avoid the usage of a term emic to one particular religious tradition.

3 Different authors discuss problems of classification and terminology in relation to religious diversification, employing various concepts, e.g., "believing without belonging" and "vicarious religion" (Davie 2007), "belonging without believing" (Mountford 2011), "multiple religious identities" (Voss Roberts 2010), "lived religion" (Ammerman 2016), and alternative forms of religion (for an overview see Hödl 2003).

4 In Austria, the religious landscape is dominated by the Roman-Catholic Church and other, much smaller Christian churches, among them Protestant and Orthodox Churches. In Islam the Sunni branch is dominant in Austria. Alevism is affiliated with Islam but is not always seen as part of this religious tradition (Heine et al. 2012; Hammer 2018). Even though Sikhism and Judaism form small minorities in Austria, they also exhibit multiple branches.

5 Similar methods have been used in other research projects, e.g., "device tours" in Nina Mollerup's (2020) analysis of digital practices of irregularized migrants and asylum seekers in Sweden. Before that, Robards and Lincoln (2017) had developed the scroll-back method for Facebook, which serves to capture stories that were recorded on social media. To our knowledge, however, no approach resembling ours has been developed for the study of Instagram in particular.

[6] All quotes were translated by the authors.

[7] In the European context, Evangelical churches are referred to as free churches, pointing to the fact that historically, Evangelical (and Protestant) churches were considered as free, in terms of their independence from the state.

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