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"Online You Will Never Get the Same Experience, Never": Minority Perspectives on (Digital) Religious Practice and Embodiment during the COVID-19 Outbreak

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Abstract: Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, religious services worldwide were forced to migrate online. This phenomenon is still yet to be properly investigated, especially in the context of religious and ethnic minorities: a research gap that this paper aims to address. Herein, 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of the Russian community in South Tyrol served as methodological tool to explore: (1) the role of the Orthodox religion and (2) of digital media for the community and, finally, (3) how its members enacted religion during the COVID-19 pandemic. Empirical results show how community members, despite being highly familiar with digital tools and technology-based solutions, deliberately chose not to use digital media to search for religious content or to attend religious services. Against the backdrop of a global pandemic and an increasingly digitised world, the specific example of the Russian community in South Tyrol helps to better understand how migrant communities live and enact religion. The present study aims at contributing to the emerging field of the study of (digital) religion and embodiment of religion from a minority perspective.

Keywords: Russian community; religious minority; religious practice; Orthodox faith; digital media; South Tyrol; Italy; COVID-19; religious embodiment; materiality of religion

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1. Introduction

Since the early months of 2020, the spread and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the worldwide implementation of lockdowns and social distancing measures. In this context, many, struggling with the immediate fear of illness and death as well as the socioeconomic and political consequences of the pandemic, turned towards their faith to look for strength and comfort (Isetti et al. 2021). Preliminary studies show indeed that religiosity has risen globally due to the pandemic (see e.g., Bentzen 2021; Boguszewski et al. 2020; Molteni et al. 2020). However, since gatherings at places of worship were cited as hotbeds of transmission, religious celebrations and services had to be either celebrated only in private and within the family, or transposed online. In this process, the social dimension of the religious life of the faithful, such as the possibility to engage, support and care for one another, is endangered. In order to address this problem, already in the first months of the pandemic Heidi Campbell promptly called for church leaders to find alternatives to physical gatherings and spaces by engaging technological options (Campbell 2020a).

The concepts of "religion online" and "online religion" first (Helland 2000) and "digital religion" later (see e.g., Campbell 2012, 2016; Campbell and Evolvi 2020) have been fertile areas of research in the last couple of decades. Scholarship in the field of digital religion examines a variety of themes, from questions of identity and authority to community, authenticity, and ritual, considering how each area is influenced by online context (Campbell and Rule 2020).

The "forced" online migration of religious services that most religious communities worldwide experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in further academic interest in this subject (see e.g., Campbell 2020b, 2021). However, the phenomenon is still yet

to be properly investigated (Kühle and Larsen 2021), even more so within the context of religious minorities. Religion plays, in fact, a critical role in providing meaning and belonging to migrant populations—thanks to shared beliefs, values, and practices—and constitutes a source of identification in the migration experience (Otieno and Nkenyereye 2021). In fact, by joining a congregation, "the adherent actively chooses to become a congregant, thereby linking his/her individual identity to the collective identity of others" (Conner 2019). Moreover, religion constitutes a critical component for integration, as it can both facilitate and hinder a migrant's transition into a new place (Conner 2019; Hirschman 2004).

As being together as a religious community builds identity and strengthens social ties, the impossibility to attend places of worship and religious practices represents a far bigger challenge for religious minorities than for majorities (Kostecki and Piwko 2021). Moreover it cannot be forgotten that migrant communities suffer even more from the negative health, economic and social consequences of the pandemic (Otieno and Nkenyereye 2021), and being able to find solace in religion during the pandemic is therefore even more important.

Against the backdrop of a global pandemic and an increasingly digitised world, questions arise on the significance of materiality and bodily participation in religious practice. Only recently, anthropology and religious studies have moved from understanding the body as an *object* to a *subject*, thus taking more seriously into consideration the embodied nature of religious processes (Mitchell 2018). In fact, a body does indeed consist of tangible elements such as flesh and bones, but also of brain/mind sensations, and the interface with the worlds around and within the body. "Bodies are the medium of social experience, the gateway to the social bodies to which individuals belong, with which they identify, through which they feel and perceive themselves, others, and the divine" (Meyer et al. 2010).

Indeed, sensory experiences are a core part of religious practice as "religions operate on and consist of, make and are made by bodies" (Morgan 2010). Therefore, the significance of the bodily presence in religious practices cannot be underestimated if it comes to understanding the impact of digitalisation on religion (Gasser 2020). *Bodies*, together with *things*, i.e., the objects of the body's apprehension, *places*, i.e., the fit between bodies and things, and *practices*, i.e., ways of activating bodies, things, and place, are material elements that religion is unable to do without (Meyer et al. 2010). In digital religion studies one of the main concerns that is raised is "whether 'disembodied' or mediated interactions online can ever truly allow for an authentic religious expression and experience online" (Campbell and Connelly 2020), even if the distinction between online and offline bodies, and between "virtuality" and "reality" is becoming blurred (Radde-Antweiler 2022). Because of this, also within the studies of digital religion, the concepts of materiality and embodiment have recently come to the fore (Campbell and Evolvi 2020).

The importance that some communities attach to the bodily and material dimensions may explain their hesitation to switch to digital religious practices. Preliminary studies show in fact that the forced digitization of religion which took place during the lockdown was in some cases only temporary, as a quick return to an analogue, prepandemic religious practice with the relaxation of social distancing measures seems to imply (Kühle and Larsen 2021). Huygens (2021) in fact, with her study on the (digital) religious practice of female Roman Catholics in Belgium during the COVID-19 pandemic, stresses the importance of bodily practices of believers, and how these were too poorly substituted in times of physical and social distancing.

A growing body of literature is devoted also to investigate how religious institutions have been engaging with and responding to digital media and digital cultures, especially in contexts as centralized and structured as the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. A thorny problem is that of the impossibility of transposing some of the fundamental rituals, such as the Eucharist, online. In the Eucharistic offering, bread and wine are changed into the *body* and *blood* of Christ (transubstantiation/Metousiosis). It is important to stress that the consacrated bread and wine *are* the body and blood of Christ, not merely "symbols" of the body and blood of Christ, in contrast therefore with the Anglican eucharist, where in fact there is higher acceptance of "cyber-Eucharist" (Turnbull 2021). As the faithful's

reception of the eucharist is considered the "more perfect form of participation in the Mass" (Second Vatican Council 1963), while livestreaming the eucharistic liturgy has the potential of feeding people's spiritualities, it falls short of meeting the need for eucharistic reception (Foley 2021).

In addition to that—and maybe as a consequence of that—Christian Churches show a generally low level of digitisation on the part of church institutions and priests (see e.g., in the Roman Catholic context Isetti et al. 2021; Radde-Antweiler and Grünenthal 2020). In the Russian Orthodox context, analyses of the online interaction between priests and the faithful point out that church leaders are skeptical and even resentful about digital media, but try to adapt to the unstoppable trend of digitisation that pervades our societies (Bogdanova 2021; Grishaeva and Shumkova 2021; Volkova 2021; Suslov 2016). In particular, even if religious institutions mostly perceive digital technologies as a tool for effective preaching, the core of religious practices still remains based on nonmediated interpersonal communication (Khroul 2021). Even if several studies address the use of digital media and technologies in the Orthodox context, to the author's knowledge, there is a research gap regarding Orthodox minorities and their use of digital media and technologies to enact religion, in particular in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, to which the present paper aims to contribute to by analysing the case study of the Russian community in South Tyrol (Italy). More specifically, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. What is the role of religion for the Russian community in South Tyrol?
2. What is the role of digital media for the Russian community in South Tyrol?
3. How do the community members enact religion during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The present article aims at contributing to the emerging field of the study of (digital) religion, materiality and embodiment of religion from a minority perspective by underlining the importance of bodily practices and rituals for the religious life of migrant communities, especially in the Christian context. In particular, I argue that migrant communities' resistance to the adoption of digital media for religious purposes can be explained by the fact that physically gathering as a religious community does not only enhance personal encounters with and experiences of God, but also contributes substantially to build a shared identity and a sense of belonging and thus can fill the void caused by the loss of family and social contacts, due first to migration mobilities and then to COVID-19 containment measures.

2. Case Study: The Russian Community in South Tyrol

There are more than 2 million Orthodox in Italy, corresponding to ca. 4% of the total population (*Rapporto Immigrazione [Immigration Report]* 2020, p. 239), which makes it the country's second-largest Christian denomination (Lauritzen 2011). Within the Italian context, South Tyrol was selected as a location for the case study (Yin 2018), because of the particular history of the local Russian Orthodox community.

South Tyrol is an Alpine region in Northern Italy, counting approx. 535,000 inhabitants (ASTAT [Provincial Institute of Statistics] 2020). The region benefits from a unique legislative and administrative autonomous status, which was instituted primarily to protect the German and the Ladin linguistic minorities, which constitute 69.4% and 4.5% of the population respectively (ASTAT [Provincial Institute of Statistics] 2020). With an average annual GDP per capita PPS in 2020 equal to EUR 41,600, and an unemployment rate of about 3.8% (ISTAT [Italian National Institute of Statistics] 2020), South Tyrol boasts one of the most prosperous regional economies in Europe. The copresence of the above-mentioned conditions contributes to make South Tyrol one of the regions with the highest quality of life in Italy and a potentially attractive destination for migration flows. Foreigners in fact make up for 10.3% of the total population (ASTAT (Provincial Institute of Statistics) 2020), which is higher than the Italian 8.7% and EU 7.8% averages (Statista 2022). The main foreign communities in South Tyrol are constituted by Albanians (5739) and Germans (4487), making the local Russian community a relatively small one in comparison, as residents with Russian citizenship only amount to 259.

In a general context of a relatively young regional immigration history (a positive migration balance was reached in the 1990s), the Russian community stands out for its long tradition and history, which dates back to the 19th century, when wealthy classes discovering the benefits of the local climate and thermal waters sojourned, and moved permanently to the region (Marabini Zoeggeler and Talalay 1997). In order to safeguard cultural and religious continuity, the community soon established a Russian foundation as well as physical landmarks such as a dedicated library and one of the oldest Orthodox churches in Italy, the Church of Saint Nicholas in Merano (Marabini Zoeggeler et al. 2017; Marabini Zoeggeler and Talalay 1997, 2015). Historical events in the 20th century, such as the Russian Revolution, First World War and the authoritarian regime of Stalin, hindered attempts to visit and settle in South Tyrol. Yet, after the collapse of the USSR, a new wave of Russian migrants has moved again to South Tyrol, where they revitalised the local community, whose beating heart lies in the pride of their long tradition, in their historical landmarks and in their contribution to the cultural and social life of South Tyrol.

The unique characteristics of the Russian community in South Tyrol have already been highlighted in previous research (Gruber et al. 2022), which emphasised the importance of acculturation processes of the Russian integration in the multilingual destination society. Gruber et al. (2022) also concluded that the local Russian community's transnational ties are not an obstacle to social integration, but rather play an important role in finding a sense of belonging with the homeland and with other Russian migrants in South Tyrol.

3. Materials and Methods

The data analysed in this article derive from a research project spanning from 2019 to 2020 that aimed at investigating whether Russian migrants' transnational orientations are in conflict with their social integration in societies of settlement, or whether they are complementary (Gruber et al. 2022). While religious practice was not the main focus of the research project, during the interviews the role of religion as a critical component of integration (Hirschman 2004) and of spiritual wellbeing of the individuals emerged. Therefore, after the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 infection, a follow-up project in 2021–2022 was designed to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religious practice of the Russian community in South Tyrol.

Semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 ethnic Russians living in South Tyrol. The sample size is reflective of the relatively small case study group of the local Russian community.

3.1. Data Collection

Because of the relatively small size of Russian migrant population within South Tyrol and the resulting difficulty of reaching participants, interviews were arranged using an exponential discriminative snowball sampling technique. The interviews were conducted in two tranches: the first one (T1, 10 interviews) took place between March 2019 and January 2020, while the second one (T2, 8 interviews) between November 2021 and February 2022, 2 years into the pandemic. All T1 participants were contacted and invited to participate in a follow-up interview: 6 agreed to participate again, 4 either refused to participate or were unresponsive, while 2 additional respondents were recruited. In total (T1 + T2), 18 interviews were conducted with 12 participants. The discussions took place face-to-face in the first tranche, and via Zoom, Microsoft Teams or telephone, because of COVID-19 restrictions, in the second tranche. One participant (T2) requested to answer the questions in written form. In this case, interview questions were sent to the participant via e-mail with the questions embedded in an attached document; data collection was completed after one follow-up exchange (Meho 2006). The duration of the interviews varied between 22 and 80 min and were conducted mostly in two of the local official languages—Italian (10) and German (5) (see Section 2)—or in English (2) or Russian (1).

3.2. Interview Scheme

All participants were asked the same main questions whilst the flexibility to explore participants' responses in further detail and change the sequence and phrasing of questions where necessary was retained. Members of the local Russian community were asked about experiences regarding the: (a) motivations to leave the country of origin and to settle in South Tyrol; (b) elements that hold the community together; (c) role played by religion within the community; (d) community's external relations (with the country of origin, other migrant communities, host community); and (e) challenges and opportunities of the Russian community in South Tyrol in the medium- to long-term. The follow-up interviews, on the other hand, focused on: (f) the impact of COVID-19 on the Russian community; (g) the impact of COVID-19 on the religious practice; and (h) visions for a postpandemic future (T2 interview guideline is included in Appendix A). Demographic information, such as age, gender, nationality, year of immigration, educational level, current employment, place of residence, religious affiliation, marital status and number of children were also collected. In T2, the participation of a key informant was achieved; because of the peculiar role of this individual within the community, a specific interview guideline was developed.

3.3. Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded, verbatim transcribed and coded by themes.

The qualitative data was analysed with the software QSR Nvivo® (version 12), implementing a thematic analysis following an inductive, data-driven approach, which, in comparison to a deductive approach, tends to provide a broader, more expansive analysis of the entire body of data (Braun and Clarke 2006). In contrast to content analysis, which uses a descriptive approach in coding the data and interpreting quantitative counts of the codes, thematic analysis provides a more qualitative and nuanced account of data (Vaismoradi et al. 2013). The raw data was organized by demographic characteristics of the people interviewed and central themes were identified based on two distinctive interview transcripts and two researchers of the research team developed a coding frame in Nvivo. Peer checking of intercoder reliability was not performed, as the pure qualitative nature of thematic analysis, makes the value of such testing questionable (Vaismoradi et al. 2013). The themes development was data-driven (inductive) and therefore frame adjustments during the coding process were allowed. One part of the coding refers mainly to a descriptive level of content and can thus be seen as an expression of the manifest content of the text (semantic) (Kiger and Varpio 2020). This part of coding is based on the interview questions and areas of interest, such as type of digital tools, cultural and religious life or the different Orthodox communities. Themes were developed also based on the interpretation of statements, which reflect deeper, more underlying meanings, assumptions or ideologies (Braun and Clarke 2021; Kiger and Varpio 2020), such as for example the sense of belonging to a certain group or not, meaning of the community and feelings of each interviewee. The full list of the (semantic and latent) themes and codes developed within the study are included in Appendix B. Thematic analysis followed the steps outlined by Braun and Clark and included familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining and naming themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). A descriptive and interpretative approach was adopted to obtain a better understanding of the role of religion and digital media for the Russian community, and how its members practiced (digital) religion in times of COVID-19.

3.4. Ethics, Consent and Anonymity

The interview partners gave written informed consent prior to the interview. The consent forms could be filled in in Italian, in German or in English. Participants were able to withdraw from the study without giving any explanation. All names and elements that could lead to the identity of interviewees have been removed to protect participant anonymity.

4. Results

The interviewees were mainly female (9 out of 12), which reflects the general disproportion between female and male characterising the migration from Russia to Italy and South Tyrol (only 54 of the 259 residents with Russian citizenship in South Tyrol are males) (Gruber et al. 2022). The year of migration among participants spanned from 1996 to 2019. In T1, seven participants had a job at the time of the interview, three of them were unemployed, while in T2 all eight respondents were employed. In total, 9 out of 12 held a university degree, which is in line with the fact that most Russian migrants have an education level that exceeds the average level of education both in Russia and in the receiving countries (Pronchev et al. 2019). All respondents identified themselves as Orthodox Christians, except for one, who identified as an atheist.

In the following sections I will explore the role of religion (Section 4.1) and of digital media for the local Russian community (Section 4.2). Finally, religious practice during the COVID-19 pandemic and attitudes towards the use of digital media for this purpose will be investigated (Section 4.3).

4.1. The Role of Religion for the Russian Community in South Tyrol

Religion is, according to Hirschman (2004), a critical component of integration, because religious participation and rituals can fill the void caused by the loss of familiar and social networks due to migration. This was also confirmed by participants:

> "For many people who, for various reasons, found themselves far from their homeland, in a different linguistic and cultural environment, the [church] plays a very important role. They don't feel alone here. And thanks to this, it is easier for them to adapt to a foreign country [...]. There are no identical people. Someone can easily adapt to a new linguistic and cultural environment, change their habits, even change their faith. But for most people, especially in middle and older age, it is very important to preserve their national, cultural and religious identity. And for them, the [church] becomes not only a place where they meet God, but also a place through which they can preserve their identity". (Interviewee 11, T2)

Recognising a common religious tradition may create a first connection among people. The religious community, for example, serves as a first entry point for some of the newly arrived Russians: "I came to the Russian community through the church. [...] I was so happy that there is a Russian Orthodox Church directly in Merano. So I thought, okay, the soul is saved. This is my reference point for the Russian world, the axis around which everything revolves" (Interviewee 7, T1).

The celebration of religious practices and/or festivities also provide some link with the motherland: "They come here also just to meet and to also hear the language. The point is: when you enter (in the church), you feel you are not far away, even if you do not know how to pray. You do not pray yet you feel this connection with your relatives a thousand miles away from Italy" (Interviewee 8, T1).

The church was named as one of the main meeting points for the community, and attracts not only ethnic Russians, but congregants from different Orthodox countries (mostly from Ukraine, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova) and allows for frequent interaction, confirming what has been argued in literature (e.g., Conner 2019) that religion is a bridge that may be encouraging social integration and reciprocal support: "Yes, the religious community is, I wouldn't call it poetic, but it's maybe like a family, there's real trust in the people who then attend the service, because for example they help me out a lot with the children" (Interviewee 7, T1).

Even the interviewees that are less religious recognise the important role of the church for the community:

> "I think (the role the church Saint Nicholas in Merano) is a beautiful one; it plays an important role to keep the community together, even if I do not consider myself a true believer. Therefore, for me personally, it does not play an important

> role, but I know that every Sunday there is a mass, that there are people. [...] In Trento [a city in the neighbouring region of Trentino] there is no Orthodox church; in fact it is a rarity, for those in need it is beautiful that there is this opportunity". (Interviewee 4, T1)

Another interviewee stated: "I am a bit elastic when it comes to religion. I go to church, but sometimes less (frequently). That's one thing. But you also go to church to see people. We are Russians, we want to see each other, we want to find each other. [...] For me, the social factor was the most important" (Interviewee 5, T2).

For others, it is the spiritual factor that drives them to church: "It is just for myself, it's not a social event. When you go to church, you don't really communicate with the others. I didn't want to meet people. I just wanted to go to church. It is to connect with God, not with people" (Interviewee 10, T2). For still others, spiritual and cultural factors were complementary:

> "I can't say that I go every Sunday to mass, no, I don't even go every month, but me and my friends we go for Christmas or Easter. Not, let's say, to tick a check list, no, we go because our soul wants us, really wants us to pray, to listen to masses in Russian, to look at Russian icons. At least once a year, this is important for my soul. [...] (Religion) is very important: maybe when you're in Russia you don't miss it, because you can go to church any day any hour, but here (i.e., in Italy) one day you realise that you miss mass, even if you're not a believer you miss mass, because it is your culture. You were born Russian, and you remain Russian, even though you've been in Italy for thirty or forty years". (Interviewee 12, T2)

Before the pandemic, the most important religious events, such as Easter and Christmas, were well attended: "Now there are at least 30 people almost always present (i.e., at masses), but when there is a festivity, such as Easter and Christmas, there are hundreds of people. At Easter there are always more than 300 people; they don't fit inside the church" (Interviewee 8, T1). However, ethnic Russians seem to attend regular masses less frequently than Orthodox of other nationalities: "I think that the religiosity of the former citizens of the Soviet Union in South Tyrol is connected not with the time of their arrival, but with the regions from which they originate. As a rule, citizens of Ukraine and Moldova are the most religious" (Interviewee 11, T2).

4.2. The Role of Digital Media for the Russian Community in South Tyrol

Already before the pandemic, respondents in T1 underlined the importance of digital media in general and social media in particular to stay connected or informed, and to facilitate life away from Russia: "If it wasn't for modern communication media, I don't think I would have ever married my (Italian) husband. [...] So, the modern world helps, it blurs the boundaries" (interviewee 10, T1). Social media chats help to maintain social ties with friends and relatives abroad: "As a true Russian, I use all kinds of digital apps to keep up to date, and also messenger, Viber, Instagram, etc." (interviewee 7, T1). Digital tools are also useful to get to know other Russian speakers in the area: "I used on Instagram the hashtag "Bolzano", and I saw that XY person writes posts in Russian. And so I messaged her and suggested that we get to know each other, etc. And now we have a group on WhatsApp with about 18 people" (interviewee 10, T1). This group grew significantly in the 2 years since the start of the pandemic: "It's like a 80–90 people now in this group [...]. I am happy to know people better, to find trusted friends, Russian, but also from Ukraine and Belarus" (interviewee 10, T2).

However, some respondents have expressed feelings of concern and worry about the growing trend of communicating digitally: "They [the new generation of the Russian community] have of course other interests, a different mentality, different ideas and they are of course—nowadays with the whole gadgets, phones—they live in a completely different world and less united, clearly normal human conditions that unfortunately concerns every society [...] all over the world there is the same problem" (interviewee 6, T1).

As it could be expected, the pandemic has further intensified the use of digital media within the community: "After the pandemic, I think we are all using digital tools more. I think before the pandemic, many people used the (smart)phone, but hardly anyone used Skype or Teams to the same extent" (Interviewee 5, T2). A phenomenon some complain about:

> "I am against digitalisation. I am for normal humanity. We can also drink vodka or tea together over Skype, or we can celebrate birthdays. But my opinion is that we should meet as much as possible in person, not digitally. [. . .] That the whole world is connected and can work and communicate in this way is not a problem. But it must not be only that. When I've worked all day (i.e., online), I want to meet up with my friends in my free time. [. . .] There is no question that the trend is towards more digitalisation. But digital communication should not replace other human communication. I'm against that". (Interviewee 5, T2)

Several respondents also reported that having been forced to increase their use of technology in order to be able to work and connect with families and friends in the last couple of years exposed them to "zoom/online fatigue" (see also Huygens 2021).

Yet not only downsides of digitalisation have been mentioned: "A positive aspect of the pandemic was the possibility to use digital media to get in touch directly with universities and cultural circles from Moscow [. . .]. We all use Zoom, or Teams or other platforms that were already used in Russia, and they are maybe a little bit in the vanguard" (Interviewee 8, T2), an intensification that also in the future might strengthen relations with Russia and with other Russian communities scattered across the country.

Even if digital media help keeping the community together, the pandemic affected the relationships within the community, and several respondents reported that they lost many contacts to other members of the community during the past two years. In this regard, the topic of COVID-19 vaccinations, even if not foreseen in the interview guide, was very often brought up by respondents as a divisive element:

> "I noticed, for example in our WhatsApp group, that many Russians here are no-vax. That is a point that bothers me. I have a lot of acquaintances who are against vaccination. That is unpleasant. They only ever want to talk and argue about COVID. [. . .] My son says that he can't have the vaccination because others will laugh that he is vaccinated. [...] I think there is the risk that the divisions will remain. For example, I can't communicate with all people at the moment because some only want to talk about COVID". (Interviewee 9, T2)

4.3. The Russian Community and (Digital) Religion in Times of COVID-19

This section aims at exploring how the community members have been enacting religion during the COVID-19 pandemic, when on one hand church attendance and group prayers were hindered by lockdowns and social distancing measures and, on the other, people search for comfort in religion during these uncertain times (see e.g., Molteni et al. 2020). In particular, practices and attitudes towards the use of digital tools for religious purposes were investigated.

The first national lockdown period (from 29 March to 18 May 2020), overlapped with the Orthodox Easter (19 April 2020). The impossibility to celebrate the most important religious event in the Orthodox calendar was, for some, difficult to bear:

> "Spending Easter at home without having the opportunity to come to church and receive the blessing, without the traditional food, which we call *Kulichka*, a kind of *colomba* [an Italian pastry typically served at Easter], it was really a great, great disappointment. [. . .] When we couldn't leave our house for Passover we were explained [through the Church Facebook page] how to pray, even if it was not respecting the rules one hundred percent, with water, do the prayer, and do a kind of sacrament of your food prepared for the Passover". (Interviewee 8, T2)

Parishioners were informed on how to perform rituals through the parish Facebook profile, which has been active since December 2016[1]. Here, prayers, information about parish activities, as well as links to external contents (e.g., Patriarch Kirill's addresses to TV viewers) are uploaded. In line with the digital content managed by Catholic parish priests in South Tyrol, this kind of communication with the parishioners is mostly one-way and top-down, with a focus on sharing and providing information, rather than receiving and exchanging it (Isetti et al. 2021).

During the pandemic, with the only exception of the first lockdown period, parishioners could physically meet in smaller prayer groups with the priest and attend religious services. However, because of social distancing measures, the church capacity was limited, and the faithful had to book their spot in advance through a WhatsApp chat.

Although eventually there was the possibility of returning to attend the church, many didn't, either because they were not in possess of the green pass[2], or for fear of infection, or because some religious practices and rituals could no longer be "properly" performed. For example, some could not accept that the individual confession was substituted by a general confession, or that "we used to eat bread and drink wine together from a common bowl. Now everyone has to do it individually. So the practice is different. For me it is better this way, when there is a spoon for each person[3]. But some people think that is not right: for these people it is a problem" (Interviewee 9, T2).

There were also some respondents who stated that they have not felt the need to come back, if not sporadically and for the most important festivities:

> "I just went into church to say thank you God, like this. And once I was in Merano, it was Russian Christmas. There were a lot of people, although it was the pandemic, because it was an important religious event. And you know, I think I would have a good life even if I didn't go to church anymore. Because when I was going to church once a month I felt bad. So probably in the last two years (i.e., when I could not attend the church) I had a good life. I don't have a problem not to go to church". (Interviewee 10, T2)

On the other hand, for some who came back, the religious experience has acquired a deeper meaning:

> "Now you come back (to church) mentally, even spiritually, more concentrated. I have come back not to chat [...], but just to pray, and I know what I am praying for. [...] People lost their loved ones and neighbours, in Russia, or in other countries where they come from, and here too. [...] We needed to remember, to pray for the dead, and you felt just this subtle passage between earthly, and heavenly, really. This is my personal experience". (Interviewee 8, T2)

As pointed out in Section 4.2, digital media are widely used by community members, and were mentioned also in the context of religious life and practice. Already before the pandemic it was possible to contact the priest through social media chats: "I was losing strength, I couldn't pray myself, I couldn't do anything, I was so depressed and then I wrote to the priest to pray for me, for my family, then I wrote to another Granma [affectionate nickname for an older woman in the community] and then the women got together to pray for (my family)" (Interviewee 7, T1). Also during the pandemic "we have a common parish chat, (the priest has) the contacts of all parishioners, everyone knows his phone number. During the pandemic, individual communication, not group communication, with parishioners took place. I know that some Orthodox priests, for example in Lithuania, performed some types of worship online, so that the parishioners could attend the service virtually" (Interviewee 11, T2).

Even if a series of online meetings with parishioners in form of lectures are planned for the future, at the moment of drafting this paper (February 2022), not much had been done locally to translate online religious services, on the one hand because there was a strong concurrence from bigger parishes and churches in the parishioners' home countries: "In Russia there were many who did just online. And almost each one has her spiritual

father in Russia, in Ukraine, in Moldova, who knows very well and [...] each one followed her own (i.e., spiritual father in the hometown)" (Interviewee 8, T2).

Only two respondents declared to have looked for religious content online and/or to have followed religious services online. One was mostly driven by curiosity:

> "(Online) it was like being a tourist. (I did it) to hear more, to hear about the scientific, and theological aspects, yes. This was really very interesting because before I had neither time nor desire, and during this pandemic period we were closed at home, it was a period to deepen the knowledge a little bit [...], but even if some do (i.e., follow online religious services), not all of them wanted to do it. Because this is already distant from the Orthodox tradition, and there are many people that are very orthodox". (Interviewee 8, T2)

The second respondent attended conferences on biblical studies with experts, but apart from recognising the ease of access to such events through digital means, the participant was not convinced of their adequacy in this area: "I doubt the need to commit religious acts on the Internet. In order to pray, the Internet is not needed. We have many examples of saints who lived alone in the desert. [...] With the help of the Internet, it is impossible to perform the most important worship—the Eucharist. But digital technologies are great for preaching" (Interviewee 11, T2). Other respondents also stressed that, in order to feel close to God and one's spirituality, private prayer is enough, and that, therefore, there is no need to look for religious content or services online: "(For religious people) it is not so important to go or not to go to church" (Interviewee 4, T2).

Some did not look for online religious content or services, because they did not feel the need for spiritual support:

> "I don't think that religion can be practiced online, no: you need to go to church. But of course, for example my aunt in Russia is very strict with religion [...] and sometimes she listened to online speeches of a pastor and said: "Look, this is very important." But even if religion is very interesting, I prefer to go to the psychologist (if I have a problem)". (Interviewee 10, T2)

Other respondents strongly opposed the use of digital media for religious practices:

> "Noooo, no this (online religious practice), no, I don't know ... it's like talking to a wall, no, this is hogwash, [...] it's not my cup of tea, I don't like it. I like it live, everything. Touching, listening, smelling our candles, no, online no. [...] We need the soul, we need the eyes, we need feeling. How can I attend mass online? I hear words, but I don't feel the atmosphere, I don't get a feeling from the church. You should come to our church in Merano. Online you will never get the same experience, never". (Interviewee 5, T2)

Many respondents indeed pointed out that the whole experience in the church could never be replaced by digital or virtual practices: "(I attend church because of the) atmosphere of home, it is like being back at home in Russia, that's because (there are the) same icons, same atmosphere" (Interviewee 2, T2), and:

> "I go to church also because of the atmosphere. Going to church is special, it's the fact of being all together, it's not just listening to the priest lecturing. It's also about the smell, the whole experience. If I just want to listen to a speech, I can do it on Youtube. As I said, I'm not extremely religious. But some of my friends who are very religious don't attend mass online either. I don't know anyone". (Interviewee 4, T2)

5. Discussion, Conclusions and Limitations

This article aimed at investigating how religious minorities used digital media and enacted religion during the COVID-19 pandemic by analysing the case of the Russian community in South Tyrol. Despite the fact that respondents showed a high familiarity with technology in general and digital media in particular, results demonstrate that the community members had very limited experience with using digital media for religious

purposes, which can be attributed to a conscious choice. This choice is not to be traced back to the spreading trend of deliberate abstention and fasting from technology in order to re-establish contact with oneself and the spiritual realm (Isetti et al. 2020), but rather to other intertwined reasons. These include "online fatigue", lack of a need for religious services in general, the idea that private or family prayer is enough. An important role is also played by the fact that online religious services and contents are not considered "orthodox", especially the Eucharist, when bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of the Lord, a ritual that cannot be properly performed online in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian contexts. However, as Venable (2021) highlights, liturgy is not just about eucharistic participation, but it is a fully embodied experience that through each of its dimensions, such as words, art, smells and lighting, contributes in drawing a person toward God. A main result of this analysis was in fact the centrality and importance of religious materiality, i.e., *bodies*, *things*, *places* and *practices* for the religious life of the community (Meyer et al. 2010). Even when social distancing measures and lockdowns made bodily attendance at places of worship difficult or even impossible, respondents were not willing to convert, even temporarily, the physical liturgical performances and the whole religious experience into a virtual one. Smelling the scent of candles, tasting the traditional food after the service, hearing the preachings and the prayers, seeing and touching the icons: all five senses have been mentioned by respondents as meaningful and constitutive elements of their religious identity and experience (see also Gasser 2020; Huygens 2021; Venable 2021). Perceiving the presence of the whole community is also a key factor, as collective prayers and worship create space for personal encounters with God, and thus, for experiences of God (de Kock and Sonnenberg 2012). However, the act of physically gathering to practice religion is not just about enhancing the spiritual experience, but contributes substantially to community building, identity and to a sense of common belonging (Ciobanu and Fokkema 2017; Conner 2019). In the context of minorities, religious participation and rituals are in fact fundamental factors in addressing the void caused by the loss of familiar and social networks due to migration mobilities (Hirschman 2004), providing a transnational source of identification (Otieno and Nkenyereye 2021). Migrants' spiritual needs are also most provided for when packaged in a familiar linguistic and cultural context (Hirschman 2004), made by a shared cultural and religious heritage (e.g., language, candles, food, icons, prayer). In a postpandemic world, co-participation to religious practices and events has also the potential of rebuild and strengthen those social ties and bonds that were eroded during the health emergency, e.g., by disagreements over compulsory COVID-19 vaccination, or simply by losing the habit of socialising and sharing common experiences.

The importance "of scrutinising religion by highlighting the bodily practices of believers, and how these are (scarcely) substituted in times of physical and social distancing" has already been recently pointed out by Huygens (2021) with reference to the Roman Catholic community in Belgium. The present results add to the limited research on how migrant communities enact (digital) religion at the time of COVID-19, by further highlighting the importance of taking into account the concept of embodiment and materiality within the studies on religion in the context of ethnic and religious minorities.

As with most case studies, the present work has some limitations, such as the replicability of results in other contexts and their generalizability. Moreover, because of the original research question (Gruber et al. 2022), the focus was limited to the religious experiences of ethnic Russians in South Tyrol: the experiences made within other Orthodox minorities in South Tyrol (and beyond) remain unobserved and might be subject to future research, especially in light of their higher level of religiosity. Finally, members of the local Orthodox community have the rare advantage and privilege of having a dedicated church, the Church of Saint Nicholas in Merano, and a parish priest which regularly administers religious services, features rarely available to other religious migrant communities. Therefore, the possibility that migrant communities which lack access to a physical place of worship and

to a local religious authority may be more open to the use of digital media to enact religion cannot be excluded and might also be subject to future research.

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Appendix A. T2 Interview Guide

Section 1—Impact of pandemic on you and on the Russian community

1. How are you? How did the pandemic impact you personally?
    a. How did the pandemic impact your integration process? Have you encountered any particular difficulty? (e.g., job uncertainty, children at home, social isolation etc.)
    b. And how were your relationships with friends and family in Russia impacted?
2. What was the impact of the pandemic on the Russian community in South Tyrol? (e.g., has the community become even more compact VS have the ties weakened?)
    a. As far as you know, what are the difficulties that the community in general has encountered? (e.g., job uncertainty, children at home, social isolation etc.)
    b. What were the positive moments? Were there opportunities to meet/support each other?
3. In the past, cultural events played a very important role for the community, wasanything done in this area during the pandemic? If yes, in presence and/or digitally?
4. Which role have the digital means played during the pandemic?

Section 2—Impact of pandemic on religious practice

5. What did it mean to you that places of worship were closed during the lockdown?
6. Did the pandemic impact your way of living religiosity? If so, how? (e.g., higher/lower need of spirituality and spiritual support)
    a. What is your perception about other members of the Russian community? And other orthodox communities?
7. If you practiced religion, how did you practice it? (e.g., praying with the family, together with the parish priest/other parishioners, online religious services)
    a. Did you look for religious contents online? Why?
    b. Did you follow online masses/services?
        i. If yes, did you follow services in your area (e.g., the parish of Merano, Russian church in Rome), or services in Russia or other countries? Did you follow those services already before the pandemic? How would you describe this experience? Do you plan to follow them in the future?
        ii. If no, why?
    c. What are the risks and opportunities of digitally practicing religion?

8. Have you ever been to the Church of Saint Nicholas in Merano before or during the pandemic? Would you go there in the future? Why?

Section 3—Future perspectives

9. What do you foresee for your own future after the pandemic?
10. In a post-pandemic future, how do you imagine the Russian community in South Tyrol?
11. What role will the digital means play for the members of the community? (e.g., even more important or higher need of presence and social contacts)

Socio-Demographic Information
Gender:_____
Age:_____(years)
Place of residence:_____
Country of birth: _____
Year of immigration: _____
Citizenship(s): _____
Higher education qualification: _____
Current employment: _____
Religious Affiliation: _____
Nr. Of children: _____

Appendix B. List of Themes

Themes	Codes
COVID-19	COVID-19 restrictions Negative impacts Positive impacts Quarantine Vaccinations
Cultural and religious heritage	Buildings Candles Chess Food Furniture History Icons Language Literature Music-Dance Paintings Prayer Theater Toys
Cultural and religious life	Cultural AND religious events Cultural events Cultural festivities Religious events Religious festivities Religious practices
Digital tools	E-Mail Facebook Instagram Newsletter Social Media chats (Whatsapp, Messenger . . .) Websites Zoom/Teams

Themes	Codes
Feelings	Afraid Defensive Disappointment Fear Feeling at home Grateful Happiness Homesickness Hopeful Loneliness Love Nostalgia Personal pride Pride Responsible Sadness Safe Shame Tenseness Worried
Geographical scale	Austria Belarus Bolzano (Municipality) Europe Germany Global Italy Merano (Municipality) Russia South Tyrol (Province) (Ex-)Soviet Union Trentino-South-Tyrol (Region)
Meeting points	Borodina Center Church Saint James Church Saint Nicholas Neighborhood Online Russian school
National communities	African Belarus British Bulgarian Georgian German Greek Italian Moldovan Other Romanian Russian Serbian Swedish Ukrainian

Themes	Codes
Orthodox communities	Albanian Bulgarian Greek Moldovan Other Romanian Russian Serbian Ukrainian
Reasons for migration	Education Marriage-Love Personal contacts Political reasons Pregnancy-children Retirement Work opportunities
Reasons to stay	Education Family Friends Integration Landscape Marriage-Love Mentality Multilingualism People are kind Personal development Political situation in Russia Quality of life Social situation in Russia Weather Work
Relationship with Russia	Collaboration(s) Digital relations Economic relations Friends Homeland or legal connections Mass media Money transfer Political relations Relatives Religious relations Tourism – visits Work
Russian community description	Active Ambitious-driven Creative Different-diverse Divided Educated Female Good-well behaved Happy to meet Helpful Nice Open-minded

Themes	Codes
	Patriotic Proud Shameful Small Spiritual United Willingness to integrate
Russian community meaning	Culture Faith Maintaining language Meeting place Memories Traditions
Sense of belonging	They—The others We—I—myself as
Social groups	Colleagues Family Friends Migrants Neighbors Tourists
Timeline	Past Present Future COVID-19 (Lockdown; post-COVID)

Notes

[1] https://www.facebook.com/chiesaortodossa.merano (accessed on 25 February 2022).

[2] The Green Pass is an Italian passport that, since August 2021, certifies if someone has received at least one jab, has tested negative for the virus or has recently recovered from COVID-19. The Green Pass is not required to access places of worship, however it is required to access public transport, making it difficult to attend the church of Merano and the Borodina Centre for those commuting from other cities.

[3] In the Orthodox Church, one single utensil is usually used to administer the Holy Communion to the entire congregation.

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