Article

Dynamics of Digital Media Use in Religious Communities—A Theoretical Model

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Abstract: Mediatization and digitalization are trends that are increasingly affecting religious communities and their communicative practices. While many aspects of these developments have been described theoretically and empirically, little is known about the dynamic interplay between digital media use, an individual's religious meaning system, and the relationships within a religious community. Building on the theory of the mediatization of religion, the functionalist perspective of religion, media selection, and co-orientation research, we propose a dynamic model of digital media use in religious communities. Hereby, the religious functions of meaning-making and social connection are considered important drivers for how individuals engage with others. Additionally, theories on media selection help our understanding of the acceptance and domestication of new technologies, as well as selective exposure to specific content. In combination, the model links the individuals with the social context of their religious communities and vice versa. Furthermore, the theoretical model helps to combine and systematize empirical research from different disciplines that are relevant to understanding today's digital religious media use. We therefore conclude with a discussion of the benefits of the model for future theoretical developments and empirical research in the field of digital religion and beyond.

Keywords: digital media; religious community; meaning; social connection; mediatization; functional perspective; co-orientation

1. Introduction

Belonging to a religious community is a central aspect of religious life (Durkheim 1995; Lundby 2011). In its broadest sense, a **religious community** can be defined as a set of people sharing specific religious beliefs and practices (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, or Islam). Such a community does not necessarily require a formal organization (Durkheim 1995) and may range in size from small groups, whose members are in direct contact (e.g., prayer groups in a Christian church), to large numbers of people who are only indirectly linked by these shared practices and beliefs (e.g., whole congregations) (Everton 2018). Being in direct or indirect contact implies that all individuals within a religious community can influence one another and, at the same time, define the characteristics of the community. More formally, we can state that individuals and the community they are part of are mutually dependent on each other (Friemel 2021; Newcomb 1953). Given that we build on a rather inclusive definition of communities that may range from small groups to whole religions, we do not distinguish between a meso and macro level. Nevertheless, the proposed model of media use in religious communities can be considered a holistic approach, to overcome the lack of integration of different levels of analysis (Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019).

Considering religious individuals as social actors inside religious communities further helps to understand the dynamic between two important constructs, a religious meaning system and social relationships. Both are central to understanding religion and have received increasing attention in the digital age (Campbell and Sheldon 2022; Park 2005; Hoover 2006). In this article, we approach religious meaning systems and social relationships from a **functionalist perspective on religion**.[1] This means that we understand

religion through the functions it can fulfill (Batson and Stocks 2004; Knoblauch 1999; Luckmann 1991; Durkheim 1995). In other words, religion can help shape and maintain a meaning system through the function of **religious meaning-making** (Batson and Stocks 2004; Park et al. 2013; Schnell 2011). At the same time, religion forms and maintains relationships through the function of **religious social connection** (Pollack 2017; Knoblauch 1999; Homann 1997). It is important to note that the two functions are interdependent. On the one hand, relationships can make meaning and inform an individual's meaning system, thereby inducing religious meaning-making (Taves 2018; Wong and Fry 1998; Park 2005; Zarzycka et al. 2020). On the other hand, similar religious meaning systems can support social connections, shared beliefs, and attitudes, resulting in the formation of relationships (Newcomb 1953; Oh 2020; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; Saroglou 2011; Knoblauch 1999). While the literature also refers to other functions of religion (Knoblauch 1999), these two seem to be central for understanding dynamics within a religious community in the digital age (Hjarvard 2008b; Hoover and Park 2004; Hoover 2006; Campbell and Sheldon 2022).

Over the past several decades, **digitalization** has become an issue of increasing relevance for all parts of society, including the religious and spiritual spheres (Tsuria and Campbell 2022). Believers use digital media for religious or spiritual practices (e.g., prayer apps; Campbell et al. 2014), to get information about certain aspects of their religion (Brubaker and Haigh 2017), and to connect online (Hutchings 2013). The increasing relevance of digital media and its impact on religion, religious communities, and individuals can be seen as a continuation of the longer-lasting **mediatization of religion** (Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019; Hjarvard 2008a). Mediatization, in general, describes a process by which media institutions (i.e., their logic and rules) influence other societal institutions, such as politics, family, or religion (Hjarvard 2008b; Couldry and Hepp 2013). While mediatization originally referred to classic mass media (e.g., print, radio, and TV), it now also includes digital media (Finnemann 2014). Digital media can include, but are not limited to, digital visuals, digital audio, websites, and online games (Helland 2016; Grieve 2022). The mediatization of religion hence describes a process "through which religious beliefs, agency, and symbols are becoming influenced by the workings of various media" (Hjarvard 2016, p. 8) and has been discussed with respect to traditional media, such as television (TV), radio, and print (Christensen 2012; Hjarvard 2008a), as well as digital media, such as websites and social media (Fischer-Nielsen 2012). Empirical studies on mediatization have investigated the role specific (digital) media can play in the life of believers, such as internet communication (Fischer-Nielsen 2012) or the radio (Setianto 2015), how digital media can impact whole religious communities (Nwankwo 2022), how faith is communicated online (Pavić et al. 2018), and how certain online movements, such as fandoms, can have similarities to traditional religious institutions (Petersen 2010).

A result of this mediatization is that the functions of religious meaning-making and social connection may also be fulfilled through the use of media (Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019; Hjarvard 2008a; Hoover and Park 2004; Campbell and Sheldon 2022). This represents a historical change because, for centuries, the functions of religious meaning-making and social connection were exclusively attached to religious organizations, their physical presence (e.g., churches), and oral communication (Kaden and Schnettler 2020; van der Merwe 2010; Hjarvard 2008a). Today, digital media provide new means to fulfill the function of religious meaning-making and, in turn, influence an individual's religious meaning system (Hoover 2006) and allow an extension of the function of social connection beyond the local community into the digital sphere, thereby creating and shaping relationships (Hjarvard 2008a; Hutchings 2011, 2013; Campbell and Sheldon 2022).

In sum, theoretical arguments and empirical insights suggest that digital media influence religious meaning systems and social relationships by fulfilling the functions of religious meaning-making and social connection. However, little research has taken an integrative approach to this by discussing all aspects in one framework. Therefore, this paper addresses the interplay of the two religious functions and discusses them in the context of the digitalization of religious communities. To develop a dynamic model of digital

media use in religious communities, we proceed in three steps; first, we propose a triadic perspective on digital religious media use and describe the three main building blocks of the model—digital religious media, religious meaning systems, and social relationships. Second, we describe how the three building blocks are related to the three functions of religious meaning-making, religious social connection, and media selection. Third, we introduce the dynamic perspective of media use in a social context based on theoretical arguments and empirical findings from co-orientation research. Besides describing the proposed model, we use it to systematize existing research and to discuss the theoretical and empirical implications of this model for future research.

2. Triadic Perspective on Digital Media Use

In this section, we propose a triadic perspective on digital media use and define the three main building blocks of the model; digital religious media use, religious meaning systems, and social relationships in a religious community.

2.1. Digital Religious Media

In the context of mediatization, media and media content created by religious actors (organizations or individuals) depicting religious meanings are referred to as religious media (Hjarvard 2012). In recent years, religious media has also emerged in the form of digital media (Fischer-Nielsen 2012; Hjarvard 2012). Today, various religious media formats are digital (e.g., social media platforms, messenger apps, websites, and apps). These digital religious media can be sorted on a continuum ranging from media that are specifically designed for religious purposes and that only contain religious content (e.g., Bible apps) to general digital media designed for non-religious purposes that can also feature religious content and be used by members of religious communities (e.g., social media) (Fischer-Nielsen 2012). Of course, all nuances are possible on this continuum. We propose an inclusive definition of digital religious media that includes all these media and their religious content. Based on this definition, digital religious media use is assumed to serve different purposes; to gather information about faith and religion (Brubaker and Haigh 2017), to create spiritual experiences with a respective transcendent being (Nduka and McGuire 2017), or to connect to other believers within and outside the community (Lövheim 2004; Campbell and Sheldon 2022). This connection with other believers mainly takes place through social media platforms or messenger apps (Hodøl 2021).

2.2. Religious Meaning System

Humans have the drive to create a meaning system comprising different values, goals, and beliefs. This so-called global meaning system includes beliefs about the self and the world, as well as an understanding of one's purpose. It helps with orientation in everyday life and makes the world a more predictable, conceivable place (Park et al. 2013). Having a coherent meaning system and experiencing meaningfulness in life can help individuals alleviate anxiety (Soenke et al. 2013), tackle a fear of death (Vail et al. 2010), and be a coping tool for illness (Lundmark 2019). A meaning system can be formed and shaped through different sources, such as relationships, achievements, and religion (Park 2005). For many people, religion in particular provides clearly defined beliefs, norms, and values that can be adopted in one's global meaning system (Park 2005). This helps individuals find and make meaning in life situations and create and shape their global meaning system (Inzlicht et al. 2011; Wong and Fry 1998). Religion is therefore described as an important source of meaning in an individual's life (Schnell 2011). We refer to these religious beliefs, goals, and meanings that shape and/or are part of one's global meaning system as a religious meaning system.

2.3. Social Relationships in Religious Communities

Social relationships can be defined as ties between two individuals. They are created and maintained through social interactions, such as interpersonal communication (Friemel

2013), but also through social contexts (e.g., family or school classes, etc.) (Ellison and McFarland 2013). They can be considered the social fabric between individuals and the phenomenon of religious communities (Everton 2018). They form social networks of varying size, complexity, and persistence. Communities may be nested or overlapping (Ellision and George 1994; McClure 2021; Everton 2018) and are dynamic with respect to their members, as well as their relationships (Everton 2018; Ellison and McFarland 2013).

Mediatization has an inherently social aspect, as new media are integrated into social life and increasingly shape the social sphere and practices (Jansson 2013). Therefore, the process of mediatization through digital media and the resulting access to digital media by religious individuals has changed the understanding of the religious community (Campbell and Sheldon 2022). Religious individuals are no longer solely dependent on a local community but have access to a sphere that transcends geographical limitations. By using digital media, religious individuals can create large (Hutchings 2011; Campbell 2005) and international networks (Ferguson et al. 2021; Mahmudova and Evolvi 2021) that are constantly in flux. Digital media, such as messenger apps, forums, or other social media services, facilitate both direct and indirect communication among community members and other believers beyond one's community (Dankasa 2017; Brubaker and Haigh 2017; Lövheim 2004). This development has led to the formation of **mediatized religious communities**. We define such communities by four main aspects; (1) the community is accessible independent of time and location, (2) the members perform religious practices and/or share religious beliefs, (3) the members have a subjective feeling of belonging to the community, and (4) the members are in direct or indirect contact.

2.4. Interaction between Digital Media Use, Meaning Systems, and Social Relationships

In combination, the three building blocks described above result in a triadic model in which each block is related to the other two (Figure 1).
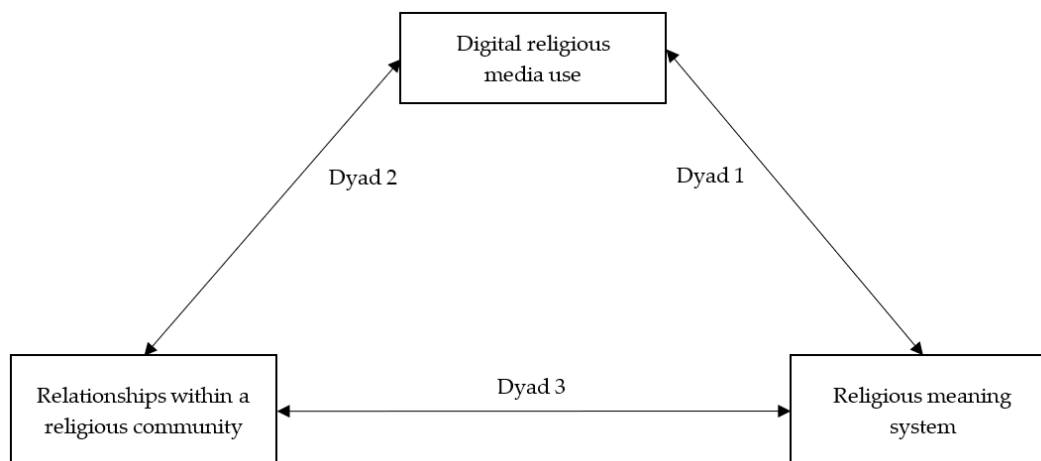

Figure 1. Triadic interdependence of digital religious media use, relationships with a religious community, and religious meaning system.

For analytic purposes, this triad can be split into three dyads. The first dyad includes digital religious media and the religious meaning system. With the communication of religious symbols, ideas, and attitudes (Hjarvard 2012; Fischer-Nielsen 2012), digital religious media can shape a religious meaning system (Taves 2018; Hoover 2006; Park 2005). However, an individual's attitudes and beliefs that make up the meaning system can impact media selection (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2019; Novak et al. 2022) and hence, define digital religious media use. Therefore, an individual's religious meaning system and digital religious media use are interconnected. The second dyad addresses the interdependence between digital religious media and social relationships. Inside mediatized religious communities, relationship dynamics can shape digital religious media use through

recommendations regarding media selection (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2019; Moberg et al. 2020), but digital religious media use can also impact relationships inside the community as it facilitates communication between members (Friemel 2021; Nwankwo 2022). Lastly, the third dyad shows the connection between social relationships and the religious meaning system. On the one hand, relationships can inform and shape an individual's religious meaning system (Taves 2018; Park 2005; Zarzycka et al. 2020); on the other hand, a religious meaning system and the underlying attitudes and beliefs can influence the relationship ties between individuals (Newcomb 1953; Oh 2020; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; Saroglou 2011).

For a more detailed discussion of the three building blocks, the resulting dyads, their dynamic interplay, and the emergent phenomena, we now turn to a functional perspective on digital religious media use.

3. Functional Perspective on Digital Religious Media Use

The functional perspective on religion defines religion by the functions and needs that religion and religious institutions can fulfill for individuals or for society (Knoblauch 1999). Herein, the two functions of religious meaning-making and religious social connection appear to be the most interesting in the context of media use (Hjarvard 2008a; Hoover and Park 2004; Campbell and Sheldon 2022). In the following section, we describe how these functions serve as a connection between digital religious media use, religious meaning systems, and relationships within a religious community. In addition to these religious functions, we draw on the function of media selection to complement the triadic perspective introduced above.

3.1. Religious Meaning-Making

"Meaning-making refers to how individuals construe, understand, and make sense of life events" (Z. Yang et al. 2021, p. 2). While meaning-making has mostly been researched and considered in times of crisis, it can also occur in everyday situations, when interpreting and making sense of things, actions, or situations (Schnell 2011; Taves 2018). Individuals adhering to a religious meaning system are able to make meaning in life situations by turning to other religious individuals, or to items and practices that refer to their religion (Schnell 2011; Taves 2018). Therefore, if a person is confronted, for instance, with an uncertain life situation, they can turn to things or people associated with their religion to make meaning in this situation (C. L. Park and Folkman 1997; Taves 2018; Schnell 2011). Thus, religious meaning-making is a function in which meaning is found in everyday situations by referring to one's religion. A religious meaning system is not only a resource for religious meaning-making but also an outcome of this process. Hence, religious meaning-making can influence and shape a religious meaning system (Park 2005).

The function of religious meaning-making helps to understand the influence of social relationships within a community on an individual's religious meaning system. Communicating with other believers in everyday life (Wong 2008; Taves 2018) and experiencing relationships with these believers are considered a main sources of meaning that can induce religious meaning-making, which, in turn, can shape an individual's meaning system (Grouden and Jose 2015; Zarzycka et al. 2020; Park 2005).

Today, the function of religious meaning-making can be related to digital religious media, as they contain referrals to an individual's religion (Brubaker and Haigh 2017; Hoover 2006). Typically, the content a person uses contains information about their own religion or beliefs (Brubaker and Haigh 2017; Nduka and McGuire 2017). This information helps religious individuals to make meaning, as it provides answers to faith-related questions or orientations in everyday life (Hoover and Park 2004; Hjarvard 2008a). Furthermore, digital religious media use can help individuals to have spiritual experiences that lead to feelings of a close relationship to a god or transcendence, or that trigger spiritual emotions, such as reverence or awe (Emmons 2006; Janicke and Ramasubramanian 2017). These experiences might act as a referral to one's own religious and spiritual beliefs (Nduka and McGuire

2017; Nwankwo 2022), thereby strengthening and reinforcing their meaning system. In conclusion, both information gathering and spiritual experiences via digital religious media may support meaning-making functions in the everyday life of a religious individual.

3.2. Religious Social Connection

As described above, relationships within mediatized religious communities are not static; they are dynamic and constantly changing (Everton 2018). The functional perspective helps to understand the antecedents of these relationship dynamics and the resulting structures. Individuals connect to other believers based on common values and beliefs (Knoblauch 1999; Kaufmann 1989; Saroglou 2011). For believers, religion provides an important and specific set of norms and values, such as neighborly love in a Christian community (Knoblauch 1999; Durkheim 1995). Therefore, religion and its underlying values and beliefs can initiate the function of social connection and, thereby, the emergence of relationships within a religious community.

The function of social connection helps to understand the influence of an individual's meaning system on social relationships within a mediatized community. As social connection can be induced through shared beliefs, values, and attitudes, it can be assumed that adhering to the same religious meaning system can also facilitate social connection (Park 2005; Saroglou 2011), thereby shaping relationship dynamics.

Similar to the function of religious meaning-making, the function of religious social connection has been increasingly fulfilled through digital media. Digital media is now seen as a new opportunity for social connection (Campbell and Sheldon 2022). Social media is especially helpful for connecting to other believers across national borders (Ferguson et al. 2021; Mahmudova and Evolvi 2021), or building entire religious online communities or congregations in the online sphere (Campbell 2005). These religious online communities or congregations can then exist solely in the online sphere on platforms such as Second Life or in forums, thus creating a digital form of community (Hutchings 2011; Campbell 2007). However, not every digital medium is suitable or offers this option to connect. In examining research regarding digital religious media, it becomes apparent that different digital media provide different opportunities to connect with other believers. On the one hand, specific digital media, such as messenger apps, forums, or social media, are utilized to connect with other believers through chat functions or posts (Lövheim 2004; Dankasa 2017; Brubaker and Haigh 2017; Vala and Huang 2019). On the other hand, some digital media seem to offer almost no opportunities to connect with others. These digital media mainly include videos; for instance, streaming services or websites that include pictures or videos of holy sites to visit, but no opportunity to actively connect (Drumheller 2005; Abelman 1987). Although religious apps often offer the opportunity to connect with others, not all provide a social feature (Campbell et al. 2014). Hence, the function of religious social connection can be facilitated through digital media; however, not all media appear to be suitable to fulfill this function.

3.3. Media Selection

The two previous sections described the influence of digital media on religious meaning-making and social connection. In this section, we switch the perspective and discuss how media use is dependent on an individual's meaning system and social relationships.

It can be assumed that an individual's religious meaning system will guide their selection of media content. This is referred to as selective exposure (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2019). The theory suggests that selective exposure is dependent on an individual's needs and motivations for media use, but also on an individual's dispositions and attitudes (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2019). As a religious meaning system is made up of specific religious beliefs, attitudes, and interpretations (Park 2005), it can be assumed that this system also acts as a source of selective exposure to digital media. We therefore suggest that religious individuals select digital media in line with their religious attitudes and beliefs

(Novak et al. 2022). Thereby, a religious meaning system can shape an individual's digital religious media use.

With respect to the relevance of social relationships for media selection, we can distinguish between the level of various digital technologies and the level of their content. In the first instance, a religious community may negotiate whether a digital technology is compatible with their religious beliefs and core values (Campbell and La Pastina 2010). The process of negotiating and shaping the use of digital technologies in mediatized religious communities has been investigated using the religious–social shaping of digital technology (RSST) approach (Campbell 2010). This approach assumes that the adoption of digital media by a religious community is highly influenced by religious attitudes and values. The digital technologies used in a mediatized religious community therefore need to be negotiated and shaped in an ongoing process according to these attitudes and values. This process mainly takes place in technology-critical religious communities (Campbell and La Pastina 2010; Rota and Krüger 2019). Digital media undergo a process of spiritualization and domestication that "promotes their interpretation according to a religious framework, which defuses the perceived threat posed by 'secular' technologies and harmonizes their use with religious beliefs and goals" (Rota and Krüger 2019, p. 8). The appropriate use of digital media, such as the internet, according to a mediatized religious community's beliefs and attitudes is always negotiated in the context of the respective community. For example, an Islamic community in Indonesia may come to a different conclusion regarding the use of the internet (Humeira and Sarwono 2019) than an Islamic community in Iran, or a Christian community in Argentina. Ultimately, this process shapes and impacts a member's use of digital religious media within a mediatized religious community (Rota and Krüger 2019). After negotiating suitable technologies, the religious community has an influence on the content a member will use. Community members may share media content to inform others about content they regard as valuable (Brubaker and Haigh 2017), thereby enabling them to preselect content from the range of available content. On social media platforms in particular, religious individuals are faced with content that contradicts their beliefs, which can challenge a religious user's faith (Ferguson et al. 2021). Consuming digital religious content in the online sphere can thus lead religious individuals to doubt their beliefs or trigger uncertainty in their faith. The mediatized religious community plays an important role in the process of grappling with these feelings of uncertainty and selecting suitable digital religious media content. By discussing digital religious media content with other members of their mediatized religious community, religious individuals are able to both make sense of digital religious media content that evokes uncertainty and select the digital religious media content that best fits their beliefs and meaning systems (Moberg et al. 2020). This selection, through communication with other community members, can take place both offline and online. Hence, relationships inside a religious community can impact digital media use, as they shape media and content selection.

4. Dynamic Perspective of Media Use in a Social Context

The theoretical arguments and empirical findings presented in the previous sections suggest that the interdependence of the three building blocks and the resulting functions follow specific patterns. Newcomb's (1953) co-orientation model provides a conceptual framework to better understand the antecedents and consequences of the respective dynamics. Hereby, media use is considered to be a social action (Renckstorf 1996) that is motivated in part by the desire for balanced situations (Heider 1946) regarding the relationship to other persons and the attitude toward an object. For example, a balanced situation would be achieved if two befriended persons agreed on their evaluation of some media content (Cartwright and Harary 1956). This preferred state of balance may be achieved by two distinct processes, referred to as social selection and social influence. Social selection refers to the process in which social connections are formed, maintained, or dissolved due to given preferences. For example, two persons could become friends because they have the same opinion towards media content. Longitudinal social network analysis has identified

such social selection processes in regard to music (Lewis et al. 2012), TV series (Friemel 2012; Lewis et al. 2012), and computer games (Eklund and Roman 2017). Thus, two members of a mediatized religious community who prefer the same digital religious content (e.g., a YouTube channel) or a digital religious medium (e.g., a prayer app) would be more likely to form a friendship tie compared to two other persons.

Social influence is distinct from this social selection process because the social connection is a given, but the evaluation of media content is subject to change. Social influence is given if a person adapts their opinion of media content based on the relationship to another person and the attitude of this person towards the respective media content. There is empirical evidence for this dynamic (Friemel 2021). Therefore, it can be assumed that the social relationships in religious communities have an influence on the diffusion of new digital religious media as well as on the evaluation of known media or specific content.

In combination, the co-orientation process suggests that friendship dynamics in a religious community are influenced by similarities in attitudes toward digital religious media (social selection) while, at the same time, these attitudes are influenced through social relationships (social influence). It is important to note that these processes may take place simultaneously, and it is crucial to take both into account at the same time to prevent overestimating one of the two processes (Aral et al. 2009; Friemel 2015; Kandel 1978). Despite the central importance of these processes and their interdependence, they are scarcely distinguished in the literature on religious networks (Everton 2018).

5. Dynamics of Digital Media Use in Religious Communities

Based on the triadic perspective of digital media use, the functional perspective on religion, and the co-orientation model, we propose a dynamic model of digital media use in religious communities. Visualizing the three building blocks as the corners of a triangle helps to illustrate the parallels and differences of the three resulting dyads (Figure 2). From a dynamic perspective, each dyad includes two distinct functions. With respect to the first dyad on the right side (digital religious media use <–> religious meaning system), this includes the function of media use on the meaning system (i.e., religious meaning-making) as well as the influence of the meaning system on the selection of media (i.e., selective exposure). It is important to note that all these functions occur simultaneously and, therefore, can have complex mutual influences on each other. This is especially true within a dyad. Therefore, the subsequent sections are organized along the three dyads.
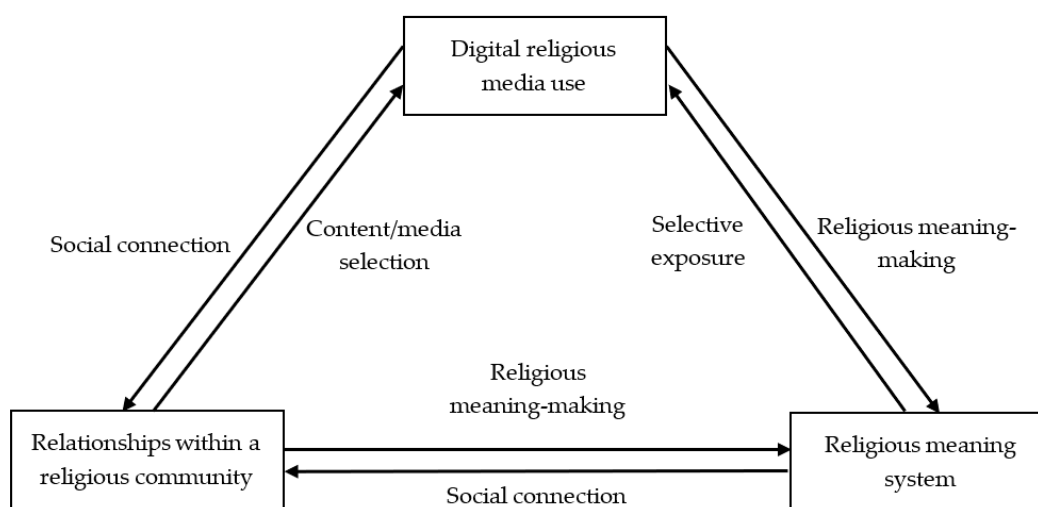

Figure 2. Dynamic model of digital media use in religious communities.

5.1. Digital Media Use and Religious Meaning System

The dyad on the right side of the triangle connects the concepts of digital religious media use and an individual's religious meaning system through the functions of religious

meaning-making and selective exposure. Previous research has shown that digital media containing religious information can shape religious beliefs and can be used to find meaning in everyday life (Hoover and Park 2004). Hence, we propose that digital media can fulfill the function of religious meaning-making and thereby reaffirm or shape an individual's meaning system.

At the same time, we propose that an individual's religious meaning system acts as a driver of selective exposure and can thereby influence digital media use. Selective exposure theory states that individuals specifically select digital media and digital media content on the basis of different dispositions, beliefs, and attitudes (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2019). As a religious meaning system is a central part of a religious individual and defines their beliefs and attitudes (Park 2005), we assume it can influence media selection and shape digital religious media use. Herein, previous research could show that religious individuals appear to seek content fitting their religious orientation (Novak et al. 2022).

5.2. Digital Media Use and Relationships

The dyad on the left side of the triangle connects the concepts of digital religious media use and social relationships within a religious community through the functions of social connection and media selection. First, we propose that digital religious media use fulfills the function of social connection, thereby shaping religious relationships inside a religious community. Digital religious media support individuals being in contact with community members and communicating with them, independent of time and space. Thereby, digital media facilitates the function of social connection and hence, leads to the creation and maintenance of relationships (Dankasa 2017; Lundby 2011; Nwankwo 2022). Furthermore, religious individuals in a religious community select specific individuals with similar media interests and media use, again supporting the process of social connection within the community (Friemel 2021). Second, we state that relationships inside a religious community can shape content and media selection processes and thereby influence an individual's digital media use. Empirical findings show that individuals obtain recommendations for new media technologies or specific content through their relationships (Humeira and Sarwono 2019; Moberg et al. 2020). Thereby, these relationships can help individuals select suitable media and adapt their digital media use to the preferences of their community (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2019; Moberg et al. 2020). Over time, the two processes of social connection and media selection are likely to result in homogeneous media use behaviors in religious communities (Friemel 2021).

5.3. Relationships and Meaning System

Finally, the dyad at the bottom of the triangle connects the concepts of relationships within a religious community and the religious meaning system through the functions of religious meaning-making and social connection. First, the relationships in a religious community are assumed to influence the religious meaning system through the function of religious meaning-making. Relationships and communication with others are assumed to be the main drivers of meaning-making (Grouden and Jose 2015; Taves 2018; Wong 2008). Hence, these relationships can fulfill the function of religious meaning-making and thereby shape and maintain an individual's religious meaning system.

Second, the religious meaning system can influence relationships inside a religious community through the function of social connection. Social connections are created through shared religious values and attitudes (Saroglou 2011). People with similar meaning systems who adhere to the same values and have the same beliefs are more likely to form relationships inside a community, thereby initiating social connection (Oh 2020). Theoretical arguments and empirical findings on co-orientation suggest that for this dyad, social influence and social selection within a community could, over a longer period of time, lead to homogeneous meaning systems within religious communities or in subgroups within a community.

Both these processes were observed in a study by Oh (2020), who investigated the change in relationships in a religious community following news coverage of their pastor. Both the function of religious meaning-making and social connection were observed; on the one hand, individuals started to change their attitudes and opinions about their pastor in line with the group to which they belong (meaning-making) and on the other hand, individuals started to form friendship ties to others with the same opinions and attitudes (social connection). This study shows that the connection between relationships and religious meaning systems is not only a theoretical assumption, but can be found in empirical research.

6. Conclusions and Outlook for Future Research

This article highlights the importance of the interplay between digital religious media use, religious meaning systems, and social relationships within a mediatized religious community. Four strengths and potential applications of our model for future research should be highlighted, as outlined below.

First, our model provides an approach to connect individuals at the community level and encourages research that adopts a dynamic approach, as suggested by Rota and Krüger (2019). Herein, religious individuals should be considered in their social contexts and not separately from their environment, and this consideration should include co-orientation processes. A network analysis approach could be employed to capture these social dynamics empirically. Furthermore, the model is not bound to the meso level of small communities but can also be applied to social structures of any size, including at the macro level of congregations or religions. Considering the nature of a globalized media system dominated by platforms, this is a crucial advantage of this model.

Second, our model highlights the importance of identifying the role that digital media plays in the fulfillment of religious functions. Even though previous research did connect mediatization and religious functions (Hjarvard 2008a; Hoover and Park 2004), little research, to the authors' knowledge, has looked at the religious functions of religious meaning-making and social connection as effects of digital media use. However, this perspective might be helpful in better understanding the role digital media plays in an individual's religious identity. By applying a broad definition of the term digital religious media, research should include a conglomerate of different digital media, thereby expanding our understanding of how different digital media platforms can fulfill different religious functions and be combined to create distinct media repertoires (Hasebrink and Popp 2006; Frey and Friemel 2023).

Third, our model helps future research to consider both the offline and online dimensions of today's post-digital world (Tsuria and Campbell 2022). Our model helps to address this interconnection between online and the offline perspectives, as it connects the offline life of individuals (mainly offline relationships and an individual's meaning system) with digital religious media use.

Fourth, our model will allow future research to analyze dynamics inside a community by connecting the aspects of social relationships and individuals' meaning systems in relation to digitalization. Although both concepts have been identified as central aspects of researching into digital religion (Hoover and Park 2004; Hutchings 2013; Campbell and Sheldon 2022), little research has connected them. This understanding of community dynamics might be especially interesting when investigating religious extremist groups. By analyzing the dynamics behind meaning systems and social relationships in conjunction with digital media use, thereby connecting both individual and community factors, research might better explain the radicalization processes happening in these communities (de Graaf and van den Bos 2021; Sumiala et al. 2023). Therefore, future research should take a longitudinal approach, as the underlying functions and changes inside communities occur over longer periods of time.

The proposed model builds on established theoretical frameworks and various empirical studies. Nevertheless, future research should test the model empirically. Ideally, this

would include a longitudinal network analysis of religious communities to account for the dynamic interdependence of the building blocks. Further theoretical and empirical work could carve out the parallels and differences of the discussed dynamics across different communities and religions. Finally, we suggest that the model is likely to be applicable to other subjects beyond religious communities and may also contribute to broader research on media use from a social context perspective, which has become a major stream of communication theories (Neuman and Guggenheim 2011).

Note

1   The functionalist perspective on religion can be traced back to French sociologist Émile Durkheim's work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 1995), in which he described the social functions that religion can have in a society (Olk 2017). Later, other supporters of the functionalist perspective, such as Luckmann (1991), Luhmann (1982), Kaufmann (1989), and van der Merwe (2010), defined different functions of religion.

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