Digital Social Dynamics of Spirituality

Spirituality and Religiosity in the Context of Digital Communication

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Aim and relevance

- Our aim is to develop a theoretical model and provide empirical evidences to understand and harness the potential of digitalization for the benefit of religious/spiritual individuals, communities, as well as the broader public.
- Existing theoretical models and empirical research designs often disregard the dynamic interdependence of individuals and communities.
- This lack of theoretical conception and empirical evidences also holds true for meaning-making and "Vergemeinschaftung" (building of community) as two important functions of religions.
- We therefore propose a theoretical model for dynamics of individual digital media use in communities with respect to religion and spirituality. Based on this model we conduct two empirical projects to understand these dynamics and discuss strategies for various actors.

Dynamic model of individual digital media use in communities with respect to religion and spirituality
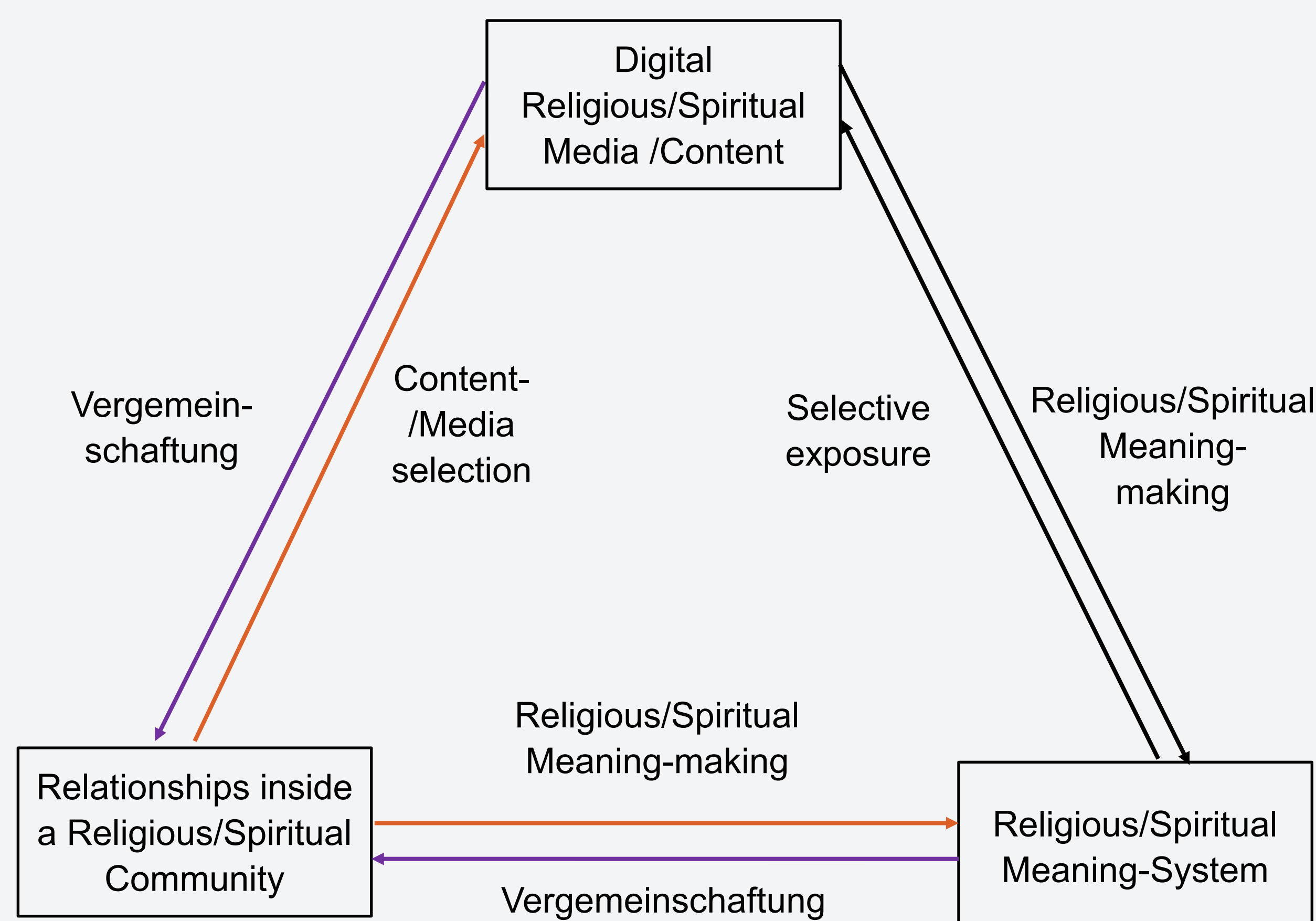
Social Selection: *Relationships in a religious/spiritual community are formed based on the same opinions or media preferences*

Social Influence: *An individual turns to an object (e.g. digital media) or an opinion based on the preferences of other religious/spiritual community members*

Timeline

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
2021													
Familiarization													
Qualitative Survey P1						O	F	A	F	A	A		
Theoretical Paper												O	O
2022													
Theoretical Paper		O	O	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P		
Quantitative Survey P1					O	O	O	O	O	O	F	A	
Network Survey P1										O	O	O	
2023													
Quantitative Survey P1		A	P	P									
Network Survey P1		O	O	O	F	A	A	A	A	F	A	P	
Representative Survey P2		O	O	O	O	O	O	F	F	A	P	P	
2024													
Revisions, Dissertation & Disputation													

Legend: O = Organisation; F = Field Work; A = Analysis; P = Publication Phase

Project 1: Digital media use in religious communities

Research Question: How do members of practicing religious communities use digital media to fulfill functions of meaning-making and "Vergemeinschaftung"?

Aim: Theoretical description and empirical analysis of various (sub)functions of communication in the context of religious communities and their fulfillment through digital media.

> **Study 1**: Qualitative survey of individuals (9 persons) from this group of persons - **Completed**
>
> **Study 2**: Cross-sectional survey of a large sample, in order to be able to make generalizable statements about this group of people. Investigation of both the digital religious media use repertoire and the importance of religious online and offline influencers – **Recruitment phase**
>
> **Study 3**: Network survey of a closed group (e.g., youth group) in order to investigate group dynamic processes of media use over time – **Organization phase**

First results

- The qualitative interviews provided insights into the digital religious media use patterns and the importance of the community in the selection of digital religious media/content. Furthermore, the interviews indicated that both "Vergemeinschaftung" and meaning-making are connected to digital religious media/content as they are both important motivations to use digital religious media/content.

- Digital religious media content is seen on a variety of different media (e.g., Apps, social media, blogs). Therefore, empirical investigations need to take this media repertoire into account and should not be limited to a single digital medium.

- Different digital religious media content provide distinct gratifications (e.g., social media for entertainment; music for spiritual connection).

Project 2: Spirituality and meaningfulness on social media

Research Question: How is spirituality expressed on online social networking platforms and to what extent can digital media fulfill the function of meaning-making for individuals?

Aim: Theoretical and empirical description and analysis of meaning-making and spiritual "Vergemeinschaftung" on online social networking platforms.

Study design:
> Standardized survey of the Swiss German population (16+) in order to make generalizable statements about this group of people

Challenges and open questions

- How to define religious and spiritual media content: What should be included/excluded?
- How to measure "Vergemeinschaftung" and "meaning-making" empirically?
- How to define a community in the digital sphere?