Religion and politics of belonging in digital times: youth religiosity in focus

Astrid Mattes[1]*, Miriam Haselbacher[2], Katharina Limacher[1] and Christoph Novak[3]

[1]Research Centre Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria, [2]Institute for Urban and Regional Research, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, Austria, [3]Department of Practical Theology, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

Political responses to growing diversity are often characterised by one-dimensional attempts to pin down a collective identity. In stark contrast, we see that young people in diverse urban areas negotiate their multiple, flexible belonging both on- and offline. Young believers, in particular, experience their religion as a powerful category of difference, often related to discrimination or rejection on grounds of their religiosity. Here, the discursive construction of belonging, as discussed in the concept "politics of belonging," is useful to grasp the formations of in- and out-groups on religious grounds. Individual negotiations of belonging always resonate with political ideas of the nation and the secular and with discourses of inclusion and exclusion. The discursive and structural maintenance of boundaries that separate people into those who belong and those who do not is more than a top-down process. It concerns and involves individuals and their identifications. Here, digital spaces, as increasingly relevant spaces of public exchange, provide new terms for identity work. In this paper, we are interested in the specific role of digital spaces for identification among young believers and for processes of boundary drawing. Building on social media tours and qualitative in-depth interviews with 41 young believers of different religious traditions, we explore individual negotiations of belonging in digital spaces, as well as negotiations in relation to religious communities and political concepts. We find that digital spaces reinforce certain boundaries (e.g., among religious traditions) whereas they facilitate the blurring of others (e.g., confessional structures). This is guided by algorithms following the logic of attention economy that structures social media as well as by the conscious search for digital possibilities of inclusion. At the same time, the online world enables various forms of countering experienced exclusions. Consequently, we identify strategies of young believers to navigate complex discourses of being religious in a secular world and the role of the digital within it. We discuss these empirical findings on religious youth against the theoretical backdrop of a "Politics of Belonging" and we explore options towards a theoretical concept to grasp digital politics of belonging.

KEYWORDS

politics of belonging, identification, youth religiosity, social media, on- and offline communities

1 Introduction

Aman, 19 years old, is currently serving as a conscript in the Austrian army while wearing a Dastar/turban. As one of the few turban-wearing soldiers, he considers himself a representative of his religion. He feels that he has to behave well to prevent causing any damage to the image of Sikhs. To inform himself about religion, he follows a Sikh channel on Discord

as well as the "Basics of Sikhi" website, which includes videos, blogs, Q&As, podcasts, and more.

Igor, 24 years old, is very religious and aspires to become a Christian-Orthodox priest. His father is originally from Bosnia, his mother from Croatia, but he was born in a small town in Austria. For him, national boundaries are irrelevant, and he regularly visits Christian-Orthodox services in different languages. On social media, he follows accounts focused on outdoor adventures, survival training, extreme sports, cars, and humour. He has also integrated his religion into his Instagram usage and he follows the accounts of Christian-Orthodox priests as well as pages of various monasteries, regularly discussing his online activities with a trusted priest.

Leah is a 21-year-old Catholic Christian who made some new best friends through her confirmation group. After graduation and spending a year abroad, she came out as lesbian and began to examine the Catholic Church as well as her faith critically. On Facebook, she discovered a page that uses gender-neutral language for God, offering queer-feminist perspectives on religion, which has helped her define her own approach towards Christianity. Her Instagram account reflects this journey, featuring a mixture of accounts from friends, Christian content, as well as queer and feminist profiles.

These three narratives provide insights into the lives of religious youths, exemplifying the ways in which the negotiation of religion and belonging is taking place on- and offline. These stories were told in qualitative interviews with young believers from Vienna (Austria), conducted in course of a larger study on religious youth and their intersectional belongings on- and offline. They illustrate how young people use digital platforms to explore, question, and/or strengthen their religious identity in the light of discursive constructions of in- and out-groups. Unlike most studies, we included research participants from different religious communities and thereby gained insight into the life worlds of members of religious minorities as well as large religious communities. We see how religious youths across religious traditions experience their religion becoming a marker of difference. This provides a strong reason to connect our findings to the growing body of literature on belonging and digital spaces (Campbell and Tsuria, 2021; Madenoglu, 2022). Guided by the question how political projects of belonging impact the on- and offline identifications of young believers, we explore digital dynamics at the intersection of religion and politics of belonging and their broader (on- and offline) implications. It is particularly this interconnected approach to on- and offline spaces that provides innovative insights and contributes to the literatures on digital belonging, politics of belonging and youth religiosity from a novel perspective.

1.1 Politicised religion, belonging, and boundary drawing

While the multiplicity of difference is the condition of everyday encounter in contemporary European society and urban spaces in particular, political debates often problematise certain aspects of this plurality. Over the past decades, the politicisation of religion has become a more prominent part of the political dynamics (Klausen, 2005; Altınordu, 2010). As both scholars and politicians refer to "religion" as an increasingly salient issue, it is necessary to explicate some aspects within these dynamics. We observe that Christianity has re-emerged as a national and nationalist identifier. While some

authors trace this back to the end of the cold war and the need for collective identifiers, others relate it to the othering of Islam (Behloul et al., 2013) and as a strategy of the populist right and new Christian-right actors. These developments furthermore relate to the securitisation of Islam (Kaya, 2012; Cesari, 2013), which is closely connected to increasingly contentious debates over migration and asylum. Despite these dynamics, the secularisation of European populations and institutions is rapidly progressing. This suggests that for many, religion has become more of a marker of group identity and less of a spiritual practice (Astor and Mayrl, 2020). Adding to this, Talal Asad pointed out, that the notion of secularisation is not merely an objective description of a societal process. He emphasises that "secularism" is an expression of heterogeneous power relations. Certain discourses evoking the idea of a secular Europe, heavily build upon an opposition towards Muslims and construct them as being "external to the essence of Europe" (Asad, 2003, p. 151).

Hence, it does not come as a surprise, that the growing gap between fewer people leading a religious life and politicians increasingly emphasizing religion as an identity marker becomes most evident in the political projects on migration and diversity (Mattes, 2017). Considering these developments, it is evident that religion is an essential element to politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). As an intersectional category, religion is particularly politicised in certain configurations, e.g., "Cultural Christianity" (Marzouki et al., 2016) and discursive constructions of a Muslim "other" (Modood, 2009).

Political scientists, along with scholars focusing on race, gender, and migration, increasingly view the politics of belonging as a distinct area of study encompassing issues of membership, boundary drawing, and identity politics (Brubaker, 2010; Klandermans, 2014). While questions of membership have always been crucial to the analysis of political systems (especially nation states), globalisation phenomena, notably international migration (Castles and Miller, 2009), and the push for equality among marginalised groups through liberal-democratic advancements exacerbate identity conflicts.

Politics of belonging extend beyond formal political processes. As Hedetoft and Hjort (2002) suggest, they describe a political and cultural battleground on a global scale, ranging from predefined notions of belonging to self-constructed definitions of new cultural spaces and identities, raising pertinent issues about relationships among individuals, groups, and communities. Both individual identification processes and collective boundary-drawing, along with formal membership politics, contribute to the dynamics of the politics of belonging. It is a framework for analysing the "interrelation and power relations between social locations, variables, and phenomena that influence people and policies of identity building and participation" (Lähdesmäki et al., 2021). Therefore, politics of belonging is also a relevant concept to grasp the identifications and feelings of belonging of individuals.

Crowley (1999, p. 30) defined the politics of belonging as "the 'dirty work' of boundary maintenance," thereby directly establishing a link between the individual aspects of belonging, the structural assessment of politics of belonging, and the processes of boundary drawing that they build upon. In following Montserrat Guiberau, we also perceive belonging as an individual's deliberate claim to membership of socially constructed collectivities (Guibernau, 2013). However, these claims are embedded in the broader politics of belonging and while there is a strong element of choice, this functions within the societal boundaries that determine the inclusion of some

and the exclusion of others. For example, when people struggle to integrate their feelings of being "Austrian" while following their Muslim parents' traditions or beliefs, this struggle directly relates to the discursive construction of in- and out-groups. In other words, belonging is inextricably linked to processes of boundary drawing, which happen not only at the level of formal politics but are everyday social practices.

As Frederic Barth pointed out, group identity is primarily defined by the boundary that separates it from others rather than by the shared characteristics within the group (Barth, 1998, p. 3). Through a constructivist lens, boundary-making approaches examine the ways in which cultural interpretations shape social relationships and their implications. We make use of the concept of boundary making to empirically analyse the role of political projects of belonging in the on- and offline identifications of urban religious youth. While boundaries can become institutionalised, it is primarily the sphere of symbolic boundary making that influences identification processes:

> "Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality. […] Symbolic boundaries also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership." (Lamont and Molnár, 2002, p. 168)

The literature on boundary formation distinguishes between symbolic and social boundaries. Social boundaries, which are embedded in institutions, structurally limit access to resources for certain groups (Bail, 2008). They are reinforced and highlighted through discrimination, collective organisation, and physical violence. In contrast, symbolic boundary making involves symbolic actions and discursive practices.

This paper examines symbolic boundary formation, which operates through distinct modes. Andreas Wimmer identifies these modes as primarily relying on existing group concepts that can change through processes such as contraction or expansion, transvaluation, positional moves, or boundary blurring (Wimmer, 2013, p. 57). Boundaries shift (contract or expand) when the criteria for membership and non-membership are redefined, thus narrowing or widening the set of accepted attributes. Transvaluation occurs when the normative order of a stratified system changes. Individual or collective positional moves might enable boundary crossing. However, bright boundaries can only be overcome by relinquishing distinctive elements of the own identity, as the crossing of such boundaries requires strict assimilation (Alba, 2005). Bright boundaries moreover persist despite individual crossings (Barth, 1998). Conversely, when boundaries blur, the in-group and its structures change. Characteristics of the out-group become accepted within the in-group, allowing for the overlapping of previously mutually exclusive identity markers and creating tolerance of multiple memberships (Korteweg and Yurdakul, 2014).

The importance of such boundary drawing in world politics can hardly be overstated. Anderson (2006) argues that in pre-modern times, religiously imagined communities extended the limits of belonging beyond an individual's direct acquaintances, globalising the idea of community, while in modernity the emergence of national imagined communities paved the way for modern democratic nation-states. However, national imagined communities not only claimed political power against aristocratic and monarchic domination. Nationalistic politics of belonging have furthermore often been the basis for xenophobic, racist and genocidal political projects (Foucault, 1991). The powerful impact of practices of boundary drawing is only possible, because individuals engage in boundary work on a daily basis. Michel Foucault reminds us of the complexity of regimes of truths that also allow boundary drawing to be effective:

> "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true." (Foucault, 1991, 131)

As our research interest is the impact of political projects of belonging on identifications of young believers on- and offline, we ask which boundaries these young people experience, how they deal with perceived inclusion and exclusion and what roles digital spaces and their regimes of truth might play.

1.2 Digital belonging

Digital spaces provide platforms for both self-expression and the navigation of social dynamics, enabling individuals to explore and present their multifaceted belongings, including their religious identity/ies. Through activities such as the consumption and creation of social media content, individuals construct and reconstruct their multiple identifications. These practices reflect personal understandings of self in relation to broader social and cultural contexts (Campbell and Bellar, 2023, p. 101). Thereby, digital spaces hold the potential to serve as arenas of empowerment by fostering activism and community building, particularly for marginalised groups (Hoechsmann et al., 2018). At the same time, they also reproduce social hierarchies and expose users to hatred and potential harm under the guise of anonymity (Reviglio, 2017).

Digitalisation, new communication technologies, and social media have altered processes of identification and belonging. The extent and direction of these developments are, however, not quite clear yet. Marlowe et al. (2017) describe digital belonging as the affective connection with a certain imagined digital community. With reference to Antonsich (2010), they conceive belonging as "a personal experience that simultaneously occurs within socio-spatial forms of inclusion and exclusion" (Marlowe et al., 2017, p. 86). The complex interplay between proactive identifications and their structural limitations is therefore a characteristic of digital belonging while likewise being significant in offline spaces. Digital politics of belonging is intertwined with the situatedness of individuals. It equally relates to questions of power relations, hegemony, and intersectionality but clearly has an important affective dimension. (see, for example Mookherjee, 2005; Peterson, 2016).

Regarding the specificity of digital belonging among post-Millennials, Katz et al. (2022) describe Gen Z identities as "intensely social," with "the opportunity to fine-tune the communities to which they belong in step with their fine-grained identity" (Katz et al., 2022, pp. 93–94). Their book on "the art of living in a digital age" discusses this age group but does not investigate marginalised young people in particular. Bennett (2018) argues that identification processes of young people is based on a do-it-yourself doctrine rather than on commonly known aspects of identity construction, such as class, religion, race, and similar concepts. Using the concept of DIY citizenship, Ratto and Boler (2014) explain that "the DIY citizen is one who creates their identity and individuality through a process of choosing from the semiotic material on offer" (Ratto and Boler, 2014, p. 11). This understanding of identity construction is resonant with recent notions of "self-branding" (Hearn, 2008) and the production of self-identity seen by Giddens as one of the constitutive elements of late modernity. It is important that Giddens' idea of "self-branding" (Giddens, 1991) precedes the omnipresence and wide accessibility of digital spaces, but grasps a notion that drastically accelerated the need and potential for individual identity work, which has become the norm for contemporary youth.

Heidi Campbell and Wendi Bellar describe how social media platforms provide "spaces for religious users to construct or build their religious identity uniquely. It allows access to various and more dynamic opportunities for religious self-expression and practice than may be allowed in traditional religious contexts." (Campbell and Bellar, 2023, p. 101) As mentioned above, digital spaces are frequently characterised as egalitarian or at least as empowering for minorities. Studies point out that digital spaces facilitate diaspora connections (e.g., Westbrook and Saad, 2017) and enable cultural re-production and the constitution of ethnic identity (Mainsah, 2014). They usually either highlight the empowering potential of digital belonging or a problematic perspective of segregation (Marlowe et al., 2017). Most studies present this identity work as playful (Katz et al., 2022) or examine it through a minority lens. Studies on migrant youth have specifically investigated the role of intersectional situatedness for negotiations of belonging. In this context, identity work is often described as more complicated than in work on identification and the digital in general.

Studies on digital belonging of minorities often treat religious minorities just as they would all other minorities (e.g., ethnic, linguistic), but do not address the specificities of religious identification. When religion is specifically addressed, organised religious communities are given special attention, while the actual diversity of online religious identifications is rarely touched upon. This is particularly problematic for studies on religious belonging in digital environments, since digital spaces enable the rise of non-traditional religious authorities, first of all, religious influencers (Wyrostkiewicz et al., 2022). Internal religious differentiation furthermore seems to be affected by digitalisation in resonance with individual identification processes (Mcauliffe, 2007), highlighting the importance of closely assessing the specificities of digital religious identifications.

1.3 Youth religiosity in superdiverse, secular, and digital times

Contemporary studies on youth religiosity usually take digital spaces into account. In fact, the growing body of literature on "digital religion" is often (implicitly) centred around perspectives of young believers (Evolvi, 2019). This is not very surprising, since digital natives are at the forefront of developments in digital culture due to their greater technical affinity, which also largely places them at the focal point of social media and digitalization research. However, this greater familiarity with digital spaces is not the only characteristic of young believers in contrast to previous generations.

Megatrends such as the secularisation and pluralisation of European societies constitute further important contextual factors in digital environments that particularly affect young believers. Across Europe, secularisation—here understood as the sharp decline of religious membership, loss of significance of religious teachings and institutions, and the ongoing disappearance of religion from the public sphere—determines religious lives today (Pew Research Center, 2018). Studies show how ongoing secularisation leads to the experience of devoted religiosity as a lifestyle out of the norm (Beekers, 2021). Interestingly, for Austria, where this study was conducted, numbers of religiosity among young people are still relatively high. Official statistics indicate Roman Catholics as the largest religious group in Vienna (33%), followed by Muslims (15%) and Orthodox Christians (11%), while only about 6% identify with other religious communities (Alevis, Protestants, Jews, Sikhs, etc.). 35% report no religious affiliation (Statistik Austria, 2022). Data from the European Values Study shows that 43% of the population aged 14–25 considers religion as "very important" in their lives. While this is 3% less than in 2018, the numbers are still higher than among the total population (36%) (Willmann, 2022). At the same time, (religious) pluralism contributes to the experience of living a religious life in the 21st century. Diversification processes in metropolitan areas shaped by immigration have particularly been discussed as resulting in superdiversity, which points at the ever more complex configurations of categories and difference (Vertovec, 2022). Religion might be one of many identity markers that cooccur within one person and are present in varying configurations across the city. Growing (religious) pluralism evidently shows believers that their religious convictions are but one of many. This creates a somewhat paradoxical situation for young believers. The experienced reality of superdiversity, the perceived pressure of secularity, and the politicisation of religion in its manifold expressions turn religiosity into a complex endeavour, particularly but not only for minorities (Mahmudova and Evolvi, 2021). We argue, religion and belonging are neither private, nor structurally embedded in everyday (secular) life, but instead are constantly subject to self-positioning and self-branding. Here, digital spaces provide opportunities towards engaging with like-minded others in digital communities where the own religious lifestyle is questioned less and instead is acknowledged and affirmed.

In this paper, we are interested in the specific role of digital spaces in identification processes among young believers and in processes of boundary drawing/blurring that take place on the communal and societal level. Both levels are important for understanding the politics of belonging in the context of youth religiosity. However, religious belonging is very much torn between two extremes: the highly individualised character of belonging, where one needs to adapt religion so that it is in tune with one's personal values and secular society (Novak et al., 2024), and the strong, unbroken relevance of offline religious institutions for religious community and practice (see also Patel, 2023). Hence, the sphere of offline religion cannot

be ignored when considering the role of religious belonging in the digital context.

This paper proceeds as follows: We discuss the empirical material of our study and the methods used for analysis. We then describe our findings and discuss them against the theoretical background sketched previously. We conclude with recommendations for further inquiry regarding the individual and structural factors determining young believers' identification both on- and offline.

2 Materials and methods

We conducted qualitative interviews with 41 (self-identified) religious Instagram users who lived in or around Vienna, an arguably superdiverse city. Participants were between 16 and 25 years of age, therefore the empirical research design was subject to a strict approval process by the Austrian Academy of Sciences ethics board. Instagram was chosen as platform, not only for its popularity but also due to the logics of the Instagram feed, which, based on algorithms, adjusts to user behaviour and creates a tailor-made digital environment to each individual user (Instagram, 2022). It is important to note that any particular social media platform has its own inherent logics and functionalities. As a result, Instagram provides users with very specific ways to interact with other users via the platform. Visual content, for example, is much more important than on other platforms such as X, formerly Twitter (see, e.g., Hase et al., 2023). For our research, this also means that it might not always be possible to draw conclusions regarding social media in general, due to the very specific data we analysed. Nevertheless, we focused on Instagram, as data from Pew Research Center (2021) suggested that people in our envisioned age group were very likely to be avid Instagram users familiar with consuming and creating (religious) content on the platform. However, during the interviews the interviewees spoke about various other platforms (in particular YouTube and Discord), which allowed us to learn about the usage of social media aside from Instagram as well.

We recruited interviewees via religious youth groups, religious organisations, at places of worship, by promoting our research via the "YouBeOn"—Instagram account, and through snowball sampling. Of course, this way of sampling has its downsides—we encountered primarily open-minded, liberal young people, which is possibly a selection bias qualitative settings often suffer from—but the explorative character of our study made snowball sampling the only feasible method. We avoided gender bias by recruiting roughly the same number of female (21) and male (19) participants overall and for each religious group. One person identified as non-binary (see sample description in Appendix). All interviewees identified as religious, practicing their religion through rituals as well as within communal settings. This has been clarified in preliminary talks with the interviewees. Interviews were conducted between February and August of 2021.

In the selection of religious traditions, we sought to acknowledge Vienna's religious diversity by including people with different religious backgrounds and perspectives on the religious characteristics of their urban context. We thus addressed seven different religious communities, some large (Catholic and Orthodox Christians, Sunni Muslims), others rather small (Alevis, Protestants, Jews, Sikhs). Some had a long history in Vienna, while others were still in the process of establishing religious infrastructures. The exploratory character of this study only allowed to cover a limited configuration of religious traditions and denominations, which of course, also influences research results. Other configurations would have brought about different findings, at least to a certain extent. The selection criteria for religious traditions regarding size and history in the country relate to arguments from the literature on politics of belonging.

During data collection, we employed a three-stage qualitative interview design to understand how participants integrate religion into their lives, both online and offline. First we conducted a "problem-centred interview" (Döringer, 2021; Scheibelhofer, 2008) during which we collected narrative biographical information on participants' lives in general as well as regarding the role of religion throughout the course of their lives until the present.

Second, we conducted "social media tours." Similar methods have been used in other research, e.g., "device tours" (Mollerup, 2020), "scroll back method" (Robards and Lincoln, 2017), etc., depending on the respective platform. This still novel approach, which we have developed especially for this project, allows the qualitative study of social-media usage and provides information on preferences, strategies, and rationales that social media users follow when using social media. We asked participants to show us their Instagram profile. To do so, participants logged onto their Instagram account on a smartphone provided by us, which subsequently recorded everything happening on the screen via screen-capture software. We then asked participants to scroll through their feed, their own profile, and the list of the accounts they followed, telling us about the different aspects of their digital profile. This method allows for different analytical approaches, ranging from visual analyses of the posts appearing on the screen to analyses of meaning-making processes which focus primarily on the information provided by the social-media user to the researcher while scrolling through the account. In our case, we conducted content analysis of the information provided to us to understand more about the (religious) content that participants consumed on Instagram, the content that they posted themselves, and the ways in which they indicated (or avoided indicating) their own religious affiliation on their Instagram profile. We refrained from analysing the visuals which were shown to us on the screen during the interview. However, the recorded visual data provided important context to help us understand the verbal information provided by the participants.

Lastly, we conducted a "mapping activity" using the "needle method" (Deinet, 2009) and a physical map of Vienna. We asked participants to indicate places which they considered important for them in general and for their religious life in particular. While the map caused individuals to focus automatically on Vienna and the surrounding area, we subsequently also inquired about places outside of Vienna and around the world, which might be of any (religious) significance for them. We furthermore asked whether there were places which were explicitly important for online activities, which, however, was hardly ever the case.

Through the combination of these three interviewing techniques, we gained information on participants' biographies, their social-media use, and the relevance of physical spaces for their religious life. We analysed interview transcripts of all parts of the threefold interviews in atlas.ti and performed a qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). We did not analyse the different sections of the interview separately, therefore the information gained cannot always be assigned to a certain interviewing technique. The goal of the

threefold approach was rather to collect very specific information (e.g., Instagram accounts and places in the city), interviewees would not likely speak about in a more conventional interview setting. Our approach stimulated conversations about social media and urban surroundings that allowed to better understand their interconnectedness.

Starting from three deductive code categories (concepts/ideas, accounts, places) we used inductive coding for fine-grained analyses of the first 10 interviews within the concepts/ideas category. In a next step, we condensed, merged, and grouped inductive codes and applied them deductively to the rest of the interviews. If new codes emerged after this stage, we re-visited the material we had already analysed and applied those new codes as well. To make the data accessible to a general audience, we worked with experts from the Austrian Centre for Digital Humanities and Cultural Heritage to create an interactive, digital map with information and quotes from the interviews. The YouBeOn Map can be explored via app.youbeon.eu and allows to see the codes applied to interview data.

Throughout the project, we dealt with several ethical considerations. We developed our empirical approach while considering power dynamics in the interview setting and possible political implications of our research findings (Novak, 2019). During data analysis, we used screen-captured material only for context related to the audio-recorded information provided to us, meaning that we did not perform visual or content analyses on information by Instagram users from whom we had received no informed consent. Therefore, our analysis focused exclusively on the interview text. When publishing extracts of the qualitative data in journal articles and as part of the YouBeOn Map (app.youbeon.eu), we used pseudonymised data only. Additionally, we asked interviewees to consent to the publication of quotes from their respective interviews as part of the YouBeOn Map. Every participant was given the chance to opt out at any stage of the research process, an option which no participant has made use of to date.

3 Results

Politics of belonging refers to "the maintenance of boundaries that separate a particular group into those who belong and those who do not" (RMIT Europe, 2024). Building on this, we are interested in the ways in which these boundaries affect religious youths and in their re-negotiating them online. In this section, we present our findings on identity work while focusing on the negotiation of religious belonging in digital spaces in relation to different religious groups and the secular world in general. In two steps related to (a) societal discourses and (b) religious communities, we demonstrate how our participants experienced and reflected upon their religion as a marker of identity, and we describe the possibilities they encountered both on- and offline. These practices of digital boundary drawing reflect the challenges and opportunities this process entails for young believers, which gives valuable insights into religious politics of belonging.

3.1 Boundary drawing in relation to societal discourses and dominant politics of belonging

Generally, we find strong indicators in our data that religion serves as a profound marker of identity for young believers. Our

interview partners have experienced multifaceted forms of religious othering in their daily social life, constantly compelling them to navigate their religious identity across various social environments. Especially those religious minorities that are most excluded from dominant projects of belonging reported drastic experiences of discrimination and exclusion. A Muslim participant described: "Some teachers asked me, 'Yes, how is it possible that you were elected class representative with the headscarf?'" (IV17, Muslim, female). Or a Sikh participant described how his family was harassed by a neighbour: "We had a neighbour (…) who thought we were Muslims and he always said that we were somehow loud and at some point he smashed the door at our house (…) and then he put a pig's head in front of the door, because he thought we did not eat pork" (IV26, Sikh, male). For most Jewish participants, anti-Semitism is a constantly pressing issue: "Since the war [between Israel and Palestine] started again, I've suddenly seen so many anti-Semites in the media, on the streets, shouting 'Fucking Jews, fuck their daughters', so it's really brutal and it's a bit scary." (IV24, Jewish, female). These experiences made participants highly aware of the social positioning of their religion and of social power relations. They also underscore the intersectional complexities inherent in discussions surrounding religious politics of belonging.

Such radical experiences are flanked by more subtle forms of exclusion that relate to the social pressure to pin down one's own identity. One participant describes: "Egyptian roots, Muslim and Austrian, how does that work, well that's a question you always get asked. (…) So I feel like an Austrian Muslim first and foremost, only that now and then you just get the feeling that you are not accepted as such." (IV4, Muslim, male). This can be tiring and exhausting, as a Jewish participant describes: "Often people want to tell me how I should feel as a woman, or how I should feel as a Jew. And then I think to myself, it's not your place to tell me anything. Because they have no idea what it's like to be a woman, or a Jewish woman, or just a Jewish person in Vienna." (IV42, Jewish, female). Here, the interviewee points to intersectionality and the more drastic experiences of exclusion made by individuals that are subject to marginalisation in multiple ways.

In digital spaces, young believers often encounter options that—from their point of view—allow them to successfully navigate the boundaries related to religion as well as gender and ethnicity. A Muslim participant describes: "So I really like following her [a female Muslim influencer], because I think she shows very openly that Arabic is her mother tongue (…) and she also shows very openly that she is a Muslim. And I think it's cool that the focus is more on women. I think that's just one thing that's so important that just keeps getting pushed into the background." (IV15, Muslim, female). Examples such as the influencer discussed in this quote can exemplify how individuals that manage to cross symbolic boundaries drawn in dominant discourses. This influencer turns the ascribed negative stereotypes of being Muslim with Arabic as mother tongue into positive identification markers, claiming their empowering potential. Such individual boundary crossings by people with a large digital reach have an important role-model effect. Although these boundary crossings often remain individual, their signal effect is empowering for young believers and might even facilitate processes of boundary blurring.

Not only members of smaller religious groups perceived themselves as a minority. Christians likewise perceived themselves as a minority in relation to a secular majority. "Most of the people I know

are actually non-religious, so if you are religious, you are more of a minority anyway." (IV36, Protestant, male). Interestingly, it was especially Catholics who constructed themselves as being in a marginalised position. This was expressed by bringing up incidents in which atheist peers questioned why they would adhere to an—from their perspective—arcane and pre-modern religious belief system, as depicted in the following quote: "I experience that at university. (Here) I often had to justify why I am a believer, why I am religious and above all, why I am Catholic." (IV3, Catholic, female). Catholics were not alone in meeting such challenges, but it was a very characteristic feature of Catholic respondents' narratives. Clearly, this experience of perceiving oneself as part of a minority when being a religiously active Christian differs from the exclusion experienced by more marginalised groups face (e.g., work-place discrimination, racist violence, etc.). Nonetheless, the (pressure) of a perceived minority status opposed by a secular majority was an astonishing finding throughout the interviews with Catholics and some Protestants.

The ways of dealing with such pressures are manifold: Some react to exclusion and (perceived) marginalisation with social withdrawal and refrain from publicly displaying their religiosity or any religious symbols. Others, however, have taken these processes of boundary drawing as an incentive to become politically active and to engage in religious youth organisations (Novak et al., 2024). A typical pattern in digital spaces were restraints regarding public religious statements:

> "Especially with postings and so on, I think three times about whether I write something about God, I have to say. Because I always write what I think, but I also get a lot of messages that bother me. I do not have 1,000 followers, but there are enough to find people who do not like what I write and that's why I think three times about whether it's worth it for me to show it somehow". (IV33, Protestant, female).

As this quote exemplifies, it would be too simple to consider digital spaces as purely empowering for religious youth, especially as far as content creation and comments are concerned.

What, indeed, are the effects of personal experiences and processes of boundary drawing regarding religious engagement in the digital world? The outlook is ambivalent: Online, young believers can easily find content and profiles that cater to their needs, preferences, and experiences, enabling them to engage with a community of like-minded people. On Instagram, there is a seemingly infinite pool of opinions and profiles that provide insights into different life worlds. This provides young believers with ample resources and opportunities to position themselves in relation to their social environment and to engage in identity work. Through online practices of networking, following, learning, and exchange, young believers can engage with profiles and people that help them to situate their own experiences. For example, several participants followed profiles that raised awareness on topics like racism or sexism. Others followed profiles that reflected upon the history or cultural elements of their religion. Some even use it to back up their arguments and to get inspiration: "For example the account 'godisgrey', which I use quite a lot (…) it can really be the case that I'm looking for specific content, say I have a discussion or a conversation with someone on a certain topic and I know that I can find a post by her that I can forward or use." (IV3, Catholic, female). Thus, the negotiation of identity can take on particular nuances online and offline.

However, this is not without constraints. Many young believers also reported problematic religion-related aspects in digital spaces that challenge the often-read description of the empowering online potential. The fear of judgement or negative comments by others when posting religious content was one example. The problematic content of some accounts was another. The young people in our sample were rather reflective and highly aware of potentially dangerous content. A Christian-Orthodox interviewee describes: "If it gets too nationalistic, so if it just boils down to a nationalistic track, that does not interest me. I'm not a nationalist, I like every single person on the planet and if radical content in that sense comes up, I unfollow." (IV 13, Orthodox, male).

In any case, digital spaces were a self-evident part of the life worlds of young people and not to be separated from offline experiences. A particularly interesting aspect of the interwovenness of on- and offline spheres are questions of affiliation with and membership of religious communities, which we will discuss in the following section.

3.2 Boundary drawing and the question of community

Although political projects of belonging often do not explicitly address religion and boundary drawing, doing so would inevitably touch upon questions of community. Scholarly literature sees the complex phenomenon of religion not merely as an attribution or identity marker, but rather as an inherently multi-dimensional matter which usually includes communal elements. Communities are important for religious practice. They function as spaces of transmission of religion. In sociology, theoretical considerations about the form, function, and character of religious communities have been subject to encompassing theorization (Lüddeckens and Walthert, 2018; Durkheim, 2020; Tönnies, 2012). Our data shows that digital communal forms add a new facet to these debates.

Offline, religious communities, such as local churches, mosque or temple communities, serve as a place of encounter that is of importance for many young believers. These physical communities were also the main starting point for the recruitment of our interviewees. A Muslim woman describes the many functions of offline communities: "The mosque is a meeting place where you can exchange ideas, where you learn new things. It's also a Koran school, so to speak. You do not just pray, it just depends on what your intention is when you are in a mosque" (IV16, Muslim, female). We frequently observed a close relation between religious communities (including various forms of "community hopping") and peer groups, as described by this Jewish participant: "Then somehow you get invited to a celebration for a meal in the synagogue, […] or you arrange to do something with friends afterwards and the synagogue is nearby […] so there are different motives" (IV12, Jewish, male). Against this background, religious communities play a central role in lived religion and religious belonging offline.

In digital spaces, by contrast, offline religious communities were seldom relevant "objects of attachment" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199). They played a minor role in the construction of belonging. People mainly followed their local religious communities on Instagram, if these had an account, but mostly without enthusiasm, as the following quote depicts: "When there's some kind of online activity, for example, something like, 'Light a candle at home and put a

photo in the story', then I do things like that. I take part because (…) it's a small community and I think I want to help fill it somehow, so I take a photo and put it up" (IV7, Catholic, female). We frequently heard that the content of local communities is not particularly interesting or only relevant for offline activities (e.g., information about upcoming events). Additionally, the online presence of traditional religious authorities such as the pope or important imams, rabbis, etc. was widely perceived as "not authentic" or slightly old-fashioned. Even with the limitations during the COVID-19 pandemic, the digitalization of local community life was not perceived as very fruitful. "With young people, if they cannot meet directly [because of Corona], it's not easy to get people together online. We [as the Alevi community] tried once, to be honest only once, but when it did not work out, we did not try any further." (IV 37, Alevi, male).

Only a few participants had communal structures in which they took part online. Among them were specific educational options, e.g., a Jewish digitalised Kollel or a Sikh discord channel. One participant explained:

> "The Sikh community in America, because it's bigger than here, they made a Discord channel and then they all gathered online and you could just be together, so they said together, o.k., we have times now that we just pray together and that really helped me a lot, because you just missed that [during the pandemic] and you could just discuss and talk about all sorts of things (…) and we have now started to translate the holy scriptures into German and (…) they said yes, you speak German, you can join in and I thought that was a great opportunity for me to connect a bit more again" (IV27, Sikh, male).

These communities were not just mirroring offline communities but formed a genuinely new group of people that interacted with and knew each other.

More often, we encountered abstract forms of community, related to an influencer, a channel or a website. An Alevi interview partner described how she uses Instagram to learn more about her religion and its heritage:

> "There are pages where you can get information about what has been done to the Alevis in Turkey, for example, about massacres, or, for example, they remind you about fasting, why we fast, what Alevism is about- (…) There's a 'Questions' function on Instagram, in the story (…) they often do that, for example 'Do you have questions about Alevism?', 'What else do you want to know?' and that's why I follow them" (IV38, Alevi, female).

Hence, digital religious learning paths allow religious youths not only to educate themselves about their religion or to reflect critically on some of the religious doctrines they are confronted with, but these do so independently of local offline communities.

Many young believers also start to reflect critically upon their own religion and to distance themselves from some of the restrictive rules of their own (offline) communities' interpretations of religious doctrine in the light of the insights they acquire online. In our sample, this personal development of faith lead to more liberal beliefs and a redefinition of religious identities, as the following quote describes:

> "I mean if I were to tell a conservative Catholic that I'm homosexual, then he would maybe still see me as a normal person, but still say 'it's a sin' and 'yes, you have to live with it' and I think no, I do not think that. My faith also changed when I found out somehow, yes, I am a lesbian (pause) and then also this turn that God really loves everyone and why should not that work (…). Then I also became a bit more feminist in that direction, so also in the direction of thinking about God in a queerer way" (IV7, Catholic, female).

For many in our sample, online spaces thereby serve as the main source of inspiration and information. They enable young believers to engage with perspectives and interpretations that differ from those commonly found in their offline communities or parental homes. A Jewish participant describes how he frequently participated in zoom lectures by two rabbis:

> "It's a couple, a male and a female rabbi, who moved here from America. They are relatively young themselves and also represent a form of Judaism that did not exist in Germany before (…) It's called Open Orthodoxy, that's more or less traditional, rule-abiding Judaism but also very much what orthodox Judaism does not actually have: very egalitarian, very open-minded, also very new views on homosexuality, on modern problems, basically it is modern answers to modern questions" (IV12, Jewish, male).

Within these individual learning paths and the reshaping of individual religion through new interpretations of religious doctrine, we observe the reconfiguration of religious boundaries that continue to exist in the offline world (Novak et al., 2022). For example, a Catholic participant did not even know which church denomination a certain account belonged to: "That is someone from *Gebetshaus Augsburg* [House of Prayer Augsburg[1]], that is Evangelical and non-denominational, or Protestant? Or Evangelical? I am not sure. (…) it is known especially in the German-speaking Christian area, simply as priests, I would say" (IV7, Catholic, female). Strikingly, we found that while confessional boundaries tend to be blurred online, boundaries between religious traditions persist. In general, the religious niches that can be encountered online are not different from other digital communities of people who gather around specific preferences. Hence, denominational boundaries are online less dominant than offline, as the digital space allows for a blending of religious perspectives and practices. In the offline world, we partially find this blurring of boundaries as well, for example, when young believers attend certain religious and interreligious events that are not organised by their home communities. However, the distinctions between confessions, languages, or traditions often persist offline, and personal relationships within specific communities remain an important feature that bind people to their communities.

We account for these striking differences between the importance of religious community on- and offline in the lives of our interviewees with two explanations: On the one hand, we see that religious institutions in our sample rarely engaged successfully in online

---

1 The "Gebetshaus Augsburg" in fact is a Catholic institution with an ecumenical-charismatic orientation.

activities, even though we collected our data during the COVID-19 pandemic and thus amidst rather rigorous limitations placed on offline religious life. On the other hand, the differences we encountered are due to the approaches to community which we relied upon in our research. When approaching local religious communities, we drew from an understanding of community that was in line with the religious organisations. We dealt with forms of social relationships that are based on or that encompass some sort of formal membership, as well as with (various) traditional religious ideas of community. However, when we were analysing our data with the concept of belonging in mind, we could not find similar or complementary religious identifications online.

4 Discussion

When we consider boundary drawing in relation to political projects, we find strong references to various forms of "imagined community." Anderson (2006) argues that, in pre-modern times, religious communities used to imagine themselves as being connected not so much by a common faith (for there was only one true faith after all), but rather by a shared understanding of holy scripture. However, given the strong hierarchies when it came to actually reading and interpreting scripture, such imagined communities used to work quite differently from what we see today. "The fundamental conceptions about 'social groups' were centripetal and hierarchical, rather than boundary-oriented and horizontal" (Anderson, 2006, p. 15). Anderson's understanding of "imagined community" informs Yuval-Davis' ideas of politics of belonging, as it is the national project she is most interested in. We perceive projects of belonging broader and asked how they influence individual identification and boundary drawing.

Unsurprisingly, we found that societal discourses are decisive for the identification processes of urban religious youths. They were very aware of dominant political projects of belonging, especially those related to the contested place of religion in contemporary society. Identifications strongly resonated with the symbolic boundaries they perceived. Here, online spaces provide opportunities for very specific aspects of boundary work and identification with configurations that are usually excluded in hegemonic discourses. This particularly concerns intersections of categories of difference, such as complex constellations of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion. In many cases, young believers find answers, role models, virtual communities, and perspectives they were unsuccessfully searching for offline. However, it would be overly simplifying to consider digital environments as purely empowering for the identity work of religious youths. Our interviewees also reported discrimination, harassment, and problematic accounts they encountered online. Still, many of them discovered the approaches to boundary work that suited their identifications at a given moment and found ways to deal with offline experiences of exclusion.

A second question in the process of boundary drawing in digital spaces concerned groups and the role of religious community in particular. This relates to the discursive findings insofar as much of the boundary work we observed simultaneously addressed positionalities of religious individuals in a secular society and within religious communities. Here we found a large discrepancy between on- and offline social forms of togetherness. In digital spaces, communality was

much rather a subject of choice which catered to particular needs. Platform algorithms and the general functioning of social media further pushes this development towards individually tailored boundary work. Offline, ideas of formal membership and traditional forms of religious communality still strongly prevail. Offline boundary work consequently functions along the lines of these organisational forms. Highly individualised identity configurations were less important in offline communities and interviewees reported that they perceived the digital sphere or non-religious spaces, rather than their local community, as the place to negotiate intersectional configurations of identity. A homosexual Catholic who does not discuss her sexual orientation at church but finds a community of like-minded people and religious role models online, or a Muslim following a multi-lingual influencer despite attending an Arab mosque, are illustrating examples of this phenomenon.

Clearly, the highly individualised and personalised approaches to religion are a result of secularisation processes that allow individuals to select religious ideas and practices to their taste and needs (Novak et al., 2024). In this regard, online spaces provide almost endless opportunities to choose from. Yet, we find patterns within these selections that suggest that this is not merely the digital manifestation of a growing religious market but that online identifications relate to the discursive structures of politics of belonging offline.

Politics of belonging does not yet sufficiently include the "imagined communities" that emerge online to provide strong, individualised options of inclusion. Rather than considering this as a solution to exclusionary projects of belonging, we must carefully consider how these options of inclusion relate to exclusionary discourses. Are they simply places of refuge and retreat where youths can be their "authentic self"? Or do we conceptualise them as a source of resistance against hegemonic projects of belonging? Does the multitude of digital communities change dominant discourses or are they too fragmented and specialised to have an impact? Despite presenting results from a larger research project, this paper has limitations, both regarding the explanatory power allowed by our methodology and the scope of arguments that can be made. The qualitative approach we applied merely allows to explore directions in the on- and offline identifications of young believers, while we cannot report on the global significance of the specific phenomena we found. Our findings can, however, help to better understand these issues by learning to understand how individual practices relate to discursive structures and hegemonic boundaries in particular.

The narrative of politics of belonging does not function frictionless if we consider digital spaces and their alternative processes of boundary drawing. Yuval-Davis's focus on the nation as *the* project of belonging is far too limited for what we observe online. Here, the nation is one imagined community next to others. Clearly, the boundary work that constructs the nation has a strong impact, but religious youths negotiate the boundaries of multiple projects of belonging simultaneously in the online context: the peer group, the local religious community, their religious tradition in general, gender relations, ethnicity, and, of course, the nation. Consistent reconnection to the question of the nation seems too narrow for what we observe in the practices of boundary drawing of young believers. Therefore, we suggest broadening the idea of politics of belonging to include a variety of simultaneously renegotiated projects of belonging that follow different logics on- and offline and that work at varied paces.

Future research should inquire further how the broad spectrum of relevant imagined communities on- and offline changes the political project of belonging as a whole. The focus on religion is a fruitful starting point for this endeavour, as it demonstrates the necessity of different forms of community: like few other phenomena, religious belonging is characterised by the interdependence of positionality, situatedness, affiliation, and membership. This challenges approaches that focus on institutionalised social boundaries as well as those only considering symbolic forms of inclusion and exclusion.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because participants identifiable data will not be shared. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to astrid.mattes@univie.ac.at.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Ethics Committee of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

AM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MH: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation. CN: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1476762/full#supplementary-material

References

Alba, R. (2005). Bright vs. blurred boundaries: second-generation assimilation and exclusion in France, Germany, and the United States. *Ethn. Racial Stud.* 28, 20–49. doi: 10.1080/0141987042000280003

Altınordu, A. (2010). The politicization of religion: political Catholicism and political Islam in comparative perspective. *Polit. Soc.* 38, 517–551. doi: 10.1177/0032329210381238

Anderson, B. R. O'. G. (2006). Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. *Rev.* Edn. London; New York: Verso.

Antonsich, M. (2010). Searching for belonging - an analytical framework: searching for belonging. *Geogr. Compass* 4, 644–659. doi: 10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00317.x

Asad, T. (2003). Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity. California: Stanford University Press.

Astor, A., and Mayrl, D. (2020). Culturalized religion: a synthetic review and agenda for research. *J. Sci. Study Relig.* 59, 209–226. doi: 10.1111/jssr.12661

Bail, C. A. (2008). The configuration of symbolic boundaries against immigrants in Europe. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 73, 37–59. doi: 10.1177/000312240807300103

Barth, F. (1998). Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of culture difference. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press.

Beekers, D. (2021). Young Muslims and Christians in a secular Europe. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Behloul, S. M., Leuenberger, S., and Tunger-Zanetti, A. (Eds.) (2013). Debating Islam: negotiating religion, Europe, and the self; […Largely developed in the course of the international conference 'debating Islam: Switzerland - Europe' held at the University of Berne during 29th of September to 1st of October 2011]. 1. Aufl. Global-local Islam. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Bennett, A. (2018). Youth, music and DIY careers. *Cult. Sociol.* 12, 133–139. doi: 10.1177/1749975518765858

Brubaker, R. (2010). Migration, membership, and the modern nation-state: internal and external dimensions of the politics of belonging migration and membership. *J. Interdiscip. Hist.* 41, 61–78. doi: 10.1162/jinh.2010.41.1.61

Campbell, H., and Bellar, W. (2023). Digital religion: the basics. The basics series. London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Campbell, H., and Tsuria, R. (Eds.) (2021). Digital religion: understanding religious practice in digital media. Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic.

Castles, S., and Miller, M. J. (2009). The age of migration: international population movements in the modern world. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cesari, J. (2013). "Why the west fears Islam: an exploration of Muslims in liberal democracies" in Culture and religion in international relations (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan).

Crowley, J. (1999). "The politics of belonging: some theoretical considerations" in The politics of belonging: migrants and minorities in contemporary Europe. eds. A. Favell and A. Geddes (Aldershot: Ashgate), 15–41.

Deinet, U. (Ed.) (2009). Methodenbuch Sozialraum. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Döringer, S. (2021). "The problem-centred expert interview". Combining qualitative interviewing approaches for investigating implicit expert knowledge. *Int. J. Soc. Res. Methodol.* 24, 265–278. doi: 10.1080/13645579.2020.1766777

Durkheim, É. (2020). Die elementaren Formen des religiösen Lebens. Translated by Ludwig Schmidts. 5. Auflage. Taschenbuch/Verlag der Weltreligionen 2. Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen.

Evolvi, G. (2019). "#NousSommesUnis: Muslim youth, hypermediated internet spaces, and European Islam" in Prayer, pop and politics. eds. K. Limacher, A. Mattes and C. Novak. *1st* ed (Göttingen: V&R Unipress), 125–144.

Foucault, M. (1991). "The Foucault reader: an introd" in To Foucault's thought, with major new unpubl. material. ed. P. Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books).Reprinted. Peregrine Books

Giddens, A. (1991). Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age. Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press.

Guibernau, M. (2013). Belonging: solidarity and division in modern societies. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Hase, V., Boczek, K., and Scharkow, M. (2023). Adapting to affordances and audiences? A cross-platform, multi-modal analysis of the platformization of news on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. *Digit. Journal.* 11, 1499–1520. doi: 10.1080/21670811.2022.2128389

Hearn, A. (2008). Meat, mask, burden: probing the contours of the brandedself. *J. Consum. Cult.* 8, 197–217. doi: 10.1177/1469540508090086

Hedetoft, U., and Hjort, M. (2002). The postnational self: belonging and identity. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press.

Hoechsmann, M., Carr, P. R., and Thésée, G. (Eds.) (2018). Democracy 2.0: media, political literacy and critical engagement. Leiden Boston: BRILL.

Hsieh, H.-F., and Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qual. Health Res.* 15, 1277–1288. doi: 10.1177/1049732305276687

Instagram. (2022). How Instagram feed works. Available at: https://help.instagram.com/1986234648360433?locale=en_GB&cms_id=1986234648360433&maybe_redirect_pol=true&force_new_ighc=false (accessed [July 11, 2024]).

Katz, R., Ogilvie, S., Shaw, J., and Woodhead, L. (2022). Gen Z, explained: the art of living in a digital age. London: University of Chicago Press.

Kaya, A. (2012). "Islam, migration and integration: the age of securitization" in Migration, diasporas and citizenship (Basingstoke, New York. London Palgrave Macmillan).

Klandermans, P. G. (2014). Identity politics and politicized identities: identity processes and the dynamics of protest. *Polit. Psychol.* 35, 1–22. doi: 10.1111/pops.12167

Klausen, J. (2005). The re-politicization of religion in Europe: the next ten years. *Perspect. Polit.* 3, 554–557. doi: 10.1017/S1537592705280349

Korteweg, A., and Yurdakul, G. (2014). The headscarf debates: conflicts of national belonging. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Lähdesmäki, T., Mäkinen, K., Čeginskas, V. L. A., and Kaasik-Krogerus, S. (2021). "Politics of belonging: concepts and method" in Europe from below. (Leiden Boston: Brill), 25–44.

Lamont, M., and Molnár, V. (2002). The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 28, 167–195. doi: 10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.141107

Lüddeckens, D., and Walthert, R. (2018). "Religiöse Gemeinschaft" in Handbuch Religionssoziologie. eds. D. Pollack, V. Krech, O. Müller and M. Hero (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden), 467–488.

Madenoglu, D. N. (2022). Establishing a digital belonging: a study on the Turkish Diaspora's use of Facebook. *Diaspora Stud.* 15, 229–251. doi: 10.1163/09763457-tat00002

Mahmudova, L., and Evolvi, G. (2021). Likes, comments, and follow requests: the Instagram user experiences of young Muslim women in the Netherlands. *J. Relig. Media Digit. Cult.* 10, 50–70. doi: 10.1163/21659214-bja10038

Mainsah, H. (2014). Young African Norwegian women and diaspora: negotiating identity and community through digital social networks. *Cross. J. Migrat. Cult.* 5, 105–119. doi: 10.1386/cjmc.5.1.105_1

Marlowe, J. M., Bartley, A., and Collins, F. (2017). Digital belongings: the intersections of social cohesion, connectivity and digital media. *Ethnicities* 17, 85–102. doi: 10.1177/1468796816654174

Marzouki, N., McDonnell, D., and Roy, O. (Eds.) (2016). Saving the people: how populists hijack religion. London: Hurst & Company.

Mattes, A. (2017). Who we are is what we believe? Religion and collective identity in Austrian and German immigrant integration policies. *Soc. Inclus.* 5, 93–104. doi: 10.17645/si.v5i1.766

Mcauliffe, C. (2007). A home far away? Religious identity and trans *National* Relations in the Iranian diaspora. *Global Netw.* 7, 307–327. doi: 10.1111/j.1471-0374.2007.00171.x

Modood, T. (2009). "Muslims and the politics of difference" in Muslims in Britain: race, place and identities. eds. P. Hopkins and R. Gale (Edinburgh University Press), 191–209.

Mollerup, N. G. (2020). Perilous navigation: knowledge making with and without digital practices during irregularized migration to Öresund. *Soc. Anal.* 64, 95–112. doi: 10.3167/sa.2020.640306

Mookherjee, M. (2005). Affective citizenship: feminism, Postcolonialism and the politics of recognition. *Crit Rev Int Soc Pol Phil* 8, 31–50. doi: 10.1080/1369823042000335830

Novak, C. (2019). "Facing privilege in qualitative interview settings. The A-B-C-D-approach" in Prayer, pop and politics. eds. K. Limacher, A. Mattes and C. Novak. *1st* ed (Göttingen: V&R Unipress), 23–54.

Novak, C., Haselbacher, M., Mattes, A., and Limacher, K. (2022). Religious "bubbles" in a Superdiverse digital landscape? Research with religious youth on Instagram. *Religions* 13:213. doi: 10.3390/rel13030213

Novak, C., Mattes, A., Haselbacher, M., and Limacher, K. (2024). Adapting my religion: how young believers negotiate religious belonging. *Soc. Compass* 71, 347–364. doi: 10.1177/00377686241242267

Patel, S. (2023). E-mams and hybrid Muslims in "convergent spaces": intersections of online and offline religions for Canadian and American Muslims at reviving the Islamic Spirit convention. Ottawa: Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa.

Peterson, K. (2016). Performing piety and perfection: the affective labor of Hijabi fashion videos. *CyberOrient* 10, 7–28. doi: 10.1002/j.cyo2.20161001.0002

Pew Research Center. (2018). Being Christian in Western Europe. Washington DC. Available at: http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2018/05/14165352/Being-Christian-in-Western-Europe-FOR-WEB1.pdf (accessed [July 11, 2024]).

Pew Research Center. (2021). Social media use in 2021. Pew Research. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2021/04/PI_2021.04.07_Social-Media-Use_FINAL.pdf (accessed [July 11, 2024]).

Ratto, M., and Boler, M. (Eds.) (2014). DIY citizenship: critical making and social media. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Reviglio, U. (2017). "Serendipity by design? How to turn from diversity exposure to diversity experience to face filter bubbles in social media" in Internet science. eds. I. Kompatsiaris, J. Cave, A. Satsiou, G. Carle, A. Passani and E. Kontopouloset al., Lecture notes in computer science (Cham: Springer International Publishing), 281–300.

RMIT Europe. (2024). The politics of belonging. FutureLearn (blog). Available at: https://www.futurelearn.com/info/blog (accessed [July 11, 2024]).

Robards, B., and Lincoln, S. (2017). Uncovering longitudinal life narratives: scrolling back on Facebook. *Qual. Res.* 17, 715–730. doi: 10.1177/1468794117700707

Scheibelhofer, E. (2008). Combining narration-based interviews with topical interviews: methodological reflections on research practices. *Int. J. Soc. Res. Methodol.* 11, 403–416. doi: 10.1080/13645570701401370

Statistik Austria. (2022). Volkszählungen 1951 Bis 2001. 2021: Zusatzfragen Zur Mikrozensus-Arbeitskräfteerhebung Zu "Religionszugehörigkeit", 1. Bis 4. Quartal 2021. Available at: https://www.statistik.at/statistiken/bevoelkerung-und-soziales/bevoelkerung/weiterfuehrende-bevoelkerungsstatistiken/religionsbekenntnis (accessed [July 11, 2024]).

Tönnies, F. (2012). "Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft" in Studien zu Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft: Herausgegeben von Klaus Lichtblau. ed. F. Tönnies (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften), 231–255.

Vertovec, S. (2022). Superdiversity: migration and social complexity. *1st* Edn. London: Routledge.

Westbrook, D. A., and Saad, S. M. (2017). Religious identity and borderless territoriality in the Coptic E-diaspora. *J. Int. Migr. Integr.* 18, 341–351. doi: 10.1007/s12134-016-0479-8

Willmann, Johanna. (2022). Werte - Zoom 18: Religion in Der Pandemie. Werte-Zoom (blog). Available at: https://www.werteforschung.at/projekte/werte-zoom/werte-zoom-18-religion-in-der-pandemie/ (Accessed October 27, 2022).

Wimmer, A. (2013). Ethnic boundary making: institutions, power, networks. Oxford: OUP.

Wyrostkiewicz, M., Sosnowska, J., and Wójciszyn-Wasil, A. (2022). The Catholic influencer as a challenge for spiritual leadership in the age of social media. *J. Study Relig. Ideol.*, 21, 81–96.

Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns Prejud.* 40, 197–214. doi: 10.1080/00313220600769331