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Sjö, Sofia; Moberg, Marcus; Lövheim, Mia

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3. A Mixed-Method Approach to Youth and Digital Religion

Sofia Sjö, Marcus Moberg, and Mia Lövhelm

In the past decade, the scholarship on the religious lives and views of youth and young adults have increasingly started to recognize the impact of media and mass-mediated popular culture (e.g. Smith and Snell 2009; Barry et al. 2010; Collins-Mayo and Beaudoin 2010; Yip and Page 2013; Bobkowski 2014). In this chapter, we begin by briefly introducing some main trends in current research, focusing on the themes and questions of greatest relevance for this volume, as well as the primary methods employed in the area. We then introduce the mixed-method approach that was developed for and employed in the Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective (YARG) project and that all of the case studies in this volume build on. We then provide a general overview of the YARG survey findings that relate to religiosity and media use specifically. We conclude the chapter with a short discussion of how the methodological approach applied in this book can contribute to nuancing the concept of “digital natives”.

Young people, religion, and media

Today’s young adults constitute a generation that, at least in industrialized countries, has grown up in a media saturated environment where digital technologies has become a natural part of daily life (e.g. Bolton et al. 2013). As Bobkowski puts it “Emerging adults stand at the forefront of the mobile and digital media revolutions” (2014: 93). It remains important to recognize, however, that levels and practices of media use also vary within this generation and that not all young adults

should be assumed to be equally used to or comfortable with using new media technologies (Jones et al. 2010; Margaryan et al. 2011).

Media, religion, and youth is a relatively new and still very much developing and expanding field. One strand of research has focused on exploring what Lövheim (2012: 164), building on the work of Graham (2012), has termed the “religious media literacy” of younger generations, that is, younger peoples’ levels of knowledge “about the process through which religion is communicated through various media forms in contemporary society” and their development of abilities “to analyze and evaluate various outcomes and implications of this process.” This thus also entails exploring young peoples’ abilities to recognize and evaluate representations of religious themes and symbols as these appear in and are disseminated through various types of media. Bobkowski (2014: 94) has in turn argued for adopting the Media Practice Model, first developed by Brown (2000), arguing that this model can provide “a tool for identifying and organizing how emerging adults’ religious mosaics affect media practices, and the way in which these practices, in turn, shape religious mosaics.” The method discussion is sure to continue and the need for a greater focus on this topic is obvious.

A great deal of research in the field has explored the role of media as a source for information about religion and as a potential socialization agent. A Swedish study of a representative sample of individuals aged 16–24 specifically highlights the importance of media in shaping understanding of religion among people in this age group (Sjöborg 2012; Klingenberg and Sjöborg 2015; Löfstedt and Sjöborg 2019). While the group of respondents, about 20%, who were characterized by a high degree of religious socialization at home, participation in activities organized by religious denominations, and of self-identification with the options of “believer” or “religious”, reported coming into contact with religion via all the options provided in the survey

(family, school or work, friends, church, television, newspapers, books and the Internet), for those with weak or no connections to religion, media was clearly the most important source for information (Sjöborg 2012). The specific media via which the respondents most often come into contact with religion were the Internet and social media. These are consequently also argued to play a particularly central role in the religious literacy of young people today (Löfstedt and Sjöborg 2019). A British study of young people (ages 13–16) and their attitudes towards religion also highlighted the influence of media. Young people were reported to not only recognize the preponderance of negative images and selective reporting of media, but also the effect the images had on them (Arweck and Penny 2015). These and other studies (e.g. Moberg et al. 2019) suggest that media “have evolved into an increasingly central resource and environment of religious socialization among young people who have not been socialized into a particular religion through family or religious community” (Moberg and Sjö 2015, 102). However, for those characterized by a strong agreement with the items that signify connection to religious organizations and personal faith, media constitutes a source of information that supplements rather than supplants other religious information sources and socialization agents (Klingenberg and Sjöborg 2015; Moberg et al. 2019; Löfstedt and Sjöborg 2019). Other studies have explored how media not only provides information about religion, but also offers narratives and material for religious exploration. As highlighted by Clark (2003) and Petersen (2012), mediated narratives can play a central role in young people’s explorations of the supernatural and belief in ghosts, extraterrestrials, and other supernatural phenomena. Studies have also shown how films and TV-series have inspired the mixing of elements from different religious and belief traditions (e.g. Arnett and Jensen 2002; Berger and Ezzy 2009).

Many early studies of religion and social media focused on young peoples' use of different online discussion forums (e.g. Lövheim 2004; Sjöborg 2006). These studies highlighted, among other things, how factors such as the level of moderation of a site and the level of heterogeneity among users affected the possibility of dialogue between participants to develop. A high level of moderation and degrees of homogeneity in terms of shared beliefs and values seems, at least in some contexts, to lead to less polarized discussions (e.g. Sjöborg 2006). On sites that had a high level of heterogeneity and turn-around of participants, dialogue seemed to be harder to bring about. Furthermore, the particular forms that interaction takes on online platforms was also shown to play an important part. As Lövheim argues, "The format of short, written contributions and the high inflow of new participants seem to encourage polarized debates rather than open dialogue" (Lövheim 2008: 207). Despite the often identified problems with online discussion forums, some studies have argued that individuals' memberships in online groups devoted to their own religious faith can be shown to bring social benefits similar to those generated by membership in offline religious groups, such as for example a sense of group identity and belonging (e.g. McKenna and West 2007).

Studies have also explored how religion is expressed on social network sites (SNS) and how religiosity connects to activity. Bobkowski and Pearce (2011: 759) argue, based on a study of the platform Myspace, that "social media users rarely disclose much about religion in their online profiles and when they do, their disclosures tend to be brief and superficial." Disclosure is tied to ideas of self-presentation and the religiosity of the profile owner. How one understands the place of religion in society and the religiosity of one's "friends" are also associated with religious self-disclosure. If one sees religion as a public matter and has religious friends one is more likely to disclose one's religious identity in one's Myspace profile. In a study of American young adults by

Miller et al. (2013), Catholics and Evangelical Protestants were more likely than the “not religious” to be SNS members. They also found that those who reported reading the Bible actively were less likely to use social media sites. In Smith’s and Snell’s study of religious and spiritual lives of American emerging adults (2009), those that were identified as “Devoted,” (i.e. those who scored highest on a number of measures of religiosity) were least likely to participate in social networking sites, but most likely to take part in religious activities. Previous qualitative studies have also highlighted how social media can provide safe spaces for interaction around religious questions for different minority groups. This has, for example, been shown to be the case for queer youth in Britain (Taylor et al. 2014), young Muslims in the Netherlands (Leurs et al. 2012), and young Jews in Britain (Abrams et al. 2013).

Much of the research on digital religion and youth has highlighted the important link between life and interaction online and offline. As argued by Lövheim and Campbell, as a consequence of the increasing ubiquity of digital media, research needs to move beyond a simplistic division between “offline and “online” and focus more closely on the interlinkages between these two spheres of contemporary life when it comes to religious practices, discussions, and patterns of belonging (e.g. Lövheim and Campbell 2017; Campbell and Lövheim 2011). Thus, trends and patterns in digital religion are closely intertwined with broader ongoing transformations in contemporary religious life and practice (Campbell 2012). The particular ways in which religious beliefs and practices primarily expressed and carried out on digital media platforms might serve to bring about actual changes in social relations, power hierarchies, or decision making procedures in religious organizations on various local and national levels constitutes a pertinent topic for future research. As Herbert and Gillespie (2013: 12) argue, the many individual case studies available do not point to social media thus far having “had an impact on mainstream

religious institutions, or indeed on mainstream public spheres” (2013: 12). Social media, they argue, enable the formation of networks that provide “the means with which to perform activities which appear to be valuable to their participants” (Herbert and Gillespie 2013: 12). Thus, it is fair to assume that the importance and impact of social media on religion will grow over time.

The present volume can contribute to advance research on the significance of digital media for the lives of young adults in several ways. First, most studies to date focus on either one particular geographical and religious context or on comparing a smaller set of contexts. As previous research on social media has shown, culture influences how social media is used (e.g. Bolton et al 2013) and is thereby likely to have important implications for how religion is experienced, expressed, and discussed across particular broader contexts. Second, most studies produced in the area have focused on young people’s religious use of digital media in isolation from other aspects or dimensions of their religious lives. The data gathered in the YARG project allows us to relate our respondents’ digital media use to several different aspects of their religious lives. Lastly, many previous studies have used a qualitative ethnographic case study approach, focusing on smaller groups. While such studies remain important and worthwhile, the YARG project provides an apt illustration of the many new avenues of analysis that a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments make possible.

The YARG mixed-method approach

In this section, we present the YARG-project, concentrating on who took part in the project, the aims of the project, the methods used, and some aspects of special interest for the study of media and religion.

YARG was an Åbo Akademi University Center of Excellence in Research between the years 2015–2018 and further funded by the Academy of Finland between the years 2015–2019. The project was led by prof. Peter Nynäs and directed by a core team of researchers based at the Department of Comparative Religion at Åbo Akademi University in Finland. Thirteen national contexts were included: Canada, China, Ghana, Finland, India, Israel, Japan, Peru, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States. In each national context, the project had local investigators, usually scholars connected to the universities where the data was gathered. The local investigators helped in planning the project, choosing research assistants, conducting fieldwork, and have also been key to analyzing the data and presenting the results. The project also aimed to encourage co-authorship and to support the careers of young researchers. Consequently, the chapters in this volume are the result of collaborative work between both local investigators and research assistants and members of the core team in Finland (for more on YARG see Klingenberg and Sjö 2019; Nynäs et al. forthcoming).

The YARG-project focused on three main research questions:

- What are the characteristics of the religious subjectivities and values among young adults globally in terms of configurations of religious, spiritual, and secular assumptions regarding beliefs, attitudes, practices, and experiences?
- What are the main discourses that constitute and shape the above subjectivities in terms of institutional, social, cultural, and other related influences?

- What methodological and theoretical implications follow from our results with regard to the conceptualization of contemporary religion?

Particularly in relation to the second question, media was identified as a main topic of interest and was consequently given a fair amount of attention in the research design.

To explore the chosen research questions, a mixed-method approach was adopted. The project combined the following instruments and methods: a general survey containing the Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ); The Faith-Q-Sort (FQS); and semi-structured thematic interviews. With the exception of Japan, where only the survey was conducted, all instruments were applied in all the other studied contexts. The Inglehart-Welzel “Cultural Map of the World” (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp>) provided the macro theoretical justification for the choice of countries included. The studied contexts were also chosen in order to achieve an as broad variety as possible in terms of religious contexts. In all contexts, the project focused on young adult university students aged 18–30. However, due to differences in the ages at which people attend university in the different studied contexts, we find some variations regarding age in the data. Particularly in the samples from Canada and Sweden some students older than 30 also took part in the study. The choice of focusing on university students (a convenience sample) was largely motivated by reasons related to feasibility and access to participants on an international, cross-cultural scale. However, young adult university students also make up the generation whose religiosity and religious outlooks are particularly prone to influences from media, consumer culture, social movements, and changing values (e.g. Arnett and Jensen 2002; Collins-Mayo and Beaudoin 2010; Bobkowski 2014). Our international partners and assistants

were asked to seriously consider issues regarding sampling and choose groups of respondents carefully and with regard to the diversity of young people in all studied contexts.

The survey

The survey was distributed to approximately 300 students in all studied contexts. Altogether 4964 individuals took part in the survey. The survey included six item blocs (A–F), along with the PVQ (discussed below). As with all instruments used in YARG, the survey was translated into twelve different languages using a double forward and back translation process. The item blocs of the survey dealt with the following topics:

- A) Participants' current life situation
- B) Social life
- C) Sources for news and information
- D) Views and convictions
- E) Wellbeing and happiness
- F) Personal details

In developing the questions, previous national and international survey questions were used to allow for comparisons. The parts of the survey that are of particular interest for the present volume relate both to item bloc B, which included questions regarding social life, and item bloc C, which included questions on media use and sources for news and information. Item bloc B included several items focusing on the religiosity of the participants. Participants were asked about their

religious belonging, self-assessed degrees of personal religiosity, self-assessed degrees of religiosity of the parental family, and frequency of engagement in both public and private religious practice. Item bloc C asked participants about their use and frequency of use of different types of media, Internet use, sources for news and information about current affairs, and whom/where one turns to for guidance when making important decisions in life. We will return to these questions shortly and present an overview of the survey findings regarding both religion and media use and the correlations between these.

The PVQ

The PVQ is a widely used survey for assessing basic value types. Building on Milton Rokeach's work on the nature of human values (1973), Schwartz developed a model of universal values (1992). According to Schwartz, the values that we are likely to find in all cultures are those that represent universal requirements of human existence. These values, Schwartz argues, can be organized under a limited number of value types. The PVQ thus entails a universal approach to human values and has been used and validated in a great number of studies (e.g. Schwartz et al 2012). The value model published in 1992 included 10 value types. A revised version, which includes 19 distinct value types, was published in 2012 by Schwartz and an international team of researchers. The revised model has been tested with multiple samples from several countries. The current value survey is a questionnaire of 57 portrait items with a 6-point Likert-scale from very much like me to not at all like me.

In this volume, the PVQ is not used, but it is worth pointing out that values also have been related to media use. Studies on media use and values that use Schwartz's PVQ have shown how certain types of media use is linked to certain value orientations (e.g. Besley 2008; Bagchi 2015).

Frequent Internet use has, for example, been linked to both “openness-to-change” values and “self-enhancement” values, which are contrasting values in Schwartz’ model (Besley 2008).

The FQS

The Faith Q-Sort (FQS) is a new instrument developed by prof. David Wulff (2019) and further developed by the YARG team in collaboration with Wulff (FQS-b) designed to aid the systematic exploration of religious subjectivities: a person’s viewpoints, opinions, beliefs, attitudes etc. vis-à-vis religion and other worldview-related topics and issues. Q-methodology is specifically developed for the study of smaller groups and samples (e.g. Watts and Stenner 2012).

In a Q-methodological study, participants are asked to sort a sample of statements – in the case of the FQS 101 statements – according to how well they think that the statements reflect their own views on the topic. The statements are provided in the form of a set of cards called a Q-Set. The cards are placed on a data entry sheet that includes the same number of slots as there are cards. This means that all cards are always placed in relation to one another. Whereas each sorted array of statements is essentially unique, it is possible to discern both shared and unique patterns in the sorts. Through factor analyses of the completed sorts, common patterns of sorting are revealed. These patterns are called “prototypes” and can be described as “socially shared viewpoints” about the topic of interest, in our case religion- and worldview-related issues (Watts and Stenner 2012).

When developing the FQS and its array of statements, Wulff drew on a broad variety of sources in order to take into account observations from the history of religions, different religious traditions, and observations from both the psychology and sociology of religion (Wulff 2019). However, the employment of the FQS in a large international study required some adjustments to the instrument. In cooperation with Wulff, the YARG core team and group of international partners

developed a revised version of the set (the FQS-b) which included additional culture-specific statements. In this volume, the FQS data features prominently in Chapter 10 focusing on the Finnish context. In all studied contexts, with the exception of Japan, 40–50 individuals completed the FQS.

The Interviews

In-depth thematic interviews were conducted with all respondents who participated in the FQS. The interviews followed a pre-defined general structure that was organized around three main themes of interest:

1. Interviewees' experience of the FQS and thoughts about and own personal engagement with religion/spirituality or similar positions of a secular character.
2. Interviewees' personal history, self-understanding, and current life situation.
3. Interviewees' thoughts about the broader social and cultural contexts and communities that they are embedded and involved in.

In relation to each theme, the interviews also focused on four topics that the interviewers were asked to remain sensitive to:

1. Changing modes of socialization in the lives of the interviewees.
2. Interviewees' thoughts on/involvement in/engagement with social movements.
3. Interviewees' use of and engagement with media and social media environments.

4. Interviewees' relationships to a consumerist ethos and their sensibilities with regard to consumption and consumer choice.

The research assistants who conducted the interviews were all provided with an interview guide that they were asked to adapt to their own settings. As a result, it was possible to generate largely similar interview data from all studied contexts, but also some data that was unique to each context. Along with the survey data, the interview data features prominently in each chapter of the present volume, thus giving voice to our respondents. In the following, we will begin our analysis with a general overview of the survey findings that are of particular interest from the perspective of the relationship between religion/religiosity and digital media use.

Religiosity and media use

The case studies in this volume, which focus on China, Ghana, Finland, Israel, Peru, Poland, and Turkey, each provide insights into the specifics of the explored contexts. Before turning to the case studies, a general overview of religiosity, media use, and the connection between religiosity and media use in the contexts studied in YARG is useful. As highlighted in the introduction and in the brief research overview in this chapter, media is often argued to be essential for today's young adults, constituting a natural and taken for granted part of the world they live in. Media in different forms is also argued to tie into the religious lives of young adults. So far, however, research on both media use and media engagement and the link between religion and media has mostly been explored in Western contexts. How religious are the young adult university students studied in

YARG, what kind of media do they engage with, and to what extent do they turn to media when exploring questions of religion and when looking for guidance in life?

Figure 1 shows that Ghana stands out in the YARG data as a place where self-identifying as religious is very common.

Insert Figure 1 here

Figure 1. *Mean for question B10: Regardless of whether you consider yourself as belonging or close to a particular religious group, community, or tradition, how religious would you say you are?*

We find some variations in the results for questions probing self-reported frequencies of public religious practice (B12: Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you take part in religious ceremonies or services these days?) and private religious practice (B13: Apart from when you are at religious ceremonies or services, how often do you engage in private religious or spiritual practices, such as worship, prayer, or meditation?) (Figure 2). As in the case with self-identified religious belonging, Ghana stands out, with 63.6 % of Ghanaian respondents indicating that they participate in public religious practice once a week or more often, as compared to 15.9% for the total sample. For private religious practice, the corresponding numbers are 82.3% and 32% respectively. Taken together, these results clearly reveal low levels of religious belonging and frequencies of both public and private religious practice— with the exception of the respondents in Ghana (and the sub-sample of Muslims in Israel

that do not show separately in the figures below). However, in all contexts we also find respondents who score highly on indicators of religiosity and religious practice.

Insert Figure 2 here

Figure 2. *Percentages of those that report taking part in public and private religious practice once a week or more in all the studied contexts in YARG.*

If we turn to questions of media use, we see both variations and consistencies. Question C1 asked participants to indicate which media they use and how frequently they use them. The choices provided were newspapers/magazines, radio, television, and the Internet. In all contexts, the Internet emerged as the form of media that most participants reported using daily, while we see more variations regarding the uses of other media (Figure 3). However, as it is nowadays possible to access all these other forms of media via the Internet, it is not clear whether the results indicate that older forms of media are losing ground to new media or not.

Insert Figure 3 here

Figure 3. *Reported daily use of newspapers/magazines, radio, television, and the Internet in all the studied contexts in YARG.*

We also see a great deal of similarities when exploring for what purposes our participants report using the Internet. Three of the most common everyday uses of the Internet in all contexts

were communication, finding information, and entertainment. For the total sample, the results for each are 72.1%, 62.9%, and 53.2% respectively. In the total sample, 33.3% also reported using the Internet every day for developing social networks. Among the least commonly reported uses we find “selling things or services,” which 61.3% of the total sample said they “never” used the Internet for, and “religious or spiritual services and issues,” which 54.4% of the total sample reported “never” using the Internet for. This last figure is of particular interest for us. Even though only 2.4% of the total sample reported using the Internet for “religious or spiritual services and issues” on a daily basis, 31.4% reported “occasionally” doing so. Particular national figures for this type of use are discussed and analyzed in several chapters in this volume.

The survey also allows us to explore how media use and religiosity relate to each other. Mirroring the results of previous research on the connection between religion online and offline (e.g. Campbell and Lövheim 2011), the YARG survey also reveals a positive correlation between higher degrees of self-assessed personal religiosity, higher frequencies of public and private religious practice, and use of the Internet for “religious or spiritual services and issues” (Table 1). Consequently, it is more likely that respondents who identified as more religious or religiously active on one of the scales used also reported turning to the Internet more frequently in religion-related matters. Religious practice offline and online therefore, to some extent, seems to go hand in hand even though the correlation is usually not greater than moderate (with “weak” referring to a correlation strength of 0-0.2, “moderate” to a correlation strength of 0.2-0.4, and “strong” a correlation strength of 0.4-1). While the survey results do not provide us with any further information about what the relationship between religiosity and using the Internet for religious or spiritual services and issues actually might entail in practice, the interview-data sheds much more light on that issue.

Country	N	B 10	N	B 12	N	B 13
Canada	410	.382**	410	.261**	406	.433**
China	325	.171**	318	.310**	319	.210**
Finland	484	.439**	483	.390**	478	.562**
Ghana	420	.238**	417	.209**	416	.261**
India	298	.297**	295	.259**	296	.210**
Israel	761	.419**	748	.328**	735	.450**
Japan	324	.233**	318	.164**	322	.162**
Peru	321	.387**	318	.410**	316	.442**
Poland	299	.377**	295	.269**	292	.365**
Russia	343	.193**	337	.181**	331	.266**
Sweden	328	.340**	326	.356**	325	.441**
Turkey	347	.248**	338	.304**	342	.293**
USA	304	.330**	294	.272**	293	.418**

Table 1. *Uses of the Internet for religious or spiritual purposes correlated with self-reported religiosity (B 10), public religious practice (B 12) and private religious practice (B13). Correlation used: Kendall's tau-b. B10 uses N = 4964, B12 & B13 excludes "I don't know" answers (N = 4897, N = 4871 respectively). **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).*

Previous research has also indicated that identifying as religious can correlate with using certain media and avoiding others (Barry et al. 2012). An analysis of self-assessed degrees of

personal religiosity, frequency of public and private religious practice, and using the Internet for different activities only gave one consequent result, which is the one reported above regarding using the Internet for religious or spiritual services and issues. Regarding the other activities asked about in the survey (communication, developing social networks, finding information, entertainment, buying things or services, uploading self-created content, health or wellbeing related services, and political issues) the results were mixed and never indicating more than either a weak or moderate positive correlation (those with high scores on questions probing religiosity were more likely to use the Internet for certain activities), or negative correlation (those with high scores on questions probing religiosity are less likely to report using the Internet for certain activities). Thus, in for example Finland, we see a moderate negative correlation between private religious practice and using the Internet for entertainment ($\tau = -.223$), and in Poland we see a weak negative correlation between public religious practice and using the Internet for selling things or services ($\tau = -.199$).

When it comes to the relationship between which media one reports using (question C1, newspapers/magazines, radio, television, and the Internet) and indicators of religiosity, the survey shows no strong indication of correlations between religiosity and Internet use. The exceptions to this general pattern are provided by the Indian sample, where we can see a weak negative correlation between self-identified religiosity and using the Internet ($\tau = -.148$), and Canada where we find a weak positive correlation between private religious practice and Internet use ($\tau = .095$). Using the Internet was thus seen as a taken for granted activity for almost all of our respondents, regardless of how religious or non-religious they reported being or how actively they reported engaging in either public or private religious practice.

The proliferation and growing importance of social media can also clearly be seen in the results. When asked from where the respondents get information about news and current affairs out of seven options provided (newspapers/magazines, radio, television, social media, online news sources, friends or other people, and other sources), the most popular options for the total sample were social media (80.7%) and online news sources (79.1%). Friends and other people were also a popular option (71.1%). Among the less popular options were television (58.1%), newspapers/magazines (50.3%), and radio (36%). 2.6% reported using other sources. The respondents were also asked who or what they turn to for guidance in life and when making decisions (C4: Which of the following do you rely on for guidance as you live your life and make decisions?). Social media was one of the options provided. For the total sample, this option ended up in the middle of the list with 15.1% choosing this option. In this case, the highest numbers were found in the Ghanaian sample, with 27.1% reporting turning to social media, while the lowest numbers were found in the Peruvian and Polish samples where only 8.7% reported seeking guidance from social media. The most frequently chosen options for the total sample were family (85.6%), own reason (81.3%), and trusted friends (76.8%). The least popular option across the total sample (when excluding the option none) were national religious leaders, who only 2.5% reporting turning to for guidance.

Digital natives?

As discussed in the introduction to this volume, the present young adult generation has often been argued to have a special relationship to new media and the digital world, having been referred to using labels such as “digital natives,” the “net generation,” and the “media generation.” The

present volume contributes to a critical discussion of the meaning and validity of these concepts. Previous research has revealed clear variations when it comes to media use among members of this generation. Not all young adults are equally used to or comfortable with all types of media (Jones et al. 2010; Margaryan et al. 2011). Individual differences with regard to, for example, gender, education, and digital media literacy also need to be taken into account. As Gunkel points out “even if the category of digital natives is valid, it does not follow that the said digital natives have a privileged understanding of technology, the parameters of which have been naturalized” (Gunkel 2014: 151). Furthermore, as already noted, the research to date has largely focused on young adults in Western contexts, and more research is needed about how differences with regard to social, cultural, geographical, and religious setting influence media use among young adults (Bolton et al. 2013). The findings from the quantitative part of the YARG-study contribute to nuancing generalizing conceptions of “digital natives” in several ways.

The survey shows that a large percentage of our respondents reported using the Internet on a daily basis. This clearly illustrates how the Internet has developed into a natural and taken for granted means for connecting, finding information, and for entertainment among the young adults who participated in the study. While the survey results also clearly indicate that our participants are active and independent digital media users who regularly turn to online sources for finding out about news and current affairs, does this make it justifiable to refer to them as “digital natives” or are there other factors that better explain their behavior?

Firstly, since our respondents were all university students it was expected that the majority of them would be avid Internet users. Previous studies have shown that Internet use is not only related to age but that it also correlates with education in such a way that more highly educated individuals tend to be more active Internet users (Pew Research Center 2018). In addition,

university students are often expected to use the Internet, as courses and other study related information are often made available through online platforms. The survey confirms the significance of access to higher education in order to be an active user of digital media. Thus, the respondents of the study represent a special niche of today's young adults who are active Internet users partly because of their position as university students, but not necessarily because they are digital natives.

Second, the notion of digital natives builds on the idea that today's young adults are somehow different from previous generations, and that their engagement with digital media has considerably impacted their ways of interacting as compared to previous generations (Persky 2001). Our data does not allow us to make comparison with previous generations, but the combination of survey and interview data gathered in various locations enables us to qualify some of the assumptions about how digital media has come to affect the religiosity and religious outlooks of present-day young adults. As we will see when turning to the different case studies and the interviews, an openness towards new media does not necessarily entail a privileging of online interaction as a means for expressing one's personal religiosity. Rather, digital media is more often perceived as providing an important complement to offline face to face interaction.

Third, though social media and online resources provide vital and frequently turned to sources for information (including in religion-related matters), respondents repeatedly report also turning to other sources such as family and friends (although such interactions might also increasingly occur through social media). As argued by among others van Dijck (2013), new media and social media work because they build on established human ways of interacting. While they can and do affect the ways in which we interact, their impact has perhaps not been as radical as

prophesized by some early studies on the presumed impact of the Internet on human interaction and sociability.

To summarize, our respondents are generally active Internet and social media users and if frequent engagement with new media makes one a digital native, then that label would be descriptive of our sample. However, as indicated by the survey results and explored in more detail in the case studies in this volume, digital media is most frequently perceived as a complement and not a substitute to other sources of information. While this does not reduce its importance for the participants of our sample, we need to resist temptations to generalize on basis of an under-theorized and empirically weakly supported notion such as digital natives. In this regard, the YARG-study fills an important gap in research by contributing with a broad and varied body of data that provides an overview of both similarities and differences in the relationship between religion and digital media use across a broad variety of national and cultural contexts while simultaneously giving a voice to lived realities of the individuals involved.