



CASE REPORT



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## Typing my Religion. Digital use of religious webs and apps by adolescents and youth for religious and interreligious dialogue

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### ABSTRACT

With 13 religions, 8061 religious centers, 2 million of young people, Catalonia accommodates a wide range of religions. Almost 90% of people own digital devices. In this framework, we aim to study the consumption of digital media by Catalan millennials from all over the region, with only young people from the city of Barcelona being excluded for the purpose of analysis in future projects. Religious apps, games, websites, online communities and participation in forums are some of the main issues we want to explore. We also aim to establish whether or not these devices contribute to consolidate online religious communities and to achieve inter-religious dialogue. For fulfilling this goal, we surveyed more than 1800 young people aged 12–18 years. Methodology also included in-depth interviews with coordinators from youth organizations and netnography. This research is based on previous investigations into communication, digital media, sociology and religion by authors such as Campbell, Elzo, Leurs and Hemming.

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## Introduction

'I am a baptized Catholic and 100% atheist'. This is the answer that a Catalan teenager between the age of 12 and 18 gave when he was asked about religion. What was he expressing? Lack of knowledge? Rebelliousness?

In the study we present aims to answer this question and to frame this expression in a context where youth have more access to knowledge and data than they could ever have imagined. Digital tools have changed the way people live and also the way teenagers experience their adolescence. Technological changes drive social changes. Addressing this situation, we decided to bring young people, religion and technology together and go around the country to take stock of younger generations using what is called digital religion (Campbell 2013).

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We found that 2 million people in Catalonia are in the range of 15–35 years of age, which is labeled ‘youth’. We must also take into account that Catalonia (Spain) has always been a welcoming region for people from all over the country and the world. This long-established hospitality makes the region one of the most multireligious places in Spain, 13 different religions currently cohabit there peacefully.

At the same time, Catalonia’s capital, Barcelona, is officially the Mobile World Capital, hosting annually the most important global event of the mobile sector: the Mobile World Congress. Having this digital status, it is not strange that almost 90% of the people own digital devices.

## Objectives

The main goals of this research are:

- To investigate the consumption and influence of digital religion among young people in Catalonia. We want to confirm or refute the hypothesis that high use of technology among youth, together with the variety and diversity of religions that our region hosts, suggest that the digital sphere could be a new space where young people can pursue their faith, as they do in all aspects of life. We use the term ‘digital religion’ to indicate websites, apps and games related to any of the 13 faiths that are present in Catalonia.
- To unveil young people’s interest or indifference to religion in the digital sphere. Generally, it seems that religion is not important for adolescents. If faith and spirituality are not present in youth’s offline world, there would be no reason for it to be present in their online world either. But, if they are believers, the digital space is a new place to live their faith in.
- To study how adolescents use the digital realm to learn about their own religion. Internet offers youth and adolescents access to a considerable amount of information about their own religion and others. We hypothesize that believers use it to learn about their own religion and use it to live their faith in new and more flexible ways. Nevertheless, the digital space is also full of unreliable information that could confuse youth.
- To pursue how digital space could become a place for interreligious dialogue, a meeting place devoted to learning about other religions. In digital space, believers might find new settings where they not only learn from other religions, but also find, meet and get to know each other, and where communities are created.

## Literature review

The theoretical basis for this research is comprised of the existing publications that have dealt with the intersections between our three main focal points: young people, religion and digital tools. In addition, there are also noteworthy references that focus on each of these points separately, as well as authors from related and cross-sectional disciplines such as sociology and psychology. The complexity of human beings is not the main focus of this research, but we are interested in individuals’ religious concern

or indifference, as well as their participation at the community level. Therefore, we will bear in mind considerations that come from these mentioned sciences in order to analyze the role that religion plays in the life of teenagers.

### Adolescents, religion and values

Beginning with the concept of ‘youth’ and its broad scope, the subject requires setting certain limits. In this sense, we limit ourselves to location begin by looking at the considerations expressed by Spanish authors on this issue. Gervilla (1993) and Elzo (2005) are notable authorities on this subject. Both authors lay the foundations for the analysis of values and culture among the younger generation. On the one hand, Elzo analyzes the reasons behind young people’s happiness and concludes that they have more resources than previous generations, yet they are lacking in attention from their parents. It also shows that young people associate happiness with adopting altruistic values. Gervilla (1993) situates education in postmodernity and talks about a crisis of values on a personal, social and cultural level; the author also reflects on education rooted in the present, which neither looks toward the past nor wonders about the future.

They have established the foundations for analyzing the values among the younger generation in Spain. The report *Jóvenes 2010* [Spanish Youth] (González-Anleo et al. 2010), edited by Fundación Santa María, revealed that 81% of their survey participants believed in God. In Catalonia, the Directorate for Youth Affairs of the Generalitat de Catalunya publishes the report *Estat de la joventut* [Youth Situation] (Direcció General de Joventut 2016). The most recent edition does not address religion directly but discusses aspects that tie in with the values promoted by religion: school drop-out rates, teenage pregnancy and the abortion rate for women between 15 and 29 years of age.

Over recent decades, religion and teenagers have constituted two concepts that arouse the interest of some authors. Benson, Donahue, and Erickson (1989) review them in the compilation *Adolescence and Religion: A Review of Literature from 1970 to 1986*. They concluded almost 30 years ago that religion loses prominence in lives of adolescents who had been believers during their childhood. Their sample was integrated with American teenagers. Gunnoe’s (2000) study found that key factors for measuring religiosity in young Americans are: type of faith and church attendance during childhood. Parental influence is a key factor raised by Kim-Spoon, Longo, and McCullough (2012). These aspects that originate in the adolescents’ childhood go beyond whether they are believers or not: religious values could affect their life decisions in terms of sexuality, alcohol or even drugs. For some parents, religion is a guarantee that their children will face these ‘dangers’ (Kim-Spoon, Longo, and McCullough 2012).

We also find the European publication *Teenagers’ Perspectives on the Role of Religion in their Lives, Schools and Societies*. In this compilation, Rosón and Veinguer (2009) compare religious diversity in Spanish and French high schools. They revealed that Spanish teenagers identify the notion of religion with their own beliefs, and they also argue that none of the students considered religion as something ‘cool’. The abovementioned Spanish Fundación Santa María is also the editor of the report

*Jóvenes 2000 y religión* [Youth 2000 and Religion] (González-Anleo, González, and Elzo 2004), which specifically addresses the socio-religious evolution of young people in Spain up to 2004. A similar and more recent study framing this issue in North American society was carried out in 2016 by the Pew Research Center. The research goes beyond the term youth and talks about ‘millennials’ (people born between 1981 and 1996), and it analyses whether they are more or less religious than previous generations. Results indicate that about half of millennials say they believe in God, and four-in-ten of them admit that religion is important in their lives. Numbers compared to previous generations of American society show a drop in religiosity level.

### **The identity in digital times**

In this case, notable contributions include the theories on psychosocial development by Erikson (1963) – who considers children as ‘active explorers’ of reality – compared with other theories like the ones by Piaget (1963), Bandura (1987) or Thorne (1993) in readers on developmental psychology such as the one by Shaffer and Kipp (2007). Elkind (1964, 1970) relates three of the stages from Piaget’s theory of development with three stages in religious development during childhood and adolescence, which he defends as running in parallel. Other post-Piagetian approaches must be taken into account, as theory of Vygotsky (1962) on how culture is transmitted generation after generation and how development is influenced by environment and society. Newel and Simon (1972), Siegler (1981) and Munakata (2007) are also noticeable authors on human cognitive development and, specifically, on how human mind processes information. With authors like Baron and Byrne (2005) in the field of social psychology, the reflection focuses on social pressure and people’s need for belonging; that is also the case for Deaux (1993) or Lea, Spears, and Groot (2001). Sandín and Pavón (2011) address the process of socialization at school in multicultural contexts as well as belonging to an ethnic group and the identification of differences. Drawing from sociology, we found the contributions of Giddens (2006).

All of the abovementioned authors assert that adolescence is a stage in which an individual’s identity is being formed. In the present day, we also have to bear in mind the technological tools that young adolescents have at their disposal. In this sense, we look at reports such as *L’esclatxa digital a la ciutat de Barcelona* [The digital gap in Barcelona] carried out by Fundació Mobile World Capital Barcelona (2016), which shows that 90% of the population owns and/or has access to digital tools. Authors such as Papacharissi (2011) address the influence of digital media in the development of youth identities. Lenhart (2015) analyses this subject specifically regarding the use of social media and its effect. In the same field, we have Rueda and Giraldo (2016), who study young people’s profile pictures on Facebook to identify new forms of representation brought about by these technologies, the new spaces they provide for expressing and exploring identity, and the resulting way in which they are reshaping values and culture. Sheldon and Bryant (2016) focus on Instagram and investigate the reasons for using it. The authors point out a direct proportional relationship between intense social activity and the elevated use of the site and further detect certain narcissism among its users. Looking at Snapchat, Piwek and Joinson (2016) study the values derived from this network.

*Youth 2.0: Social Media and Adolescence* is a compilation written by Leurs (2016). He analyses the standpoint of young immigrants and looks into how certain digital hierarchies are formed. The author shows how social power relationships associated with race, ethnicity, religion and gender also occur on the Internet, creating digital gaps that reach beyond Internet access and ownership of digital tools. The same author, along with Sandra Ponzanesi, heads up a series of publications in the project *Wired Up: Digital Media as Innovative Socialization Practices for Migrant Youth*, where they study the digital presence of young diaspora immigrants.

Digital religion also plays an important role in our theoretical framework. In this field, we look at contributions made by Campbell (2013), who dealt specifically with religious mobile applications and by Helland (2005). We also find authors who have looked into specific apps, such as Padrini (2015). Beyond apps, Spadaro (2014) reflects on the ways to experience faith online and the construction of religious identity on the Internet, which is also discussed by Lövheim (2015).

## Methodology

This research was developed from December 2015 to May 2016. In order to achieve the abovementioned goals, we used a methodology based on surveys, interviews and netnography.

We selected the particular segment of what is called ‘young people’ that we wanted to focus on. According to similar researches, such as that of Benson and Donahue (1995), an adolescent is ‘a youth between the ages of 12 and 18’. Thus, classifications established by Erikson (1968) define the stage as the intersection between childhood and maturity: a moment when adolescents wonder who they are, when they need to establish a social foundation for defining their roles as they approach adulthood. In Spain, these ages coincide with two featured academic stages for youth, secondary education (from 12 to 16) and bachelor (from 16 to 18). The choice of this age range also implies the observation of religious and digital activity at a time in young peoples’ lives when the influence of parents and legal tutors, on the one hand, and social environment and friends, enter into a certain conflict and imbalance.

The process began with us contacting centers and organizations all over Catalonia, except in the city of Barcelona because similar subjects in city had been already studied in several occasions. The following reports are results of these previous researches in the city of Barcelona: *Enquesta Jove Barcelona 2015* [Survey for youth Barcelona 2015] (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2015), *Adolescents a Barcelona 2010* [Adolescents in Barcelona 2010] (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2010) or *Informe sobre la realitat de la joventut a Barcelona 2003* [Report about youth in Barcelona 2003] (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2003). We contacted 320 organizations, all of them representing different faiths and typologies:

- Public, private and subsidized private schools and high schools in Catalonia, both secular and affiliated with one of the 13 religions present in the country.
- Youth centers that work with young people in different fields and with a variety of profiles.
- Youth associations affiliated with the different faiths existing in Catalonia.

We first contacted authorized personnel in charge of the youth groups. A useful guide for finding these institutions was the Map of Religious Minorities in Catalonia (Fons, Luque, and Forteza 2012).

Having obtained the authorization from the organizations, we sent out the surveys. Respondents could choose to fill them out in digital format or on paper. In total, we sent out 2000 paper-format surveys and obtained 1691 responses. Regarding the digital format, we sent emails, made phone calls and used social network sites to contact the organizations. However, the outreach was broader because those organizations also shared the survey with others, which makes it difficult to provide an exact number for the associations that were contacted in total. The number of responses we received was 1858.

The questionnaire was designed and prepared previously, with 22 open-ended and multiple-choice questions. The choice of format is justified by the object of study and the objectives that we hoped to achieve. This structure had three parts: profile, the use of technology and religion:

- Profile: determining age, gender, origins and whether young interviewees are believers or not (see [Annex 1](#)).
- 2.0 Uses: analyzing how young people use technology in general is a necessary first step before looking into how it derives into uses associated with digital religion. In this area, we also hoped to uncover the levels of access to digital tools.
- Technology and religion: the core of the research, which specifies how young people use digital tools in the sphere of religion. In this case, the responses from the young people had to do with the specific activities they engage in, the websites they visit, the apps they use, the networks and online communities they participate in, and even the religious games they play. Likewise, above and beyond instrumental uses, we asked if they share their digital religious activity with the people around them, and how they see their faith represented in the media.

Young people's answers (see [Annex 2](#)) were compared with interviews carried out with educators and directors from several of the participating entities. Interviews are used in this research as a complementary technique. We want to count on adults' approach, which provides qualitative information to complement the figures and opinions stemming from the surveys. The directors we interviewed were chosen according to the variety of ages and religions in each of their organizations, as well as the degree to which digital tools were present in their programs. As such, we interviewed: Daniel Osiàs, Director of Projects for the Marianao Foundation<sup>1</sup> (Sant Boi de Llobregat); Pep Oliveras, ICT manager for the Marianao Foundation (Sant Boi de Llobregat) and Abel Camps, a mentor at El Teb Raval<sup>2</sup> (Barcelona). Likewise, we wanted opinions from associations linked to specific religions. To that end, we interviewed Dina Mouyal Amselem and Aaron Achrich, of the Union of Jewish Students of Barcelona, and Gagandeep Singh, from the Gurdwara Guru Darshan Sahib Sikh Temple (Barcelona). In these two cases, we held the interviews face to face with a questionnaire we had prepared in advance, which included both general and personalized questions. These two techniques are supported by studies such as *Jóvenes 2000 y religion* [Youth 2000 and Religion], in which a survey was developed involving a

specific sample of young people, which was combined with interviews, or Benson and Donahue's (1995), who used the same approach.

Netnography (Kozinets 2010) is a derivation from ethnography and is defined as the analysis of user behavior on the Internet. Using netnography, the responses and opinions expressed by young people and organizations can be compared with the activities carried out by the open online religious communities in which they participate. We followed young people's behavior in the following digital communities: Facebook Muslim Multicultural Youth and Facebook Sant Esperit Youth Association. In our planning stage (Kozinets 2010), we chose these two communities because they are both communities that we learned about from the young people who responded to our survey, because they are led by the young people themselves. These communities are active, with more than a hundred followers, in the Catalan context and they are linked to the two largest religions represented in our study: Islam and Catholicism. These were the motives, during the planning stage (Kozinets 2010), which led us to the decision to analyze the two digital spaces in question. As the next step, the methodology we followed proposes that the researchers join the communities under study. It also lays out the possibility of obtaining data through observation, without participation in the community's activities. Having chosen the section option, we designed the following form intended to help us to study the communities:

Name:

Faith:

Number of members:

Public/private:

Frequency of updating:

Type of publications:

- Events
- Messages of faith
- Prayers

Publishing format:

- Text
- Video
- Image
- News

Level of interactivity:

Relationship with other communities:

## Data

The results obtained by this methodology show that almost seven out of 10 young people in Catalonia believe in one of the 13 faiths that the region accommodates. Christianity (52%) is the most prevalent, followed by Catholicism (31%) from other denominations and by Muslims (8%). Two out of 10 young people interviewed were from a minor religion.

We also obtained data about their digital activities. This indicated that 87% of them use the Internet several times daily. They can connect because eight out of 10

have their own computer, 37% of them since they were 10 years old or younger. Regarding cell phones, 93% of them own one of these devices and use it daily on several occasions. Finally, five out of 10 youth in Catalonia own a tablet (see [Annex 2: Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6](#)).

Their idea of using a device involves being on some of the most famous social networks: Instagram (78%), Facebook (71%), Google+ (68%), You Tube (60%) and Snapchat (60%) (see [Annex 2: Table 7](#)). In this sense, it is worth pointing out that 52% of the surveyed youth tell that they use digital tools without any parental control (see [Annex 2: Table 10](#)).

We conclude from the data that 16% of the interviewed youth use digital religion. Of them, 57% use it for communicating with other people, 43% for doing academic projects, 37% to learn about their religion better and 30% to be aware of activities organized by their communities. Twenty percent of them use digital religion to know more about other religions (see [Annex 2: Tables 8 and 9](#)).

We also wondered in what extent youth make it public that they use digital religion. Data show that 61% do not tell their parents and that 64% do not tell their friends, with 8% of them telling only their friends who believe in the same religion. When asked what they would do if a friend showed them a religious digital tool, we saw that 13% responded they would listen to their friend (see [Annex 2: Table 11](#)).

In this research, we also asked the young people which public figures and institutions associated with religion they follow on social network sites. They can be divided into the following categories:

*Public figures:* Dalai Lama, Islamic Feminists, Father Javier Vilanova, Father Josep Àngel Sainz Meneses, Mark Hart, Mohamed Zeyara, Pope Francis, various catechists.

*Religious organizations:* Bishopric of Girona Youth Delegation, Catalan Christian Youth Association Movement, Delejove Barcelona, Delejove Terrassa, Inter-diocesan Secretariat for Youth Ministry in Catalonia and the Balearic Islands, Islamic and Cultural Council of Catalonia, Jesuits of Catalonia, Joventuts Marianes Vicencianes (Vicentian Family), JW Jehovah's Witnesses, LDS, Life Teen, Muslim Multicultural Youth, Sant Esperit Youth Association, Young Immigrants Association of Niomré (Senegal).

*Religious social associations:* Caritas, Mans Unides, Vicent Ferrer Association.

*Communities:* Atid Jewish Community, Camino a la Vida Eterna Pentecostal Church, Israeli Community of Barcelona, Our Lady of Lourdes Hospitality – Vic, Taizé Community.

*Online communities:* Dios Es Bueno, Hijab, Islam Forever, Musulmanes por Amor a Allah, Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa.

*Schools:* Jesuits of Lleida, Marists, Sagrat Cor School, Sagrada Família Diocesan School, Tecla Sala School.

*Youth centers:* Joan Sunyol Youth Center, Sant Ignasi Youth Center.

*Religious media:* Catalunya Cristiana, Córdoba Internacional TV, CTV (Egyptian Christian Television Network), Touba Medias.

*Religious singers:* Matt Maher.

*Professors:* Francesc Torralba.



Confusion and lack of knowledge are how we would summarize the sensations we experienced after processing all the answers obtained. In terms of religious culture, the situation for Catalan youth is complex. We could classify them into three groups: believers, non-believers and passive believers. As their name suggests, the first ones believe and practice a faith. They mainly made up of Muslims, Evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses. The non-believers are completely opposite in that they do not care about religion at all. The third group is in the middle and comprises mostly Catholic youth. In most cases, the activity in digital religious communities is an extension of traditional offline activities (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2011).

Addressing the non-believers, we find several reasons for this based on our research:

*Lack of knowledge:* The majority of these young people come from entirely secular educational environments. In many cases, they have only biased knowledge of specific faiths, which leads them to make largely unfounded value judgments. We draw this conclusion from our qualitative research. At the field 'Religion' we found repeatedly answers as: 'I don't have religion', 'I don't believe in anything and anyone', 'I don't watch religion', 'I don't use religion' or 'Religion is a fake'. Furthermore, 52% of believers told that they are 'Christians', but have not specified what kind of Christianity do they believe in.

*Lack of interest:* Whether or not they are familiar with a faith, they do not consider religion to be something necessary in their lives. Some of them have a preconceived idea, criticize believers without arguments or they directly insult some religions, which is an extreme that should be addressed if we do not want a society based on hate and social representations that are not a reality. We also reach this conclusion 'Religion is not necessary', 'I don't find it necessary nor important talking about religion with my friends, we don't care about religion', 'I am not interested on religion' or 'People don't care about religion'.

*Social considerations:* Religion is not 'cool' enough for them or for their social lives, and it could make them the object of ridicule. Believers talk about religion only with other believers (see [Annex 2: Table 11](#)).

According to the Pew Research Center, as the number of believers decrease, the affiliation of those who believe gets stronger. In this sense, we have detected that there is a sector of young Catholics who are active, participative and involved in their religious communities – both in person and digitally. The young people who participate in activities organized by Christian groups are the ones who show the greatest interest in their religion. We see how interest in religion and the feeling of faith is an individual and personal matter that is generally externalized in an environment where the same faith is shared. These are the young people who, of their own accord, participate in religious activities. It is worth stressing that, in this case, they are young people from religious families and schools, so they have received religious values from two of the main agents of socialization (Giddens 2006). In contrast, it is worth noting that many of the young people we surveyed who attend religious schools do not have that desire. Friends appear here as another transmitter – or not – of religious values. The opinions of friends could influence whether or not youth take into account their interests in religion and religious values.

Their parents placed them in religious schools, but adolescence is a period of development when individuals begin to question realities that they had accepted up to

that point simply because of their immediate social context (Echeverría 2011). According to Echeverría (2011), it is a period of suspended identity (Lipman 1991), where people begin forging their own paths beyond imposed childhood values in order to move toward their achieved identity. This is contingent upon the person's development of independent critical thinking. In any case, the author states that society understands independent thinkers as those who think for themselves, who do not blindly follow what others say or do.

The influence of religious values translates into a particular attitude in certain circumstances that occur during adolescence, where parents hope that their children will take into account both religious values and independent critical thinking. These situations are sexuality, alcohol and even drugs. In this sense, parents feel that religion can become a protective layer for their children and help them to make the right decisions in crucial moments (Benson, Masters, and Larson 1997).

In looking at active young believers, we could not leave out minor religious groups. For them – most of whom are immigrants – religion is essential in their lives, and digital tools represent a major advance.

Therefore, it is significant to understand how diasporas make use of online space in their every-day immigrant lives and how new media can create digital diasporas, new forms of 'coexistence' for diasporic groups on the web. (Tsagarousianou 2004, 62)

The digital diaspora refers to the virtual community of immigrants, which has been made possible due to the advent of digital tools. Authors like Alonso and Oiarzabal (2010) confirm how digital spaces are used by newcomers as elements for community building. It is important to ascertain whether or not digital tools help them by overcoming social, emotional and political barriers. The digital sphere is in this sense a double-edge sword, especially in diasporic contexts.

Religious digital communities could be welcoming spaces for integration, especially in the situation of immigrants. In these cases, the fact of belonging to a religion that is not widespread in their immediate surroundings makes their beliefs an even stronger part of their identity. For young people who come from other countries, religion is one of the avenues for continued contact with their culture of origin (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2011). Finding a digital window that keeps them connected to that environment can alleviate the feelings of homesickness they may experience.

Mass migration and digital mediation have led to a situation where relationships are maintained over large geographical distances, beyond national boundaries. The Internet is used to create transnational imagined audiences formed by dispersed people, which Appadurai describes as "diasporic public spheres" (1996, 4). (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2011, 3).

## Religion and identity

We could not overlook the idea that religion is one featured factor when it comes to finding not just one's own identity but also that of the other. The importance of belonging to a community in the process of building one's social identity is a response to the different levels of implication in religious groups that we uncovered.

In the case of immigrants, it is a mean to defend their personality; in the case of Catholic people, it is also a way to differentiate themselves from those who are not the 'same' and who are neighbors. This issue requires further analysis that we are not going to address in this research, but it is important to take into account the representations derived from these social imaging constructions and their influence on how religions are still viewed socially at younger ages.

In this sense, Deaux (1993) defined social identity as a self-definition that orients how we conceptualize and evaluate ourselves. This construction of social identity occurs in the socialization process that people experience from birth to death as they adapt to their environment. During socialization, people learn and interiorize the sociocultural elements in their surroundings and integrate them into their personalities under the influence of various social agents (Sandín and Pavón 2011). During the process, belonging to a group generates a sense of identity.

For young active believers, religion is the element that connects their community and holds it together; it is the group they feel a part of (Salem 2016). In many cases, religion is present in their family community, but it is not always accepted among their friends. That is why most believers prefer not to talk about their digital religious activities (64%) with their friends. Some of qualitative answers received show this reality. Several adolescents who said they use digital religion confessed that they prefer not to tell it to their friends because they do not want to seem 'ridiculous' or to 'suffer bullying'.

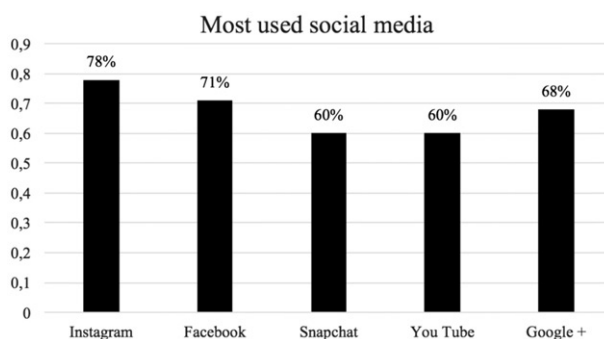
Until 20 years ago, this feeling of belonging was limited to real physical interpersonal spaces. The transfer of communities into digital environments has led to variations in certain aspects, although they are essentially virtual reproductions of traditional spaces of socialization (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2011). As such, they also contribute to the creation of identity (Spadaro 2014).

However, offline organizations have created their digital platforms to broaden their reach. Then, it seems that these spaces are a mere extension of reality or a secondary place to announce activities, especially for the people who manage them. Despite this, the responses to our surveys and the results of the netnographic analysis show us that these platforms could go further. They serve as a space where young people engage in a continuous experience of their faith, which is the reason that leads them to belong to their respective communities.

In online form, these communities are hosted mainly on social networks. They are new community spaces that contribute to the creation of young people's social identities because it becomes a new space where to know and meet people, is a new environment, a new kind of socialization agent. For the first time, they can choose which people they want to know, considering common interests, worries and patterns of thinking. Some authors have pointed out how the internet gives young people control in building identities for themselves freely as they choose from among various options – a possibility that is not as easy in real life.

### **The realm of the image**

In this research we also see how images play a noticeable role. The results indicate that Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and Snapchat fall at the top of the ranking (see



**Figure 1.** Most used social media.

Figure 1 and Annex 2: Table 7). If we analyze the main characteristic of these networks, we see a clear reflection of the society of the future. Some studies have referenced the relationship between adolescent users' profile pictures, their personalities and online behavior. Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008) assert that these are spaces where young people 'show themselves rather than explaining themselves'.

At the same time, we find that young people are captivated with immediacy. One of the most popular social networks is Snapchat, a space where posts remain for just 24 h. It is used to share funny pictures of oneself. In addition, it is a space where users can see who has viewed their snapshots – reinforcing the need for that external recognition we mentioned in the previous paragraph. The interest in Snapchat shows how the generation that we surveyed forms the so-called 'liquid society' (Bauman 2002), a postmodern community with liquid values that lives in the present and is not concerned with the past or the future. Plus, this particular network shows how easy it can be to correct or forget an error in digital space. This idea, adapted to a reality where mistakes cannot be erased, could create a clash between the two worlds, with society itself standing to lose the most.

### **Lack of digital religious dialogue among Catalan youth**

Very few young people (20%) asserted that they use digital tools with the intention to learn about other religions. Online religious spaces are a platform for self-affirming one's own identity and values; that is why they have not served as spaces for inter-religious dialogue in a wide-reaching environment that would lend itself to just such a use. Abel Camps (Source: Personal Interview, 17 May 2016) of the El Teb Raval association states that the young people he works with look online for information about their own faith, but not about other faiths. In general, however, we detect that the present is still a very incipient period, where communities are still transferring their in-person affairs and activities into digital formats. We have to point out that we actually did not find any activities that were exclusively online. They are at a stage that is not yet what Helland (2005) calls online religion.

The interviewed youth have access to infrastructure and possess the tools and necessary skills for interreligious communication, so this is not a reason to justify the lack of it. We see, then, that in the world of communication, religious communities of young people still live in isolation. Here, there appears again the debate about the

benefits and disadvantages of digital tools for interreligious dialogue, what we called a double-edged sword. In this way, and considering that communities contribute to the creation of people's identities, perhaps the young people of the coming generations will be more aware of differences and diversity.

### **(Non-)Shared digital religion**

Inter-religious dialogue does not fail to occur only on social network sites. In this sense, it is worth pointing out that we see young people engaging in more individual uses of items, such as religious apps or websites.

We should first stress that all the young people in our research used religious apps or websites related to their own faiths. In addition to participation, young people also consult the mentioned websites for purely informative reasons. The available apps are a way for them to organize religion in their lives. In fact, when we analyze the common characteristics of all the apps that the young people said they use, we see that most of them provide prayer times, reminders for certain prayers, answers to questions of faith following specific precepts from the scriptures and the lyrics of religious songs. As Gangandeep Singh (Source: Personal Interview, 22 May 2016), member of the Gurdwara Guru Darshan Sahib Sikh Temple of Barcelona says: 'It is better to carry praying material in your mobile apps so you do not forget it or also if you do not have a temple nearby where you can pray'.

Some of the young people surveyed expressed the desire for applications that would put them in contact with other people whose profiles indicate they are from the same faith. Therefore, apps should be even more social and promote an experience of faith that involves more interaction and participation. The most popular current apps are rooted in individualism because most of these tools offer functionalities to manage religion individually but not to share scriptures, messages, prayers or to learn more about other religions. In a negative sense, this could be interpreted as a lack of dialogue and connection; however, an individualized practice of religion helps people adapt it to their day-to-day lives.

Thus, these tools are often developed overseas and are directed at a global audience of believers, with the result that young people do not feel they provide a familiar space. We also observe that the digital spaces based on religion are disconnected from one another. Whereas the majority of webs and apps are informative, networks promote participation and the creation of relationships and establish a new concept of, for example, praying.

Thinking about interactivity, we cannot leave out religious games. They combine information and participation and could promote religious knowledge and values among youth. Although the variety of games used by youth in Catalonia is not very broad, we do see that they disseminate religious values using dynamics that can be attractive to adolescents.

In most cases, we find religious games that are competitions rooted in the teachings of the sacred scriptures. Others in the video game category introduce the user to certain episodes from the scriptures. Many of the games that were mentioned by young Catalans in the survey, however, merely use religious narratives and characters to create their own action.

Sisler (2008) mentions games in the field of religion from the standpoint of the representation of the other. In his case, he reflects on how Muslims are represented in games played by adolescents. The author compares the representations in Western societies with how Muslims represent themselves, and points out the influence of games on existing social prejudices. There is the risk that while under the protection of play they may not always provide real information, so they may not help spread real knowledge about religion.

## Conclusion

Our journey through Catalonia investigating how Catalan youth engage with digital religion allowed us to reach some notable conclusions that answer the questions we had before the research and let us confirm or refute our previous hypothesis.

First of all, we detect that most young Catalans are believers (65% of the total participants) and that many of them lack certain knowledge about their own religion, as qualitative research unveils with several contradictory answers about religion, faith and the importance they give to these issues in their lives. Furthermore, they identify with their religion due to family connections or because of their surroundings. Some of them identify the term 'religion' only as it relates to their own faith (Rosón and Veinguer 2009). Our data, however, make us discard our hypothesis about youth indifference on religion. The 65% of believers is a key indicator. However the 16% of them use what we call 'digital religion' (Campbell 2013), so we confirm a low utilization of these tools (see Annex 2).

We identify three kinds of religious implications among Catalan youth, both online and offline (believers, non-believers and passive believers). Young people from minority religious groups are users of these tools. Forty-six percent of surveyed believers are Muslims, 15% are Orthodox Catholics and 13% are Evangelical Christians.<sup>3</sup>

For those who are newcomers, digital religion is a way to preserve their identity and culture (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2011). In diasporic contexts, religion connects them to their homeland.

Drawing information from the research, we also realize that these online religious communities of youth go beyond the Internet. They are usually offline organizations that use digital tools only as instruments, but they still have not reached a very high digitalization level and thus do not organize their activities exclusively online. Despite this, social media plays an important role, as young people integrate these communities. The most used social networks – Instagram (78%), Facebook (71%), Google+ (68%), You Tube (60%) and Snapchat (60%) – host young believers and give them spaces to interact. In this sense, image is one of the most used formats. It is important to point out that young people admit that they participate in and use digital religion only if they are sure that their interlocutor shares the same beliefs. Data show that 64% of adolescents who use digital religion in Catalonia do not tell their friends that they do it; the 8% admit that they only tell about their use of digital religion those who share their same faith.

In this sense, our study underscores the importance of religion when it comes to identity. Adolescence is a period when people develop their personalities, and the influence of family and friends establishes whether or not their religious values are

relevant. If the nearest community of a teenager is linked to religion, this will become a relevant issue. We have also seen how important it is for immigrant people who just want to preserve their identity and spirituality and be connected to them, no matter where they are. Thus, we found with data and in-depth interviews that religion creates a sense of community among all the active believers we interviewed.

Regarding specific digital tools, we conclude that websites and apps could lead to more individual religious practice, since some of those most used by youth do not have a high level of interaction and do not include functionalities to promote it. We could look at this situation from both a positive and a negative perspective. On the one hand, webs and apps promote a flexible experience of religion; but the majority of these tools do not let users establish relationships; only two of the 20 found apps have a functionality to connect with other users. About games, we have seen that they are didactic instruments for spreading knowledge; but some games use merely a religious aesthetic for other purposes, which can contribute to a lack of understanding.

Despite everything, the use of digital religion still does not lead to interreligious dialogue.

In Catalonia, we do not find digital communication among communities from different religions. 20% of those adolescents who use digital religion use it to learn about its own or other religions (see [Annex 2: Table 9](#)). We also find that adolescents are interested in their own religion, but few assert that digital tools are a way to learn about other religions. According to this conclusion, our hypothesis about the creation of communities and interreligious dialogue is not entirely confirmed. Adolescents and youth in Catalonia who use digital religion are viewing it as a tool, but not as a new space where to create new relationships and communities (see [Annex 2: Table 9](#)). Taking into account that these are next generations, future research should address how bridges could be built between these different religious online communities in Catalonia.

## Notes

1. <http://www.marianao.net/>.
2. <http://elteb.org>.
3. These percentages have been calculated taking the total of participants using digital religion.

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## Annex 1: SURVEY

### Date:

### PROFILE

Age:

Male  Female

City:

Religion:

### DIGITAL DEVICES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

#### 1. Where do you connect to the Internet? (You can choose more than one option)

- Home.
- School.
- Association.
- Free WI-FI zones.

#### 2. How frequently

- Several times a day.
- Once a day.
- Once a week.
- Hardly ever.

#### 3. Do you have your own computer? Yes No

(If your answer is 'Yes')

a) Beginning at what age?

b) How often do you use it?

- Several times a day.
- Once a day.
- Once a week.
- Hardly ever.

**4. Do you have your own cell phone?** Yes No

(If your answer is 'Yes')

- a) Beginning at what age?**  
**b) How often do you use it?**

- Several times a day.
- Once a day.
- Once a week.
- Hardly ever.

**c) Is it an smartphone?**

- **Which model do you have?**

(If the answer is 'No'):

- **Would you like to have your own cell phone?**
- **Which model would you like to own?**

**5. Do you have your own tablet?**  Yes  No

(If the answer is 'Yes'):

- a) Beginning at what age?**  
**b) How often do you use it?**

- Several times a day.
- Once a day.
- Once a week.
- Hardly ever.

- **Which model do you have?**

(If the answer is 'No'):

- c) Would you like to have your own tablet?**  
 - **Which model would you like to own?**

**6. Which social network sites are you on?**

- Facebook.
- Twitter.
- Google +.
- Instagram.
- Pinterest.
- You Tube
- Other ones. Which ones?

**7. Which religious people are you following on these sites?**

**8. At what age did you begin using social network sites?**

**9. Would you like to be in a specific social network site but you can't? Which one? Why?**

USE

**10. Do you use digital devices for religious activities?**

- No.
- Yes, but I don't connect specifically for that reason.
- Yes, and I connect specifically for that reason.
- a) If you chose the second or third options: In which religious activities do you use digital devices? (You can choose more than one option):**
  - To communicate with friends.
  - To learn about my religion.
  - To learn about my own and other religions.

- To talk with friends about religion.
- To share messages of faith.
- To find out about religious activities.
- To look for information on my religion for school.
- To share news about my religion.
- To share news about other religions.
- To search for images and videos about my religion.
- To search for images and videos about other religions.
- To upload images and videos about my religion.
- To upload images and videos about other religions.
- To upload images and videos about my religion organization.
- To participate in forums about my religion.
- To participate in forums about all religions.
- To play games about my religion.
- To play games about another religions.
- To pray.
- Other.

**b) Which language do you use in these activities?**

**c) Which digital device do you use for these activities?**

**11. Which religious website do you visit? How did you know about it?**

**12. Do you receive any newsletter about your religion or about other religions?**

**13. Which apps do you use for the abovementioned activities? (Ex. Baha'i Prayers). How did you know about it?**

**14. Do you think a new app about religious activities will be useful for you?**

- Yes.
- No.

**a) What functionalities should it have?**

**15. Do you play religious digital games? Which ones? How did you know about them?**

**16. Do you think a new digital game about religious activities will be useful for you? What functionalities should it have?**

**17. Which of the following affirmations do you agree?**

- I believe that digital information about my religion is always true and reliable.
- Digital media publish unreliable information about my religion.
- I do not look at digital information about my religion.

**18. If you have any doubt or question about religion, who give you answers?**

**19. Do your parents monitor your mobile devices and follow you on social network sites?**

- They control me on social network sites and follow me, and I accept it.
- They give me total freedom.
- I don't want them to monitor my devices or to follow me on social network sites.

**20. Do you tell your parents that you use these tools for religious activities?**

- Yes.
- Yes, they use digital religion too.
- No. Why?

**21. Do your friends know that you use tools that deal with religion?**

- Yes.
- Yes, and they also use them.
- Only if they are of the same faith.
- No.

**22. If a friend shows you a site, game or app about religion ...**

- They don't use any.
- I'm not interested.
- If they share my same religion, I take a look.
- I take a look, no matter what religion.
- I have heard of any.

**Annex 2: Tables**

 See [Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11.](#)
**Table 1. Age and gender.**

Age	Total	Percentage (%)	Gender	Total	Percentage (%)
12	315	17	Female	924	50
13	398	21	Male	918	49
14	303	16			
15	260	14			
16	190	10			
17	131	7			
18	78	4			

**Table 2. Religion.**

Religion	Total	Percentage (%)	Confession	Total	Percentage (%)
Believers	1.212	65	Baha'i	5	0.41
Non-believers	646	35	Buddhism	13	1
			Catholicism	377	31
			Christianity	628	52
			Evangelical	27	2
			Islam	95	8
			Orthodox	78	4
			Sikhism	5	0.4
			Judaism	17	1
			Mormonism	7	1
			Jehovah's Witnesses	9	1
			Other religions	11	1

**Table 3. Internet use.**

Where do you connect to the internet?	Total	Percentage (%)	How frequently?	Total	Percentage (%)
Home	1.803	97	Several times	1.612	87
School	1.089	59	Once a day	179	10
Association	65	3	Once a week	27	1
Free WI-FI zones	1.034	56	Hardly ever	29	2

**Table 4. Cell-phone use.**

Do you have your own cell-phone?	Total	Percentage (%)	Beginning at what age?	Total	Percentage (%)	How frequently?	Total	Percentage (%)
Yes	1.730	93	Before 10	420	24	Several times	1.550	90
No	108	6	Between 11 and 15	1.269	73	Once a day	84	5
			Between 16 and 18	13	1	Once a week	25	1
			After 18	2	0.12	Hardly ever	35	2

**Table 5.** Tablet use.

Do you have your own tablet?	Percentage		Beginning at what age?		Percentage		How frequently?	
	Total	(%)	Total	(%)	Total	(%)	Total	(%)
Yes	952	51	Before 10	358	38	Several times	259	27
No	876	47	Between 11 and 15	516	54	Once a day	235	25
			Between 16 and 18	44	5	Once a week	149	16
			After 18	4	0.43	Hardly ever	315	33

**Table 6.** Computer use.

Do you have your own computer?	Percentage		Beginning at what age?		Percentage		How frequently?	
	Total	(%)	Total	(%)	Total	(%)	Total	(%)
Yes	1.554	84	Before 10	575	37	Several times	849	55
No	302	16	Between 11 and 15	903	58.1	Once a day	424	27
			Between 16 and 18	51	3.28	Once a week	161	10
			After 18	2	0.13	Hardly ever	142	9

**Table 7.** Social media use.

Which social network sites are they on?	Percentage		Beginning at what age?		
	Total	(%)	Total	(%)	
Instagram	1.451	78	Before 10	770	41.4
Facebook	1.310	71	Between 11 and 15	976	52.5
Google+	1.264	68	Between 16 and 18	11	0.6
You Tube	1.122	60	After 18	2	0.1
Snapchat	1.122	60			
Twitter	711	38			
Pinterest	179	10			

**Table 8.** Digital religion.

Do you use digital devices for religious activities?	Total	Percentage (%)
No	1.508	81
Yes, but I don't connect specifically for that reason	189	10
Yes, and I connect specifically for that reason	105	6

**Table 9.** Digital religion uses.

For which religious activities do you use digital devices?	Total	Percentage (%)
To communicate with friends	192	57
To learn about my religion	125	37
To learn about my own and other religions	68	20
To talk with friends about religion	46	14
To share messages of faith	76	22
To find out about religious activities	104	30
To look for information on my religion for school	146	43
To share news about my religion	65	19
To share news about other religions	30	9
To search for images and videos about my religion	94	28
To search for images and videos about other religions	47	14
To upload images and videos about my religion	54	16
To upload images and videos about other religions	17	5
To upload images and videos about my religion organization	37	11
To participate in forums about my religion	38	11
To participate in forums about all religions	11	3
To play games about my religion	36	11
To play games about other religions	15	4
To pray	46	14

**Table 10.** Parents monitoring.

	Total	Percentage (%)
<i>Do your parents monitor your mobile devices and follow you on social network sites?</i>		
They control me on social network sites and follow me, and I accept it	414	22
They give me total freedom	963	52
I don't want them to monitor my devices or to follow me on social network sites	342	18
<i>Do your parents know that you use digital technologies for religious activities?</i>		
Yes	180	10
Yes; and they also use them	115	6
No	1.289	61

**Table 11.** Sharing religion with friends.

	Total	Percentage (%)
<i>Do your friends know that you use tools that deal with religion?</i>		
Yes	100	5
Yes, and they also use them	90	5
Only if they are of this same faith	142	8
No	1.183	64
<i>If a friend shows you a site, game or app about religion</i>		
They don't use any	735	40
I'm not interested	148	8
If they share my same religion, I take a look	122	7
I take a look, no matter what religion	109	6
I have never heard of any	538	29