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Mediatization of Religion: Toward Understanding Pilgrimage in the Digital Environment

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The mediatization of pilgrimage in the context of its formation as a socio-communicative institution is examined as a process of transforming traditional sacred experience under the influence of digital technologies and media. The **purpose** of this article is to analyze pilgrimage as a media phenomenon through the use of interpretive tools such as storytelling, digital diaries, interactive maps, and QR codes (Beebe, 2008; Kanaan-Amat, Crous-Costa, & Aulet, 2019; Lundby, 2014). The author explores how digitalization enables new forms of participation in pilgrimage practices, including inclusive online formats for people with disabilities, youth, and users of social networks and virtual media platforms (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). The analysis focuses on the formation of virtual communities of pilgrims on media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Viber Web, and WhatsApp Web, which facilitate not only communication but also spiritual involvement in liturgies, sermons, and journeys. Virtual catalogs, presentations, lectures, and other digital tools are becoming powerful instruments for positioning pilgrimage routes in the digital media space (Barbato, 2022; Dimodugno, 2023). As a **conclusion**, the article offers a scholarly rationale for the institutionalization of pilgrimage as a socio-communicative institution, a process that emerges through its mediatization (Panchenko & Rizun, 2024; Couldry, 2007). In this context, the use of artificial intelligence tools − particularly ChatGPT − is gaining relevance, opening new opportunities for personalized engagement within digital pilgrimage practices (Zhou et al., 2023; OpenAI, 2023).

Keywords: mediatization, pilgrimage, socio-communicative institution, sacred communication, digitalization, interpretive drift, storytelling

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Медіатизація релігії: до осмислення паломництва в цифровому середовищі

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Медіатизація паломництва в контексті становлення соціальнокомунікаційного інституту розглядається як процес трансформації традиційного сакрального досвіду під впливом цифрових технологій та медіа. **Метою** статті є аналіз медіатизації паломництва як прояву медіатизації релігії та становлення його як соціальнокомунікаційного інституту, зокрема сторітелінгу, digital-щоденників, інтерактивних карт і QR-кодів (Beebe, 2008; Kanaan-Amat, Crous-Costa, & Aulet, 2019; Lundby, 2014). Автори досліджують, як диджиталізація сприяє появі нових форм залучення до паломницьких практик, зокрема для людей з інвалідністю, молоді, користувачів соціальних мереж і віртуальних медіаплатформ (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). У центрі аналізу − створення віртуальних спільнот паломників у таких медіа, як Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Viber Web, WhatsApp Web, що забезпечують не лише комунікацію, а й духовну участь у літургії, проповідях, подорожах. Віртуальні каталоги, презентації, лекції та інші цифрові інструменти перетворюються на потужні засоби позиціонування паломницьких маршрутів у цифровому медіапросторі (Barbato, 2022; Dimodugno, 2023). У **висновку**, статтею запропоновано наукове обґрунтування процесу інституціалізації паломництва як соціальнокомунікаційного інституту, що відбувається внаслідок його медіатизації (Panchenko & Rizun, 2024; Couldry, 2007). У цьому контексті особливої актуальності набуває використання інструментів штучного інтелекту, зокрема ChatGPT, відкриває нові можливості для персоналізованої взаємодії в межах цифрових паломницьких практик (Zhou et al., 2023; OpenAI, 2023).

Ключові слова: медіатизація, паломництво, соціальнокомунікаційний інститут, сакральні комунікації, диджиталізація, інтерпретаційний дрейф, сторітелінг

Theoretical background

The theoretical and methodological basis of the work is modern research in the field of social communications, mediatization, pilgrimage, and religious tourism. The circle of scientists whose works became the basis of the study includes: A. Baggio (2005), M. Barbato (2022), K. Beebe (2008), R. Butler and V. Suntikul (2018), and K. Casellas and others. (Casellas et al., 2019), N. Collins-Kreiner (Collins-Kreiner, 2010), N. Couldry (Couldry, 2007), S. De Ascaniis and L. Cantoni (De Ascaniis & Cantoni, 2016), A. De Sousa and C. da Rosa (De Sousa & da Rosa, 2020), D. Dimodugno (Dimodugno, 2023), T. Duda (Duda, 2019), K. Helland (Helland, 2016), S. Hjarvard (2008), H. Hussein and Y. Wang (Hussain & Wang, 2024), D. Johansen and A. Ohrvik (Johannsen & Ohrvik, 2020), H. Jorge (2023), M. Kanaan-Amat, N. Crouse-Costa, S. Olet (Kanaan-Amat et al., 2019), E. Kasneci et al. (2023), O. Lo Presti (2011), K. Lundby (2014), L. Martino (2012), P. Mansson et al. (Månsson et al., 2020), S. Murray (Murray, 2021), D. Olsen & Timothy (Olsen & Timothy, 2018), OpenAI (2023), S. Panchenko & Rizun, 2024), E. Paschinger (Paschinger, 2019), E. Polus & Carr, 2021), D. Priymak (Приймак, 2016), V. Rizun (Rizun, 2008; 2024), E. Sánchez-Amboage et al. (2017), V. Schulz (Schulz, 2004), K. Shenderovsky (Шендеровський, 2013), S.

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Ignatieva (Ігнатьєва, 2013), T. Tan and K. Perry (Tan & Perry, 2022), E. Verón (Verón, 2014), Zhou et al. (Zhou et al., 2023).

The works of these scholars highlight the issues of digital religion, storytelling, interpretive drift, digital tourism, the use of generative artificial intelligence technologies, in particular ChatGPT, as an interpretive and communication tool in the digital pilgrimage experience, interactive formats, and the institutionalization of pilgrimage as a socio-communication institution.

Problem statement

Pilgrimage as a socio-communication institution is a complex phenomenon that combines spiritual practices, tourism activities, and institutional forms of organization. In the current digital era, the traditional sacred experience of pilgrims is being transformed by the media, which necessitates a rethinking of pilgrimage in the context of mediatization (Hjarvard, 2008; Couldry, 2007; Lundby, 2014). The need to understand new forms of pilgrimage interaction, such as media pilgrimage, necessitates the development of a scientific framework for analyzing digital interpretive practices, including digital diaries, virtual routes, and storytelling (Kanaan-Amat, Crous-Costa, & Aulet, 2019; Wu, Chang, & Wu, 2019).

The scientific problem lies in the lack of clearly formulated conceptual approaches to analyzing pilgrimage as a mediatized and institutionalized social institution. The sectoral problem is related to the inconsistency between religious, tourist, and information structures that organize pilgrimage trips in a multi-confessional society, particularly in Ukraine. In this area, there is a branching of competencies and duplication of functions between church pilgrimage departments, travel agencies, and digital media platforms (Panchenko & Rizun, 2024; De Sousa & da Rosa, 2020).

In addition, pilgrimage serves a number of important social functions, including cognitive, communicative, consolidating, therapeutic, and resource-saving. In particular, the organizers of pilgrimage routes can actively contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage and the environment (Panchenko, 2022; Margry, 2008), which actualizes the ecological component of the study. In this context, it is crucial to evaluate the potential of pilgrimage as a tool not only for spiritual rejuvenation but also for sustainable development (Jirásek, 2011).

Thus, the focus of the research is to solve the scientific problem of understanding pilgrimage in the digital age, as well as the sectoral problem of organizing pilgrimage practices in a multi-confessional society, considering the ecological component (Davide Dimodugno, 2023). The study aims to provide a scientific basis for the implementation of a systemic, interdisciplinary model of media pilgrimage as an effective socio-communication institution.

The **purpose** of the study is to scientifically substantiate the process of mediatization of pilgrimage as a factor of institutionalization in the socio-communication space. The research aims to analyze the transformation of pilgrimage practices under the influence of digital media, including new forms of communication, participation, and representation of sacred experiences in the online environment (Hjarvard, 2008; Lundby, 2014; Shenderovsky, 2013).

The theoretical and methodological basis is formed by the provisions of the theory of mediatization of religion (Couldry, 2007; Hjarvard, 2008), the socio-communication approach (Rizun, 2008), as well as narrative and visual-interpretive analysis, which are used to study digital practices of pilgrimage in the context of social networks, interactive tools, and virtual communities (Kanaan-Amat, Crous-Costa, & Aulet, 2019; Johannsen & Ohrvik, 2020; Wu, Chang, & Wu, 2019).

Method

The methodological basis of the study draws upon an interdisciplinary combination of the mediatization theory of religion (Hjarvard, 2008; Lundby, 2014), a socio-communication approach to the analysis of digital practices (Rizun, 2008; Couldry, 2007), and institutional analysis, which allows us to understand pilgrimage as a form of social order in the context of digital transformation (Martino, 2012; Panchenko & Rizun, 2024).

To analyze digital pilgrimage practices, elements of discourse analysis of media texts and communications in social networks, visual-interpretive analysis of digital narratives and tools (Kanaan-Amat, Crous-Costa, & Aulet, 2019; Wu, Chang, & Wu, 2019), as well as digital ethnography, which allows us to study the formation of virtual communities of pilgrims (Johannsen & Ohrvik, 2020; Jorge, 2023), were applied.

The chosen approaches ensure interdisciplinarity, allowing us to consider media pilgrimage as a complex phenomenon at the intersection of media, religion, culture, and social communication. Such methodological tools enable the identification of mechanisms of mediatization of sacred experiences, the comprehension of transformation in pilgrimage practices, and the analysis of their institutionalization in the modern digital media environment.

Results and Discussion

Let us consider in detail the scientific works that address the issues of mediatization of pilgrimage through modern media tools in the era of digitalization and in the process of institutionalization of pilgrimage as a socio-communication institution.

Mediatization is the process by which the main elements of social or cultural activity (e.g., politics, education, religion, etc.) acquire a media form. As a result, the activity is carried out to a greater or lesser extent through interaction with the media. The symbolic content and structure of social and cultural activity are influenced by the media environment and media logic, on which they gradually become more dependent (Hjarvard, 2008; Schulz, 2004; Sánchez-Amboage et al, 2017).

Mediatization is a process of social change that, to some extent, subordinates other social or cultural spheres to the logic of the media. In the case of the media: channels, languages, and environments contribute to changes in the quantity, content, and direction of religious messages in society, while transforming religious ideas, challenging, and replacing the authority of institutionalized religions. Thanks to these processes, religion has become mediatized as a social and cultural activity (Hjarvard, 2008; Jansson, 2002). As the scholar E. Verón notes, mediatization is a technical, social, and cultural process that encompasses the sphere of discursiveness of meanings that are interrupted when "mental processes" are exteriorized in the form of material devices, which he calls "media phenomena" (Verón, 2014, p. 14). Mediatization is only the name for a long historical sequence of institutionalization of media phenomena in human societies and its multiple consequences" (Verón, 2014, p. 15; Reader, 2007).

The collective monograph "*Mediação & Midiatização*" has a chapter that refers to our study "*Mediação e midiatização da religião em suas articulações teóricas e práticas: um levantamento de hípotes e problemáticas*" ("Mediation and mediatization of religion in its theoretical and practical articulations: a survey of hypotheses and problems"). In a scientific investigation, author Luis Mauro Sá Martino notes that the integration of information technologies into religious practice transforms its structure in response to changed social expectations and evolving communication formats, making it more diffuse and ambiguous. An example of this is the myriad of smartphone apps that offer everything from online versions of the Bible with features such as keyword searches and peer-to-peer commentaries to downloadable sermons and prayers that, embedded in the specific mediation and mediatization of religion in their theoretical and practical articulations, are heard or recited according to one's inclination and preference. In the author's view, the

mediatization of religion signifies not only a moment of change in the practice of religious institutions but also an apparent broader restructuring of the meanings of "sacred," "religious," and "religious experience" in a mediatized society (Martino, 2012; The Digital Pilgrim Project, 2025).

The relationship between media and religion in the context of a society undergoing a process of mediatization emphasizes the articulation of religiousness with the symbolic and the material, within a mobile and often shifting boundary, yet one that remains visible. If, on the one hand, traditional forms of religious experience are restored and maintained, such as liturgical celebrations and personal connections in the community, on the other hand, an avalanche of media products appears, intended for consumption by a market of believers who seek to adapt communication practices to formats that correspond to everyday patterns of information consumption; they are recipients of messages and consumers of products, seeking the religious message in the same media and consumer context in which they receive other messages (Vidal-Casellas et al, 2019). There is a contrast, which can also be interpreted as a dialogue, between hypermodern media practices, in which the technological dimension exceeds the use of the most modern devices, and "premodern" practices, such as the distribution of amulets of various kinds, belief in curses or in the healing power of essential oils, among other elements related to the same "premodern" matrix of religion (Martino, 2012; Månsson, et al, 2020). In the section of his PhD thesis "*Institutionalization of Pilgrimage and Tourism Activity in the Context of Globalization Processes of Culture*", scholar D. Pryimak argues that religious pilgrimage is a peculiar factor in the institutionalization of cultural practices of travel, in particular tourism, which makes it possible to define it as a modern innovative technology. Differentiation of tourism and pilgrimage in the context of globalization processes of modernity is a new topic that suggests that the extensive principle of movement, reaching shrines, and the intensive way of communication, when all resources of information visualization are included, in particular virtualization, as well as the wide exchange of places and the presentation of places, become competitive practices in relation to mass culture, become realities of alterglobalism, as well as virtualization and technological equipment of the entire virtual, visual and figurative complex, which is associated with a wide range of cultural formation as a representative mechanism (Приймак, 2016; Coleman, Eade, 2004; Moaven et al, 2017).

In the monograph "*The vital questions of mass communication theory*", Professor V. Rizun examines communication according to the following features: 1) communicators – those between whom communication takes place, in particular the communicant – the one who initiates the communication process, acts as its addressee, and the communicator – the one to whom the communication is directed and who is its addressee; 2) the spiritual and intellectual unity of those who communicate – a common consciousness, a common culture; 3) a common form of spiritual being – language; 4) the socio-psychological ability to communicate (Rizun, 2008). It is communication during a pilgrimage that fills the sacred journey with a communicative exchange between groups of pilgrims. This is clearly evidenced by the signs of communication cited above. Sacred communications are of great importance during a pilgrimage. Recently, there has been a trend of overcoming pilgrimage routes using planned routes that are detailed, planned, and have places of power during the journey (monasteries, cemeteries, temples, sacred places, trees, mountains, waterfalls). Sacred communications can take various forms and occur in any way convenient for you. Among the sacred forms of communication, the following can be distinguished: keeping a spiritual diary, meditation, talking or praying aloud, writing a letter to the Universe or the Absolute, keeping a guidebook during a pilgrimage, undertaking a sacred (especially for you) journey - and these are just a few of the vast varieties of spiritual communication. At the heart of all these methods is a special sense of connection through communication – a universal human experience that goes beyond culture, religion, beliefs, or thoughts. Some interpret spiritual communication as a human connection. In contrast, others see it as a connection between a person and the Absolute or as a

connection with a higher sense of meaning and purpose in life. It is an important part of our spiritual health and well-being (Ігнатьєва, 2013; Margry, 2008).

In the monograph "*Tourism, Pilgrimage and Intercultural Dialogue: interpreting sacred stories*", a team of scholars M. Kanaan-Amat, N. Crous-Costa, S. Aulet carried out a comprehensive analysis of the features of tourism, pilgrimage and intercultural dialogue in sections that are relevant to our topic and require a detailed review: "*Tools for interpreting religious heritage*" (Kanaan-Amat et al., 2019); "*Does a religious tourist need a guide? Interpretation and Storytelling in Sacred Places*" (Duda, 2019); "*Pilgrimage Tourism and Social Media: A Path for the 21st Century?*" (Paschinger, 2019).

In the section "*Tools for the interpretation of religious heritage,*" scholars M. Kanaan-Amat, N. Crous-Costa, and S. Aulet consider interpretation as a crucial role in the protection, use, and mediation of natural, cultural, or intangible heritage, including religious heritage. The information provided in sacred sites is key to ensuring a hospitable reception. However, it is also a key element in explaining the site's nature to visitors, regardless of their prior experience. In the context of growing interest in cultural heritage, socio-cultural resources are becoming increasingly important, and interpretation tools are a key element (Murray, 2021, p. 165). In the case of sacred sites, as representative spaces of identity and transmitters of core cultural values, interpretation tools must highlight regional features. To show, to enable discovery, to arouse interest, to teach, to inform, to entertain, to inspire dreams are some examples of the purposes of interpretation. Interpretation is a fundamental component of dialogue and communication (Casellas et al, 2019; Månsson et al, 2020).

As the authors emphasize, interpretation is not limited to natural and cultural sites: it is also open to ethnology, manufacturing, folk crafts, historical cities, and archaeology. It aims to provide explanations and information about sites in two main areas:

• the environment: routes, observation trails, cognitive routes, landscape research points;
• on-site: spaces where permanent or temporary exhibitions are located, visits are organized, and commented on by guide-interpreters.

In the case of sacred sites, visitors require guidance to discern what to look for and what is significant. It is essential to acknowledge that there is a growing lack of awareness about the symbolism and values associated with religion. This is especially true for foreign visitors who have very different cultural and religious backgrounds (Butler & Suntikul, 2018; Olsen & Timothy, 2018).

In sacred sites, especially those with the most complex infrastructure and equipment, information and awareness for visitors should not be limited to the space of a single temple. For example, souvenir shops should sell products that contribute to raising awareness. Similarly, accommodation services should take this opportunity into account by offering guests a variety of materials, placing them in rooms or allocating a separate space to display this information (Kanaan-Amat et al., 2019, pp. 86–87; 91; 93).

In the monograph section "*Does a Religious Tourist Need a Guide? Interpretation and Storytelling in Sacred Places*" author Tomasz Duda examines in detail the place of religious tourism and pilgrimage in the current religious and cultural system. As the scientist writes, one of the main challenges of modern religious tourism (including pilgrimage) is active adaptation to the changing needs of people in planning their free time and satisfying spiritual needs (Baggio, 2005, p. 16). Based on local religious, cultural, historical, or natural heritage, increasingly innovative religious tourism products are being created that reflect the needs of society (Dimodugno, 2023; Vernon, 2003). A tourist sacred space comprehensively combines the essence of a holy place with various types of excursions that incorporate elements of religious and historical education, as well as the appreciation of cultural heritage (Helland, 2016; de Ascaniis & Cantoni, 2016). This type of pilgrimage poses challenges for specialist interpreters, whose role is mainly performed by tourist guides and volunteers specially trained for this purpose. Their role is not only to explain the

intricacies of the historical and cultural origins of a given object, place, or route, but also to actively share the main ideas with visitors, using the appropriate narrative process and forms of communication. Studies conducted with tourists/pilgrims traveling to holy places and shrines have shown that in this direction of religious tourism (which is still very individual in nature), the services of a guide-interpreter are highly desirable and in demand. He is expected not only to have knowledge, but also to be able to "immerse" the participant in the atmosphere of a sacred place. The task facing a religious tourism guide is to accompany the pilgrim in the process of exploring both religious truths and the genesis of their formation and functioning in a specific natural environment. A skillfully conducted narrative combined with sufficient provision of knowledge will allow the pilgrim to experience the sacred place more deeply and consciously (Duda, 2019, pp. 105; 113).

In the scientific article "*Pilgrimage tourism and social media: A way forward in the 21st century?*", the scientist E. Paschinger talks about the importance of religious tourism in the era of digitalization and gives an example of the digitalization of part of the "Way of St. James" (De Sousa & da Rosa, 2020). Religious tourism is one of the key sectors of the global economy, which has maintained its competitiveness despite the financial crisis, the pandemic's challenges, and wars. The emergence of social media and its vast opportunities for better, targeted marketing and open dialogue between visitors, pilgrims, and local stakeholders have challenged traditional methods of marketing and branding destinations. This is especially true for religious heritage and pilgrimage, which has a growing trend (Gemzöe, 2020). Using the example of the digitalization of part of the Spanish "Way of St. James", the landscape is being institutionalized for the strategic promotion of religious tourism through social media. This is often fragmented and limited to the initiative of a few institutions or key stakeholders (De Sousa, da Rosa, 2017). The institutions responsible for tourism development have partly overlapping competencies. This duplication needs to be eliminated to ensure the proper coordination of tourism policies, agree on common objectives, and implement coordinated measures to achieve these objectives. To maintain and increase the competitiveness of the tourism sector, a holistic approach is necessary. Meeting the needs of tourists is of paramount importance. This can only be achieved through high-quality standards throughout the entire value chain of religious tourism (De Ascaniis & Cantoni, 2016). Accordingly, scholars consider the fundamental foundations of religious tourism development, including demand and product, education and training, visitor experience, and the development of new products, especially in light of the issues of digitalization and social media, in modern pilgrimage. Social media has become a vital and increasingly powerful marketing tool utilized by individuals from diverse backgrounds (Tan & Perry, 2022). Tourists, like pilgrims, plan their trips and gather information using social networks, and they receive advice from friends and other virtual contacts before, during, and after their trip or pilgrimage. Thus, social media is increasingly penetrating the preparation, organization, and discussion of pilgrimage (Paschinger, 2019; The mediatization, 2025).

In the article "*Church institution and digital world: new opportunities to profess the word of God,*" scholar O. Lo Presti explored the relationship between the church institution and new technologies in the field of communication and management of religious tourism experiences. The author undertakes a critical study of the church's institutional use of new technologies for communication, management, and promotion of its heritage. The empirical stage of the study is realized by analyzing technologies applied to the ecclesiastical heritage, with the Neapolitan Catholic Church serving as an example. This work demonstrates the high degree of technological use by ecclesiastical institutions for the communication and education of people, with the aim of evangelization. The results of this study will help understand the adaptability of these technologies to the needs of users, recipients, and territories; the degree of their improvement and promotion; as well as the measures that can be implemented for the effective and efficient management of heritage and territories (Lo Presti, 2011).

As the scholar C. Helland reflects on "Digital religion" and "Digital society" in the chapter "*Digital religion. Handbook of religion and society*", he writes that if it did not seem paradoxical, religion in all its forms and functions is transferred and mixed with the digital world. These new relationships change the way we practice religion, as well as the way religion affects society and culture. Digital religion is the blending of our modern mediated society with contemporary religious beliefs and practices. Digital religion is not just the presence of "religion" on digital media, but rather the combination of all the social and cultural components that we associate with religion, with all the elements that we associate with digital society (Helland, 2016).

In the article "*Pilgrimage in Mediaspace: Continuities and Transformations*", scholar N. Couldry introduces the concept of "media pilgrimage". The article discusses various challenges: first, the argument that relatively banal journeys to media-related places cannot be compared with the intensity of religious pilgrimage; second, the difficulties associated with making the concept of "media pilgrimage" work in a cross-cultural comparison; third, the difficulties of understanding what will be the continuation of "pilgrimage" in the online environment of digital media. The author concludes that the concept of media pilgrimage remains useful, even if its future boundaries are currently particularly uncertain (Couldry, 2007). In the article "*The mediatization of religion: A theory of the media as agents of religious change*", scholar S. Hjarvard developed a conceptual framework for understanding how media can transform religion. These changes are complex and do not necessarily have the same impact on religion; in some cases, the media can contribute to the re-sacralization of society, in others, they can undermine the authority of institutionalized religion and promote secular ideas, rituals, and ways of worship. At a general level, these processes share one commonality: they all attest to the mediatization of religion. At the heart of this theory is the concept of mediatization. Through the process of mediatization, religion is increasingly subject to the logic of the media. As channels of communication, the media have become the primary source of religious ideas, particularly in the form of everyday religion. As a language, the media shape the religious imagination according to the genres of popular culture. As a cultural environment, the media have taken over many of the social functions of institutionalized religions, providing both moral and spiritual guidelines and a sense of community. Finally, the results of a national survey in Denmark are presented to substantiate the theoretical arguments and illustrate how the mediatization of religion has made popular media texts important sources of spiritual interest. Through mediatization, religious ideas and practices have become increasingly dependent on the media (Serrallonga, 2018). As channels of communication, the media have become the primary source of images and texts about magic, spiritualism, and religion. As languages, the media shape religious imagination according to the genres of popular culture. The media, as a cultural environment, have taken over many of the social functions of institutionalized religions, providing both moral and spiritual guidelines and a sense of community. As a result, institutionalized religion in modern Western societies plays a less prominent role in the communication of religious beliefs, and instead, banal religious elements of the media come to the forefront of society's religious imagination (Hjarvard, 2008; Shmueli & Collins-Kreiner, 2018).

The team of scientists D. Johannsen and A. Ohrvik in the scientific investigation "How to Be a Pilgrim: Guidebooks on the Norwegian St. Olav Ways and the Heritagization of Religion" examined the contemporary revival of pilgrimage in Northern Europe as part of a trend towards the inheritance of religion, which allows for the emergence of new religious representations. Scholars have analyzed the "Ways of St. Olaf" guides from the perspective of narrative scripts, examining in detail how they can influence expectations, shape pilgrims' behavior, and direct their attention to a transforming history and religious heritage. Based on published pilgrim journals and diaries, they conclude that the guides lead a process of "interpretive drift" (the change of beliefs under the influence of experience and new impressions that instantly affect perception), which influences pilgrims towards the acceptance and embodiment of a new role in the religious sphere (Wu et al., 2019). The guides invite pilgrims to take on the role of heirs of the medieval European tradition.

With the emergence of renewed pilgrimage routes in European countries where pilgrimage has long been neglected and detached from confessional beliefs, we are witnessing the exploratory development of new religious formats, expressions, and identities in motion. All parts of the guides can contribute to the process of "interpretive drift", which is a defining feature of the pilgrimage experience, as documented in many pilgrim reports (Hussain & Wang, 2024). The restored "Ways of St. Olaf" have all the hallmarks of a "caminoized" pilgrimage; they are oriented towards long-distance walking, signposts along the historical route, a pilgrim's passport, and a certificate of completion of the pilgrimage (Johannsen & Ohrvik, 2020, pp. 508, 509, 516).

In the article "*The Mediatization of Camino de Santiago: Between the Pilgrimage Narrative and Media Circulation of the Narrative*", a team of scholars, M. T. De Sousa and A. P. da Rosa conducted research on the relationship between pilgrimage, narrative, and mediatization. The research object was the transformation of the pilgrims' experience on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. The analysis showed that the mediatization of modern pilgrimage has led to changes in the interaction of experience and narrative (narrative is a set of interconnected real or fictional events, facts, or impressions that make up a narrative text) (Nancy L. Frey). Vitally important in religious communities, narratives form a connection between the act of narration and contact with the sacred in the symbolic context. Thus, they form a key basis for religious doctrines and rituals. Narratives also play a crucial role in the transmission of religious experiences. It is through narratives that members of a religious group process their experiences and inspire others to do the same. Moreover, narratives disseminate the religious experience itself. This perspective is helpful when considering the contemporary context in which it is impossible to make sense of communication without discussing the circulation of meanings that manifests itself in the media sphere. Narrative is no longer the result of pilgrimage; instead, it incorporates experience as an activity that modifies it. This is a historical process that involves at least three major transformations, directly linked to the pilgrims' assimilation of technological innovations that significantly reduce the gap between experience, narrative configuration, and its circulation (Polus & Carr, 2021). The first transformation is associated with motorized means of transportation, which almost halves the time of pilgrimage. The narratives of the return journey home, common in the diaries of medieval and modern pilgrims, have largely disappeared or been reduced to brief notes or reflections. The understanding of pilgrimage is changing. Instead of consisting of two mirror journeys (there and back), it begins to consist of the time spent from departure to arrival in Santiago de Compostela (De Sousa & da Rosa, 2020; Jorge, 2023).

Table 1.
The Structural Logic of Media Pilgrimage in the Context of Digitalization

Theoretical concept	Communication instrument	Empirical case (open source)	Conclusion / Practice transformation
Mediatization of religion	Online pilgrimage platforms	YouTube: video diaries Camino de Santiago	Transferring experience to screen form (mediagenicity)
Digitalization of the sacred experience	QR codes, mobile applications	Vatican News App: digital routes for believers	Interactivating the ritual, accessibility for a global audience
Pilgrimage storytelling	Instagram, TikTok, Facebook groups	#camino #virtualpilgrimage (Instagram, 2023–2024)	Sacralization of everyday life through personal digital narratives
Institutionalization of media pilgrimage	Official websites, online communities	Website of the Patriarchate of the UGCC, Camino	Formation of stable digital structures

		Pilgrims community (Facebook)	
Mediatization through AI	ChatGPT, generative models	ChatGPT: route generation, prayers, Bible analysis	Personalization of experience, automated spiritual guidance

Note: The table was compiled by the authors using generative artificial intelligence (ChatGPT, OpenAI, 2024) to structure theoretical approaches, digital tools, and empirical cases.

Conclusions

This study presents an interdisciplinary analysis of pilgrimage as a social communication institution in the context of digital transformation, which occurs under the influence of mediatization and digitalization processes. Based on the theory of mediatization of religion (Hjarvard, 2008; Lundby, 2014), the social communication approach (Rizun, 2008; Couldry, 2007) and institutional analysis (Martino, 2012; Panchenko & Rizun, 2024), we substantiated that pilgrimage transforms not only as a religious practice, but also as a form of public communication that acquires new functions in the digital environment.

The use of visual-interpretive analysis, discourse analysis of media texts, and digital ethnography (Johannsen & Ohrvik, 2020; Jorge, 2023) has allowed us to identify key mechanisms of mediatization of sacred experience. In particular, it is shown how storytelling, digital diaries, QR codes, interactive maps, streams, and social networks (Paschinger, 2019; Duda, 2019) shape new practices of participation in pilgrimage. In this context, digital tools act not only as channels of representation but also as means of transformation and rethinking of religious experience (De Sousa & da Rosa, 2020; Helland, 2016).

The formation of virtual pilgrimage communities, which function as new social structures with their own logic, rituals, ethical norms, and interaction practices, is analyzed (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Hussain & Wang, 2024). These communities are not only a complement to offline pilgrimage, but often act as its alternative.

The paper also presents the concept of institutionalization of pilgrimage as a socio-communication institution, which is formed as a result of the combination of religious, tourist, and digital components (Panchenko & Rizun, 2024; Lo Presti, 2011). The processes of canonization of routes, standardization of digital formats, emergence of new normative practices (pilgrim's passport, certificate of completion of the route, etc.), as well as the key role of the media as an agent of this institutionalization are identified (Barbato, 2022; Johannsen & Ohrvik, 2020; Vernon, 2003).

Particular attention is paid to the role of generative artificial intelligence, in particular ChatGPT, in creating personalized pilgrimage routes and narratives. Such technologies enable a deeper interaction between text, experience, and user, offering new forms of sacred communication in the digital environment (Zhou et al., 2023; OpenAI, 2023).

Thus, the study has shown that media pilgrimage is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that combines religious, communication, technological, and cultural aspects. The proposed approach not only enables us to comprehend the transformations of pilgrimage as a media phenomenon but also to consider it as a new model of social communication that corresponds to the logic of a digital society. The study of this phenomenon requires further research using narrative, visual, and ethnographic analysis, which will contribute to a deeper understanding of digital sacredness and the prospects for its institutionalization.

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specifically to systematize sources and create a table. The authors of the article bear full responsibility for the correct use and citation of sources.

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