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## A Variety of Reading Modes. Researching the Consumption/Reception of Media and Religion

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# A Variety of Reading Modes

## Researching the Consumption/Reception of Media and Religion

### Abstract

This article identifies three perspectives on the study of media consumption/reception in the field of religion and media and develops a trifold typology of methodological approaches. The first type considers representation in its relationship with reception, with the researcher as the primary recipient. The second type proceeds in reverse, centering on reception/consumption and attending to representation in so far as it is at the basis of reception; in this type, informants are the primary recipients. The third type concerns consumption and reception processes, with the media that is being consumed playing no significant role in the study. The conclusion addresses the limitations of the discussed types of method in the field of media and religion and advocates for combined approaches. It emphasizes the researcher's role and responsibility in the analysis and argues that future research should focus on integrating cultural contexts to better understand the dynamics of media and religion.

### Keywords

Media Consumption, Media Reception, Analytical, Discourse Analysis, Quantitative and Qualitative Methods/Approaches

### Biography

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## Introduction

The field of media and religion is characterized by a vast array of contemporary and historical sources and practices of engaging with them and therefore deploys similarly diverse methods. Understanding religion as a

meaning-making practice in the “historical world”<sup>1</sup> suggests that it provides orientation for dealing with the contingencies of human life and its environment.<sup>2</sup> This understanding of religion necessarily embraces media, which are involved in meaning-making practices in the reception and consumption of religion. By distinguishing between immanent and transcendent spheres, religion differentiates itself from other cultural fields that also engage meaning-making processes.<sup>3</sup> This distinction allows religion to be understood as a communication system that, according to Birgit Meyer,

requires intermediaries – or, in short, media – that transmit messages between “senders” and “receivers.” Note that this is [...] a formal understanding of media according to which in principle anything can be made to operate as a medium. Media [...] shape [messages] by virtue of their technological, social, and aesthetic properties and propensities, through specific formats and forms.<sup>4</sup>

The term “media” is understood broadly in this field and can include audio-visual forms,<sup>5</sup> images,<sup>6</sup> clothes,<sup>7</sup> computer games,<sup>8</sup> food,<sup>9</sup> and music.<sup>10</sup> The ongoing production of religious references in media continues to enrich and diversify this field of research. What connects the various media and religious references are the people, whether religious or non-religious, who interpret and make sense of the media they receive or consume.<sup>11</sup> They bring diverse readings and perspectives to the same religious artifacts, symbols, and narratives. Therefore, it is essential to consider the individuals involved

1 Nichols 2010, 79; Nichols 2016, 155.

2 Stolz 2004, 67.

3 Pollack/Rosta 2015, 72.

4 Meyer 2013, 4.

5 The German book series Religion, Film, and Media (RFM) has published edited volumes and monographs in the field of film and religion for more than 30 years; see <https://www.religion-film-media.org/en/book-series-2/> [accessed 25 July 2024].

6 Fritz 2018.

7 Höpflinger 2020a.

8 Radde-Antweiler 2008.

9 Fritz/von Wyss-Giacosa 2021.

10 Wilder/Rehwald 2012.

11 Mäder 2023, 211–213.

in the practices of media reception and consumption when selecting a method for studying the interactions between media and religion.

The choice of method in any field depends on the research question and the scope of the study. Approaches in the field of media and religion adopt different perspectives on the reception and consumption<sup>12</sup> of the media being studied. For considering methodological questions in the study of reception and consumption, two aspects are crucial: the medium itself and its consumers or receivers. If religion is understood as a particular form of communication, then the “intermediaries”, i. e. the media, must be considered. This means attending not only to media representations but also to the contexts of the production, distribution, and reception of media. These intermediaries, along with the social actors involved – perhaps religious practitioners, spectators of a fantasy film that creates a religious worldview, or museum visitors viewing historical religious artifacts like Egyptian sarcophagi – determine the choice of method.

To elaborate a typology of methodological approaches, this article identifies three perspectives on practices of media consumption/reception. The first method type focuses on representation in its relationship with reception, with the researcher as the primary recipient. The second type proceeds in reverse, centering on reception/consumption and attending to media representations only in so far as they form the basis of reception; in this type, informants are the primary recipients. The third type focuses exclusively on consumption and reception processes in qualitative and quantitative procedures, with the media representation that is consumed playing no significant role in the study.

## Representation in Focus

Focusing on representation helps us gain insight into the media under study. In this first method type, the researcher acts as the primary recipient, critically analyzing and contextualizing the source. Religious symbols and narratives are explored within their religious tradition or in relation to thematic aspects such as death, cosmologies, or supernatural powers. This

12 Reception and consumption refer to different but partly overlapping practices. Reception highlights the process of interpretation, whereas consumption refers the act of engaging with media, including how, when, and where media is used or accessed. The terms are used accordingly in this article.

kind of analysis typically distinguishes between two aspects of representation which parallel the dual nature of religious references. As the scholar of religion Fritz Stolz puts it, “Symbols often have a dual character: they depict sections of reality and at the same time act as a model for it.”<sup>13</sup> The practice of representation draws on language, including symbols, codes, signs, or other forms, to communicate meaningful models of or for the world. In the process of analysis, researchers are also the recipients of the signs they are investigating, and they integrate the codes used in the representation with their own mental or conceptual representations.<sup>14</sup>

As the researcher decodes media representations, they typically make explicit their methods for interpreting a source and the perspectives they emphasize.<sup>15</sup> This hermeneutic process is shaped by the researcher, their own context, and the framing questions that guide their perspective. For instance, they might analyze the portrayal of gender in a biblical film,<sup>16</sup> the use of color in *memento mori* objects like skulls,<sup>17</sup> or the significance of references to the donor in *ex voto* paintings.<sup>18</sup> These studies utilize methodological tools that are mostly descriptive-analytical, such as neo-formalist film analysis,<sup>19</sup> the iconological procedure,<sup>20</sup> or any other kind of hermeneutic image analysis in which the researcher engages with their object of study by including context to varying degrees.<sup>21</sup> Another method in which representation plays a crucial role is discourse analysis. This constructivist approach examines power dynamics in representational processes and asks how and by whom a discourse is defined.<sup>22</sup>

In summary, the methodological option discussed in this section centers on media representations, which researchers both receive and analyze. Thus, the researcher effectively assumes the role of a recipient of the media under study.

13 Stolz 2004, 67 (my translation).

14 Hall 2013, 2–5.

15 Hall 2006.

16 O’Brien 2016, 449–462.

17 Höpflinger 2020b.

18 Pezzoli-Olgiati 2011.

19 Bienk 2014; Bordwell/Thompson/Smith 2017; Glatz 2023.

20 Panofsky 1979.

21 Lüddemann 2016.

22 Scolari 2019, 40–89.

## From Consumption/Reception to Representation

The second method type starts with analysis of how media are consumed/received and then considers the media representations as the basis of consumption/reception. Such studies may be guided by different research questions and focus more on consumers/recipients as social actors who shape the meaning of media through their practices of consumption/reception. In this approach, researchers act primarily as observers of their subjects' reception processes. They may do so by directly engaging with recipients, for example, by conducting interviews, or by adopting a heuristic perspective that explores potential readings without claiming to represent actual psychological or cognitive structures.<sup>23</sup>

Studies of this type generally involve qualitative fieldwork where researchers observe the reception and consumption experiences of social actors, which may then be supplemented with interviews. However, researchers are not merely passive observers of these reception processes; they are themselves familiar with the media being studied through their own experiences, just as the social actors are. As researchers observe the reception processes of their subjects, they also pay attention to the media representations that give rise to their subjects' interpretations. This combined perspective may be used to analyze a video posted on YouTube or a social-media platform together with the comments left by viewers. The study then creates an analytical framework that combines the viewers' comments with an analysis of the video's representations. It categorizes the comments in relation to the video's style, formal elements, plot, story etc. For each element, the analysis of comments makes it possible to identify different reading positions and, more specifically, the religious or non-religious focus in the reception process. These various ways of meaning-making through reception can then be related to the representation, which might include religious symbols or narrative elements.<sup>24</sup> Examining the interface between consumption/reception processes and representation is a complex but worthwhile endeavor.<sup>25</sup>

Another method for attending to representation in the context of reception processes uses photo elicitation (PE).<sup>26</sup> PE is a method from the field of visual

23 Mäder 2020, 351.

24 Mäder 2020, 265–266.

25 Mäder/Soto-Sanfiel 2019.

26 Pink 2021, 109–133.

sociology that includes visual sources in conversations with participants. These sources can be already existing “found images”, researcher-produced images, or participant-produced images.<sup>27</sup> In this method, the researcher looks at the representation of the visual source, so to say, through the eyes and the reception of the social actors. The researcher’s task is to listen to and understand how the social actors give meaning to representation. Therefore, it is a second-degree perception. PE shifts the dynamics in the relation between researcher and participant: “Where standard interview techniques tend to be face-to-face, the researcher and participant tend to be shoulder-to-shoulder focused on the image before them. Likewise, photo elicitation is known to shift the researcher-participant power dynamic.”<sup>28</sup> In my own research about the role of photos in weddings, the performance of this rite of passage, and how it is remembered, PE has been applied to allow the couples to reconstruct their wedding day by means of their wedding photographs and to understand, in this process, the significance of the photos for them.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to field methods, semio-pragmatics are another methodological option. This approach explores various interpretative possibilities in a heuristic procedure that may occur in the relationship between the recipients, their contexts, and the representation. French communication scholar Roger Odin developed the concept of “spaces of communication” to address these diverse reception experiences.<sup>30</sup> A semio-pragmatic approach can be used to analyze, for example, the different perceptions, historical and contemporary, of the famous passion play that has been performed since 1634 in the German village Oberammergau.<sup>31</sup> Both the performance and the reception of the passion play have undoubtedly evolved over time. Reception may vary depending on the spectators and their backgrounds, or, to use Odin’s terms, the spaces of communication in which it occurs. For example, a practicing Christian may engage with the play differently from a tourist who is more interested in the spectacle than its theological message, although these perspectives can also coexist in a single individual. What is significant in this approach is the awareness that the reception contexts differ and influence how the religious narrative of the passion play is experienced and inter-

27 Williams/Whitehouse 2015, 308–313.

28 Williams/Whitehouse 2015, 306.

29 Mäder 2024a; 2024b.

30 Odin 2012, 155.

31 Kessler 2002.

preted.<sup>32</sup> A semio-pragmatic approach explicitly takes into account the diversity of reception contexts, composed of the spectator's background and the cultural-historical context of the media. The media's meaning is exclusively constructed in relation to the reception process. However, alongside this attention to reception, analyzing the performance and representation of the passion play is crucial for understanding the varied reception experiences.

Thus, the approaches that draw on this methodological type do not focus only on how audiences make meaning of media, but also consider the stylistic, narrative, symbolic, and sensory characteristics of the media consumed, and relate them to the audience's responses.

## Consumption/Reception in Focus

A third method type focuses on the consumer and on how they receive media. The researcher enquires about the effects of the media consumption and how the recipients make meaning of the media. Quantitative and qualitative methods may be used to process the responses. Quantitative studies are interested in statistically significant responses, whereas qualitative studies look for patterns in individual responses. The results of quantitative studies are often presented in statistical charts and diagrams. Qualitative studies discuss their findings by comparing similarities and differences across the participants' reception experiences. Studies may focus on different media formats or the demographics of participants, in particular their various religious, cultural, or geographic backgrounds.

In contrast to the second method type, which attends to representation in the analysis of consumption/reception, audience studies of this third type are mainly interested in reactions to representations rather than the representations themselves. Thus they do not consider the formal means and narratives of the media in their analysis. Instead, the process of consumption/reception is analyzed solely through audience responses. For example, in a qualitative reception study of the Indonesian television program *SALIHA* (2017),<sup>33</sup> the only information provided about the program is that a Muslim beauty video blogger describes it "a place of inspiration for Muslim woman in fashion as it features combining Muslim clothes in a fashionable way or

32 Mäder 2020, 36–62.

33 Fauzi/Fasta/Jeyakumar/Jeong 2020, 150–151.

how to use a modern Hijab style but still following Islamic teachings.”<sup>34</sup> Through in-depth interviews and a focus group, the study then investigates the participants’ readings of the show.<sup>35</sup>

Likewise in the relatively new research field of digital and online media – such as video games, social media, and the Internet – qualitative audience studies are frequently employed.<sup>36</sup> For example, a qualitative study of the MMO (massively multiplayer online) game World of Warcraft (WoW) conducted 22 in-depth online interviews with players of the video game. The researchers asked “if, how, and why online gamers reflect on such religious-spiritual narratives in the game, and what influence this has on their (non) religious worldviews.”<sup>37</sup> The study identified three different responses to religion or “religious reflexivity”<sup>38</sup> through analysis of the gamers’ reception, but it did not analyze religious representations within the game.

It is worth mentioning that in the case of digital and social media, consumers also produce narratives by creating content, such as videos for TikTok or characters for video games. This mixing of the roles of producer and consumer is expressed in the term “prosumer”. Consequently, a reception study may in fact address both the production and consumption processes if it examines the experiences of “prosumers” in gaming and social media interactions.

These examples of qualitative reception studies illustrate that studying responses to religious references in the media can provide valuable insight into how religion is (re)constructed through media reception. Qualitative studies of reception explore the varied reactions of different audiences, such as religious and non-religious viewers or practitioners of different religious traditions.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, quantitative reception studies generate knowledge about the more probable and less probable responses to media. For example, a study which I undertook with a colleague considers viewers’ identification with a religious character in a documentary film.<sup>40</sup> It assesses the recipients’ responses to the religious characters using a two-by-two between-subjects

34 Fauzi/Fasta/Jeyakumar/Jeong 2020, 142.

35 Hall 2006.

36 Johns 2012; Tsuria/Yadlin-Segal/Vitullo/Campbell 2017.

37 Aupers/Schaap/Wildt 2017, 154.

38 Schaap/Aupers 2017, 1755–1757.

39 Grahmann 2021, 188–218.

40 The study that my Spanish colleague María T. Soto-Sanfiel and I conducted is based on two documentaries, one about an American member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

factorial design. The two independent variables are *country*, where the study took place (Spain/Switzerland), and *religion*, as represented in the documentaries (Muslim/Mormon, specifically Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).<sup>41</sup> Viewers' identification with a character was shown to be significant for the narrative's ability to persuade. Viewers were more likely to identify with (1) someone whose experiences were familiar, (2) someone they found likable.<sup>42</sup> The results indicate that the level of identification varied depending on the religion depicted. Additionally, the cultural context, either Spain or Switzerland, significantly influenced the degree of identification.

In the field of digital religion, quantitative studies are often carried out online, as in the case of a study of yoga practices taught through Facebook. The surveys used in the study examine whether regular posts and personal online coaching contribute to promoting spirituality.<sup>43</sup> Two Likert scales measure the level of spirituality before and after the practice on Facebook.<sup>44</sup> The results illustrate that Facebook is a suitable platform for consolidating faith and spirituality among believers and for spreading and communicating messages and practices.

Another study based on an online survey asked young people aged between 15 and 20 about their use of the Internet for religious purposes.<sup>45</sup> In total 1,100 individuals answered the survey, which recruited participants through the Swedish social network site LunarPlatform in 2007. One of the study's conclusions was that religious socialization continues to take place offline. The "offline faithful" young people were "by far the most frequent users of religious websites and discussion groups."<sup>46</sup> Thus the study connects online consumption of religion with offline religious affiliation.<sup>47</sup>

None of these three studies includes formal analysis of the media representations themselves. Their focus is instead on how the audiences re-

Saints who lives in Nepal, the other about an Iranian Muslim woman who lives in Iran. See Soto-Sanfiel/Mäder 2020.

41 Soto-Sanfiel/Mäder 2020, 9–12.

42 Soto-Sanfiel/Mäder 2020, 5.

43 Pandya 2019.

44 The participants chose one of 6 measures to indicate their response to a statement (15 in total). For example, statement: *I feel God's presence*; possible responses: *many times a day; every day; most days; some days; once in a while; never or almost never*.

45 Lövheim 2018.

46 Lövheim 2018, 213.

47 See also the contribution by Sofia Sjö in this issue, 95–104.

spond and the differences among audience members (religion, nationality, activity on Facebook) that may influence their responses in statistically significant ways. As can be seen from these examples, quantitative studies tend to generalize the reception process. Consequently, they often do not address or only indirectly address how meaning is made of media representations.

## In Conclusion: Methodological Challenges in the Study of Media and Religion

As demonstrated, each of these three method types used in the study of media and religion addresses different aspects of reception. In this conclusion, I will highlight four broader issues that pertain to all three types of reception/consumption study identified here and are of particular significance for the methodological advancement of the field.

(1) Each method type proposed here has its limitations and produces gaps. No single method can fully capture all the dimensions of reception and consumption that are of interest in the study of media and religion. These limitations arise not only from the method itself but also from the diversity of possible subject matters and audiences. The inherent complexity of religion often requires simplification of the research design, which constrains the scope of its findings. Nevertheless, each study contributes to a larger body of research and is part of a broader cumulative effort.

(2) Methods are flexible and adjustable; they can be mixed and matched, and they can and need to be adapted to the object of research. Different research methods exist “along a continuum from positivism (i. e., scientific research that claims objectivity) through radical interpretivism (i. e., scholarship as art),”<sup>48</sup> as the communication scholar Laura L. Ellingson writes. She notes,

While disciplinary and professional conventions remain dominant forces, the success of some work that moves around, beyond, through, and alongside traditional work always benefits the field, because it reminds us of the constructed nature of all such norms and practices.<sup>49</sup>

48 Ellingson 2009, 4.

49 Ellingson 2009, 16.

Rigorous methods enable systematic and comprehensive analysis, but they can also limit the scope of findings. Methods are often part of a methodological canon, defined by disciplinary boundaries or fashions. This is true also for reception studies. It is crucial to remember that methods are not ends in themselves; their purpose is to be effective in addressing the research question. If they do not serve this purpose, they have missed their mark. In the interdisciplinary field of media and religion, the application of a combination of methods is often more effective than limiting the study to a single method recognized in media studies or the study of religion, because a multi-method approach may better capture the object of study.

(3) The first and second method types examine not only how social actors create meaning in the process of consumption, but also the representation strategies employed by different media and their effects on the reception of religion. The results of such studies are then presented in specific formats, often including – in addition to text – images, film stills, drawings, or charts taken from or relating to the media being studied. Therefore, it is crucial to consider how the chosen representation(s) of results can contribute to the mediated presence of religion. For instance, the researcher must consider whether film stills included in their article reproduce stereotypes about a religious tradition.

(4) Last but not least, researchers themselves are also recipients or consumers of media. Their hermeneutic perspectives shape the research design, selection of sources, formulation of survey questions, interpretation of results, interactions with social actors, and presentation of findings.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, each study of reception/consumption should begin with a critical self-examination of the researchers' own positions, including their personal reception of the source and their relationship with the social actors or groups they study. Researchers play an active role in analyzing reception/consumption, and this comes with a responsibility that must be taken seriously. As noted above, their responsibilities are not only towards the participants in the study, but also towards the sources that are being studied. The media often play an ambivalent role in how, for what purpose, and in which contexts religion is portrayed, and thus researchers need to justify their choice of media sources. Studies that reflect on the cultural context of media consumption/reception and all the implications this entails certainly represent promising avenues of enquiry within the field of media and religion.

50 Mäder 2022, 13.

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