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## Well-being and Digital Media Usage to Strengthen the Faith of Seventh-day Adventists During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ARNDT BÜSSING, LORETHY STARCK,  
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**WELL-BEING AND DIGITAL MEDIA  
USAGE TO STRENGTHEN THE FAITH  
OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS DURING  
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

**Abstract:** In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the emotional, spiritual, and social well-being of 1,036 German Seventh-day Adventists were analyzed; usage of the Church's digital media resources was also analyzed. This study found that older peoples' well-being was particularly high, and this group also benefited from digital media resources. The findings presented in this article may encourage Christian and non-Christian communities alike to further expand their digital media resources to provide helpful resources during the successive waves of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** *well-being, spirituality, media usage, digital services, digital media, COVID-19 pandemic*

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unexpected event for all people—even for Adventists who expect the imminent return of Jesus, an event associated with sudden personal and systemic crises of an unprecedented nature (Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2015; Matt. 24; Luke 21). However, no one expected that local church communities' diverse life would come to a complete halt within such a short time. The pandemic's full impact and subsequent lockdown on parishioner's emotional, social, and spiritual life remain unclear.

Vigilance for the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting assessment of the emotional, social, and spiritual vulnerability of the religious community is at the core of creating a resilient organization. Testing, evaluating, and promoting change and adapting according to the constantly changing conditions is clearly a leadership task. Leadership is a community-

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focused process of the whole Church (Bell, 2014); to connect all these processes is associated with the organization's fundamental meaning (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012). Acceptance and processing of the crisis, solution orientation, improvisational capacity (i.e., flexibility), adaptability, future planning, and competitiveness are fundamental principles of resilient organizations (Hofmann, 2015). Usage of digital and social media on all church levels is part of a community-focused leadership process.

Providing activities such as devotions, sermons, worship services, discussion circles, Bible lessons, and youth engagements are all part of such interactive processes. A strong initiative, flexibility, energy, and high ability of the leadership to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and emerge stronger is a good prerequisite. Changes that are carried out and operated by grassroots are considered a solid prerequisite also for the competitiveness (attractiveness to people) of a (local) church (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012).

Digital communication, which is presented in a wide range of avenues via the Internet, has experienced a rapid increase because of the COVID-19 pandemic. One example is Zoom, a video conference platform founded in 2011. In the first five months of 2020, Zoom tripled its stock market value (from €61.20 on January 2, 2020 to €155.50 on May 6, 2020) (Finanzen.net, 2020). These digital communication companies are tasked with digitally replacing analog, private, and professional communication channels during home office and contact restrictions.

However, this form of communication has consequences for our human community. Our living spaces are changing, as is how we get in touch and exchange ideas. Yet “the special thing about this form of communication is that the digital medium of the Internet simultaneously separates people and brings them closer together” (Grimm & Delfmann, 2017, p. 1). Closeness is achieved by overcoming the physical distance; however, we feel separated due to the lack of sensory perception experienced when we are physically together.

A communitarian system, such as the Adventist Church, is where spirituality is directly shaped and acted out through analog encounters. A community of faith presupposes a physical presence in the sense of holism, and it transforms lives through personal encounters and a common location—that is, a literal meeting place. Digital forms of encounter, therefore, present a significant challenge for the growth of Christian faith and the satisfaction of the worshipper, individually.

The aspects of digital communication, as Charbonnier (2018) collates from different perspectives—those of “sign theory, engineering sciences, sociology of technology in the form of action-theoretical, system-theoretical and practice-theoretical philosophical approaches” (p. 238)—must be understood in the realms of theory and practice. Only when the effect of digital communication is understood in the church context can it be used and controlled appropriately

and satisfactorily. Charbonnier (2018) concludes, “the digital paradigm . . . (has an impact) in the everyday life of the individual, as well as in the social process” (p. 250). Although digital communication standardizes “reality and, at the same time, enables individual development,” it also marks a new “section of the history of technology and culture,” which requires a “critique of digital reason and digital practice” (Charbonnier, 2018, p. 250). This is especially true in a church that focuses on its communication partners’ existential needs and holistic well-being. This begs the question: how does the increase in digitalization determine and influence social, individual, and spiritual satisfaction?

General media application has been a part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church for over 90 years, focusing on sharing inspirational information with others. As one of the first Christian radio stations in Germany, the “Voice of Hope” has become a modern media outlet centered on serving people’s needs both inside and outside the Adventist Church. Worldwide, Adventists use digital media in administration and church life. Text messages, email, messenger services, satellite evangelism and mission, service broadcasts, and videoconferencing have been a part of everyday church life—even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this, the use of digital media during the pandemic was a natural transition.

During the time of severe restrictions on the individual, as well as social, economic, and religious life, Germans studied and analyzed how “such a massive crisis affects us, how we react to alternative approaches such as ‘digital care,’ and, above all, how our faith and hope prove themselves in such a time” (Naether, 2020). Thus, the following questions were brought into the foreground: (1) How do the restrictions on social and community life affect German Adventists’ emotional and social well-being, and what do the limitations mean for parishioners’ spiritual life? (2) Despite the social restrictions, is it possible to stay in touch with family, friends, and the community at large? (3) What is the significance of social media for the strengthening of faith in times of crisis? (4) Are older persons less supported by digital media compared to younger persons? (This aspect is relevant because some argue that the elderly are unduly challenged by digital technology and that, therefore, social media are a tool to connect mainly with the younger generation.)

In terms of parish life management during the COVID-19 pandemic, community-based leadership presents a real challenge. For persons in leadership positions at every church level, new challenges have arrived, namely: (1) how to keep in contact with church members, (2) how to encourage social connections within the local church/church community, even in times of distance, and (3) how to support church members’ spiritual and emotional well-being through direct contacts and digital media interactions that could strengthen their faith, even in times of fear and insecurity.

Christians have been left alone with their fears and worries within some denominations, their religious needs unmet by their churches. Some local communities have experienced limited or even suspended religious life (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). Sulkowski and Ignatowski (2020) performed qualitative interviews with religious leaders of various denominations; these interviews found that the decisions concerning the religious community practices (i.e., suspension of services, Bible studies, etc.) “depended on ecclesiology and the way the Church was managed” (p. 5).

It might also be that religious leaders’ personal view regarding their “function” in the community plays a role. There were several anecdotal comments from Catholic priests and parish members that some pastors/priests have missed their parish members as an “audience” for their ceremonies but were not as interested in staying in contact with them during the rest of the week (i.e., via phone calls, newsletters, etc.). These priests/pastors likely view themselves as an integral part of the community and may view themselves as important leaders (“shepherds”) of their community (“sheep”) who have to perform the religious ceremonies for their community to follow. Therefore, not only the leaders’ views are of relevance but also the community’s perception. In fact, the “pastoral constructions of meaning and purpose of belonging” (Parish, 2020, p. 5) may allow parish members to perceive themselves as a community connected by their living faith experiences, wherever they are and however they may meet—either virtually or in-person (Parish, 2020).

Using various digital media resources such as live streaming religious services, inspiration speeches given by religious leaders, opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous worship, and the establishment of virtual communities with their own rituals and forms of worship were becoming part of religious community life, even before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, considering the pandemic, churches have had to rely much more on digital media, and thus the understanding of community is shifting.

Despite this shift, peoples’ essential need to be in close direct contact with each other, perceive each other as tangible beings, and interact with others in their full physical, emotional, and spiritual presence remains crucial. In many cases, this need goes unmet.

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

Members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Germany were invited via email, social media, and announcements during church services to participate in an online survey. Before completing the anonymous survey, participants were informed about their free will to anonymously take part. No individual

data was collected or stored, and no IP addresses were saved.

Surveys were completed between April 29, 2020, and May 17, 2020 (19 days).

## Measures

### *Sociodemographic Data*

The questionnaire asked for participants' gender, age-range (e.g., less than 40 years, 41-60 years, older than 60 years), and whether they had personally experienced the COVID-19 virus. All these were optional responses.

### *Emotional Well-being*

Emotional well-being was assessed with the German language version of the WHO-Five Well-being Index (WHO-5) (Bech, Olsen, Kjoller, & Rasmussen, 2013). Representative items include statements such as, "I have felt cheerful and in good spirits," or "My daily life has been filled with things that interest me." Respondents were asked to rate the intensity of such feelings across the previous two weeks; responses were scored with a six-point grading scale, ranging from at no time (0) to all the time (5). In this study, we report both the mean values (ranging from 0 to 5) and the sum scores (ranging from 0 to 25). Scores less than 13 may indicate depressive states. The scale's internal consistency in this sample was good (Cronbach's alpha = .846).

### *Spiritual Well-being*

Spiritual well-being was assessed with five items.

1. "I feel close to God." (Taken from Lyn Underwood's Daily Spiritual Experience Scales, 2006)
2. "I felt alive and fulfilled in my spiritual life." (Taken from the Spiritual Dryness Scale, with a positive phrasing [Büssing, Günther, Baumann, Frick, & Jacobs, 2013; Büssing, Baumann, Jacobs, & Frick, 2016])
3. "I felt that my prayers were really answered." (Taken from the Spiritual Dryness Scale, with a positive phrasing [Büssing et al., 2013; Büssing et al., 2016])
4. "For the past 14 days, I have been hopeful for the day of the Lord (i.e., for the return of Jesus)." (Referring to a statement found in Luke 21:28 that Jesus brings natural crises into a positive connection with His return, an important topic for Adventists, see Fundamental Belief 25.)
5. "I felt comforted by God in my challenges, worries and fears." (Referring to a comment by Flebbe [2017] that crises can be faced with God's solidarity and support [Ps. 23:4; 2 Cor. 12:9])

Respondents were asked to rate the intensity of such feelings across the previous two weeks; responses were scored with a six-point grading scale, rang-

ing from *at no time* (0) to *all the time* (5). Here, both the mean values (ranging from 0 to 5) and the sum scores (ranging from 0 to 25) were reported. The scale's internal consistency in this sample is good (Cronbach's alpha = .837).

### *Social Well-being*

Social well-being was addressed with two survey items: "During the past two weeks I have had people with whom I could share joy and suffering," and "Even in the COVID-19 crisis, I have 'allowed' contact with people with whom I feel comfortable without restrictions." Respondents were asked to rate the intensity of such feelings across the previous two weeks; responses were scored with a six-point grading scale ranging from *at no time* (0) to *all the time* (5). Here, both the mean values (ranging from 0 to 5) and the sum scores (ranging from 0 to 25) were reported. The two-item scale's internal consistency in this sample is acceptable (alpha = .718).

A further item asked whether the church and/or local community could mitigate the consequences of contact restrictions. Because this item would significantly decrease the two-item scale's internal consistency, it was used as an informative item only.

### *Usage of Digital and Social Media*

We also wanted to determine digital and social media's influence on emotional, spiritual, and social well-being considering the contact restrictions during the COVID-19 crisis. During the pandemic, several local and regional church resources became available online. Teams made up of the local/district pastor and media-savvy church members mainly started the local resources. The Hope Media Center, a division of the Hope Channel television station (which belongs to the Adventist Church), broadcasts Bible studies and sermons every Saturday. During the time of lockdown, live services were streamed on Sabbath.

In the survey, we first asked participants about their usage of social media in several areas. The first item asked participants about their personal gain from Bible lessons and discussion groups, youth classes, religious classes, church services, etc. We then asked about their feelings when they contacted pastors, fellow parishioners, and their church/local church community. We also asked whether utilizing digital media resources resulted in a strengthening of faith, specifically sermons, devotions, services from local pastors, services from the Hope Channel or other pastors from their region/district/city, offers from Adventist Youth, and websites associated with the Adventist Church. Participants could score the frequency of their perceptions on a five-point scale from *never*, *seldom*, *sometimes*, *often*, and *regularly*. Data were



reported as mean scores. For some analyses, the 10 media usage items were combined to a sum-score factor termed “Benefit from digital media offers” (ranging from 0 to 40), with acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .753$ ). Participants also had the option to share individual resources they had found beneficial. For that purpose, the responses in the optional free-text fields were qualitatively analyzed.

### Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics, analyses of variance (ANOVA), cross-tabulation (Chi2 test), first-order correlations (Spearman rho), step-by-step regression analyses, and internal consistency analyses (Cronbach’s coefficient  $\alpha$ ) were computed with SPSS 23.0. Cluster analysis was performed with SPSS 25.0.

Given this study’s exploratory character, the significance level of ANOVA and correlation analyses were set at  $p < 0.05$ . Concerning classifying the strength of the observed correlations, we regarded  $r > .5$  as a strong correlation, an  $r$  between  $.3$  and  $.5$  as a moderate correlation, an  $r$  between  $.2$  and  $.3$  as a weak correlation, and  $r < .2$  as negligible or no correlation.

## Findings

### Demographics

In this sample of German Adventists ( $N=1,036$ ), the proportion of women and men was well-balanced (55% women, 45% men). Most were 40 to 60 years of age. Overall, the cohort was representative of the Adventist Church in Germany (Table 1). Of the respondents, 1.1% stated that they had experienced the COVID-19 virus themselves; 3.7% did not respond to this question.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Data of Adventists in This Sample (N=1036)*

		Adventists in this sample	Adventists in Germany
Gender (%)	Male	45	40
	Female	55	60
Age group (%)	< 40 years (%)	22	24
	40-60 years (%)	43	35
	> 60 years	35	43
COVID-19 infection (%)	No	95	-
	Yes	1	-
	No response	4	-



### Overall Well-being

Within the sample, social well-being scored highest, followed by spiritual well-being, and emotional well-being (Table 2). Female Adventists scored lower for emotional well-being, but did not significantly differ from men regarding spiritual and social well-being.

Concerning age, emotional and spiritual well-being was highest in older respondents and lowest in young respondents, while their social well-being was not significantly different (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Well-being in the Sample, Differentiated for Gender and Age Groups*

		Emotional well-being	Spiritual well-being	Social well-being
Range		0-25	0-25	0-10
All (sum score)	mean	16.60	17.52	7.57
	SD	5.08	5.48	2.68
All (mean score)	mean	3.31	3.50	3.79
	SD	1.01	1.09	1.34
<b>Gender</b>				
men	mean	3.42	3.54	3.85
	SD	0.97	1.08	1.28
women	mean	3.22	3.46	3.74
	SD	1.03	1.10	1.38
F value		10.56	1.31	1.68
p value		0.001	n.s.	n.s.
<b>Age groups</b>				
< 40 years	mean	3.06	3.09	3.85
	SD	0.98	1.13	1.25
40-60 years	mean	3.14	3.44	3.69
	SD	1.03	1.05	1.36
> 60 years	mean	3.68	3.82	3.87
	SD	0.89	1.00	1.35
F value		39.98	34.01	2.16
p value		<0.0001	<0.0001	n.s.

With respect to social well-being, 75% of respondents stated that they “mostly” or even “all the time” have had people with whom, in the last two weeks, they could share joy and suffering, while 14% had “none” or “from time to time” had experienced such support. Almost three-fourths (71%) stated they “mostly” or “all the time” had “allowed” contact with people with whom they felt comfortable without restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, while 20% had “none” or had such contacts from “time to time.” Over a third (36%) stated the consequences of the contact restrictions could be mitigated by the local church/church community “mostly” or even “all the time,” while 48% stated that these consequences could “not at all” or “from time to time” be mitigated by the Church.

Based on these three well-being variables, we performed a Z-valued two-step cluster analysis and found three clusters of well-being (Table 3). The sharpest differences were between Cluster 2 and Cluster 3, with high scores for all well-being dimensions in Cluster 2 (47%). Cluster 3 (18%) shows very low emotional well-being (indicating a depressive state), low spiritual well-being, and low social well-being. The respective scores of these variables were in an intermediate range within Cluster 1 (36%). Within these clusters, the proportion of women is significantly higher in Cluster 3 (64%, compared to 55% in the whole sample;  $p=0.015$ ,  $\chi^2$ ). Persons with higher age were found predominantly in Cluster 2 (48%) and less often in the problematic Cluster 3 (18%) ( $p<0.0001$ ,  $\chi^2$ ).

**Table 3**

*Cluster Types of Well-being in the Sample*

	Range of Scores	Cluster 1 (35.5%)	Cluster 2 (47.0%)	Cluster 3 (17.5%)	
<b>Emotional well-being</b>	0-25	16.67 ± 2.93	19.83 ± 3.21	8.60 ± 3.26	F=857.50 *
<b>Spiritual well-being</b>	0-25	15.19 ± 3.60	21.74 ± 21.74	10.81 ± 5.29	F=787.19 *
<b>Social well-being</b>	0-10	8.82 ± 3.13	11.31 ± 3.13	6.54 ± 3.70	F=159.46 *
<b>Media usage score</b>	0-40	16.26 ± 8.24	19.48 ± 8.65	14.00 ± 7.34	F=32.20 *

Results are mean scores ± SD; \*  $p<0.001$

### *Usage of Digital and Social Media*

As shown in Table 3, many respondents utilized digital media with personal gain in Bible lessons (59% “often” to “regularly”) and stated that it was good to have contacts with their pastor or other parishioners (61%) and the local church/church community (67%). However, only 35% participated with personal gain “often” or “regularly” in discussion groups, youth classes, religious classes, church services, etc., compared to 65% who “seldom” or “sometimes” participated in such activities. For gender, men participated with less personal gain than women in discussion groups, youth classes, religious classes, church services ( $F=5.0$ ,  $p=0.026$ ). Further, men experienced slightly less gain through their contact with their preacher or other parishioners ( $F=4.0$ ,  $p=0.046$ ). Older Adventists in particular ( $2.31 \pm 1.07$ ) participated with personal gain in discussion groups, youth classes, religious classes, church services, etc. when compared to the younger participants ( $1.98 \pm 0.91$ ), while those between 40 to 60 years of age scored in-between ( $2.20 \pm 1.05$ ) ( $F=3.4$ ,  $p=0.035$ ).

Which methods of digital media most strengthened the participants faith (Table 4)? Of most value were (digital) sermons/devotions/services from the local pastors (75% were strengthened “often” to “regularly”), (digital) sermons/devotions/services from the Hope Channel or other pastors (73%), (digital) sermons/devotions/services broadcasted from their region/district/city (62%), and websites of the Adventist Church and/or its entities (60%). Less relevant were (digital) sermons/devotions/services from the community conference (46%), and of lowest relevance within this adult age sample the (digital) offers from Advent Youth (34%).

The digital media resources from respondents’ respective region/district/city were of slightly stronger relevance for women than men ( $F=4.0$ ,  $p=0.046$ ), while for all other strengthening resources no significant gender-related differences were found. With respect to age, the most significant differences were between younger and older Adventists regarding viewing the Hope Channel, ( $F=10.2$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ), regional resources ( $F=4.8$ ,  $p=0.008$ ), and local pastors ( $F=3.7$ ,  $p=0.025$ ); these items were more faith-strengthening to older Adventists than to younger ones. In contrast, the (digital) offers from Adventist Youth were of relevance particularly for the younger respondents ( $2.49 \pm 1.09$ ) compared to those in the 40 to 60 years age bracket ( $2.19 \pm 1.09$ ) or those older than 60 ( $1.60 \pm 0.81$ ) ( $F=14.1$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ).

The “benefit from digital media offers” scores differed significantly between the three cluster types of well-being (Table 3). The highest benefit was found in Cluster 2, and the lowest in Cluster 3 (Cohen’s  $d = 0.66$ ).

**Table 4***Responses to the Media Usage Items*

	Seldom %	Sometimes %	Often %	Regularly %	Mean Score (± SD)
<b>Participation via social media</b>					
Participated with personal gain in Bible lessons	18	24	21	38	2.8 ± 1.1
Participated with personal gain in discussion groups, youth classes, religious classes, church services etc.	30	34	20	15	2.2 ± 1.0
It was good for me to have contacts with my pastor or with parishioners	14	25	26	35	2.8 ± 1.1
It was good for me to have contacts with my community/ church	12	21	18	49	3.1 ± 1.1
<b>Strengthened by . . .</b> (Digital) sermons/devotions/ services from my local pastors	11	16	21	53	3.2 ± 1.0
(Digital) sermons/devotions/ services from my region / district / city from Hope TV or other pastors	9	19	23	50	3.1 ± 1.0
(Digital) sermons/devotions/ services from my region/ district/ city	16	22	21	41	2.9 ± 1.1
(Digital) sermons/devotions/ services from my community conference	22	32	22	24	2.5 ± 1.1
(Digital) offers from Adventist Youth	34	33	16	18	2.2 ± 1.1
Websites of the Church and/ or its entities	18	21	18	42	2.9 ± 1.2

### *Qualitative Analysis of Individual Resources*

Nearly all participants shared positive and encouraging resources which can be put into the following categories.

- *Personal relationship with God*: includes themes of shelter in God, trust in God, Jesus as a friend, personal Bible study, prayer, reflection, and reading Christian literature.
- *Personal beliefs*: includes themes of God having everything in His hand, Jesus's Second Coming, and anticipating the New Earth.
- *Community media*: includes newsletters and emails from pastors and church leaders, and church services beyond the local congregation/region (i.e., via Hope Channel or other communities).
- *Community within the community*: includes prayer groups, house churches, discussion groups, local services, sermons and devotions, Bible classes, youth events, mail and messenger services, and video sharing.
- *Social community*: includes partnerships, family, friends, neighbors, friends of faith, phone calls, and contact via digital media.
- *Neighborhood help*: includes helping and care services for neighbors.
- *Silence and tranquility*: includes enjoying silence and tranquility, relaxation, and realignment.
- *Leisure time*: includes experiencing nature, walks, cycling, jogging, and enjoying hobbies.
- *Rationalism*: includes knowing that the crisis is limited and will come to an end.

### *Correlations Between Digital Media Usage and Well-being*

Emotional and spiritual well-being are strongly interconnected, while social well-being was moderately related to emotional well-being and weakly with spiritual well-being (Table 5). The digital media resources were marginally to weakly related to these well-being dimensions. *Emotional well-being* was weakly associated with the strengthening of faith from the Hope Channel or other pastors, while all other resources were only marginally related (Table 5). *Spiritual well-being* was weakly associated with the respondent's participation (with personal gain) in discussion groups, youth classes, religious classes, church services etc., with the perception that it was good to stay in contact with the local church/church community and with the strengthening of faith from regional and local offers, specifically from the Hope Channel or other pastors (Table 5). *Social well-being* was weakly associated with participating (with personal gain) in Bible lessons and the perception that it was good to maintain contact with local church/church community. All other variables were only marginally associated with social well-being.

The “benefit from digital media offers” score was weakly associated with spiritual well-being and marginally associated with emotional and social well-being (Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Correlations Between Well-being Aspects and Usage of Media*

	Emotional well-being	Spiritual well-being	Social well-being
Emotional well-being (WHO-Five)	1.000		
Spiritual well-being	.513**	1.000	
Social well-being	.358**	.268**	1.000
<b>Participation via social media</b>			
Participated with personal gain in Bible lessons	.097	.143**	.263**
Participated with personal gain in discussion groups, youth classes, religious classes, church services etc.	.158**	.251**	.039
It was good for me to have contacts with my pastor or with parishioners	.115**	.189**	.181**
It was good for me to have contacts with my community/church	.168**	.202**	.244**
<b>Strengthened by . . .</b>			
(Digital) sermons/devotions/services from my local pastors	.187**	.264**	.130**
(Digital) sermons/devotions/ services from my region/district/city from Hope TV or other pastors	.207**	.248**	.107**
(Digital) sermons/devotions/services from my region /district/city	.177**	.287**	.111**
(Digital) sermons/devotions/services from my community conference	.158**	.158**	.108**
(Digital) offers from Adventist Youth	.102	.004	.035
Websites of the Church and/or its entities	.107	.186**	.194**
Benefit from digital media usage	.156**	.208**	.156**

\*\* p<0,001 (Spearman rho)

### *Predictors of Emotional and Spiritual Well-being*

Next, we aimed to clarify the predictors of emotional, spiritual, and social well-being, and thus performed step-by-step regression analyses. We included age cohorts and the “benefit from digital media” factor, which combined the 10 media usage items. As shown in Table 6, emotional well-being was predicted best ( $R^2=.32$ ) by spiritual and social well-being (which both would predict 29% of variance), and further impact of the “benefit from digital media” (which would add further 2.5% of explained variance). Spiritual well-being was predicted by four variables ( $R^2=.29$ ), emotional well-being (24% explained variance), “benefit from digital media” (adding 2.5% of variance explanation), age (adding further 2%), and social well-being (adding < 1% of explained variance). Social well-being was predicted with weak explanatory power ( $R^2=.15$ ) by emotional well-being (13%), as well as by “benefit from digital media,” spiritual well-being, and age (adding 3% of variance explanation).

**Table 6**  
*Stepwise Regression Analyses to Predict Adventists Emotional and Spiritual Well-being (Including the Influencing Variable “Benefit from Digital Media Usage”)*

	Beta	T	p
Dependent variable: emotional well-being (WHO5) Modell 3: $F=149.6$ , $p<0.0001$ ; $R^2=.32$			
(constant)		7.671	<.0001
Spiritual well-being	.379	13.360	<.0001
Social well-being	.250	9.105	<.0001
Age	.163	5.938	<.0001
Dependent variable: spiritual well-being Modell 4: $F=98.69$ , $p<0.0001$ ; $R^2=.29$			
(constant)		7.572	<.0001
Emotional well-being	.388	12.832	<.0001
Benefit from digital media usage	.158	5.700	<.0001
Age	.153	5.431	<.0001
Social well-being	.090	3.079	.002
Dependent variable: social well-being Modell 4: $F=43.54$ , $p<0.0001$ ; $R^2=.15$			
(constant)		11.336	<.0001
Emotional well-being	.305	8.896	<.0001
Benefit from digital media usage	.105	3.432	.001
Spiritual well-being	.107	3.079	.002
Age	-.091	-2.932	.003

\* Gender was not included in the regression models



## Discussion

Regarding Adventists' anticipation of Jesus's return at any time (Adventist Fundamental Belief 25), the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions affected the local church communities' religious and social life in different ways. The usual diversity of church activities was stopped entirely within a short time. As demonstrated by participants, their social, emotional, and spiritual well-being scored in an upper mid-range and was thus not generally restricted. Interestingly, the older respondents, who might be seen as an "at-risk group," had significantly higher emotional and spiritual well-being than the younger groups. Over half (58%) of Adventists maintained hope in Jesus' return (Luke 21:28: "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."), while 27% did not state such hope. This hope was significantly stronger in the older cohort than in younger respondents ( $F=14.9$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ).

Adventist's emotional well-being during the COVID-19 restrictions was slightly lower (Cohen's  $d = 0.19$ ) as compared to a representative study of Germany, conducted by Brähler, Mühlan, Albani, & Schmidt (2007) and slightly higher (Cohen's  $d = 0.18$ ) as compared to a study among German Adventists (Büssing, Starck, & van Treeck, 2020a), both conducted before the pandemic. Whether this lower level of emotional well-being is an impact of the pandemic is unclear. However, emotional well-being was lower in women compared to men in all three studies. Perhaps this is because women allow themselves to be more sensitive and realistic about the dangers and burdens of life (Kuhl, 2001). In contrast, spiritual well-being did not differ between women and men. A majority felt comforted by God in their challenges, worries, and fears (81% "mostly" to "all the time"). Here, older respondents felt more comforted by God than younger ones ( $F=13.5$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ).

Most stated that they had "allowed" contact with people with whom they felt comfortable during the pandemic and have had people with whom they could share joy and suffering; however, 20% and 14% (respectively) had no such contacts or only had such experiences "rarely." This group (up to 20%) may suffer from social loneliness. A large proportion (48%) stated that their local church/church community could not mitigate the contact restrictions' consequences, while 36% were satisfied with the Church's abilities to support its parishioners. However, it remains unclear what precisely the interviewees expected from their Church. Therefore, their usage of digital/social media for spiritual well-being is an area of further research.

Using digital media has been practiced in local communities since the mid-1990s through satellite transmissions in context with evangelistic meetings (NET). Live worship Adventist church services have been broadcasted via the Hope Channel to congregations since the beginning of the 21st century.

Regular video conferences have been a part of the Church's administration (both at the conference and union level) daily routine for many years. Therefore, one could expect that these media forms are a powerful resource for community members, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several studies have shown that people are increasingly using digital/social networks and are socializing through digital communication services more often (Gupta, Armstrong, & Clayton, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2019). These social media platforms also allow the elderly social participation, and many people use these methods to communicate with family members or friends from a distance. Family connectedness, particularly for the elderly, is of exceptional importance (Cornejo, Tentori, & Favela, 2013); the elderly are always "looking for methods to stay connected and be informed" (Kiel, 2005, p. 21). In this sample of Seventh-day Adventists, the older age group particularly benefited from the Church's digital offers, indicating that the church's "digital inclusion" was compelling. Most participated via digital/social media (with personal gain) in Bible lessons or had contact with their pastor, fellow parishioners, or the local church/church community. Other resources were less often used (with personal gain), particularly discussion groups, youth classes, religious classes, and church services. However, although less frequently used, older respondents participated more often in discussion groups, youth classes, religious classes, church services, etc., than did their younger counterparts. The content of the digital offers seemed crucial in determining which cohort was reached.

Approximately 85% of Adventists regularly attended the weekly worship service before the pandemic (Büssing et al., 2020a). However, this study's findings show that both local, regional, and supra-regional (i.e., Hope Channel programming) digital offers have strengthened the respondent's faith during the pandemic. Only the efforts of Adventist Youth were less successful, particularly when trying to reach the older cohort. (This is understandable because the content of the Adventist Youth is geared towards the younger generation.)

Social media (i.e., Facebook, WhatsApp, Threema, Wire) were used (with benefit) by over 60% of respondents to have contact within the Church (67% "often to regularly," 21% "sometimes," and 12% "rarely") and to get in contact with their pastor or other members (61% "often" to "regularly," 25% "sometimes," and 14% "rarely"). These contacts were not age-related and were relevant for all age cohorts.

It seems that digital and social media were important for Adventist respondents to cope with the restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic and that they used these as resources to strengthen their faith. While these forms of media were regarded as necessary by some Adventists, their correlative association with emotional, spiritual, and social well-being was weak. Based on the actor-network theory, which examines the effects of technology on the

social network and its communication, digitized communication is a given part of the system. “Actors—people, media, machines or other artifacts— . . . are equally able to influence relationships and behavior of the actors in the network” (Ebner & Schön, 2013). How markedly digital forms of communication play a role in the respective system/network depends on the system/network’s preference, needs, and the basic practice tradition (Charbonnier, 2018). However, before COVID-19, digital communication was a secondary part of the Adventist worship structure. Digital media might have been used as presentation aids (e.g., a PowerPoint presentation to enhance the sermon) or organizationally (e.g., email or posts on social media) before the pandemic; however, Adventist worship services, as well as other relevant events and working groups, were predominantly carried out analogously through direct encounters. It is easy to explain why digital communication showed to have no real impact on well-being, as well-being is usually enhanced by personal encounters. Digital communication was not a traditional means of increasing well-being in community practice.

From the point of view of actor-network theory, before COVID-19, communication in the Adventist congregation was analog and not conducted by digital media alone; it was more a means of coordinating and starting real encounters, closeness, and collaboration, but not the primary means of communication. After the shutdown and digital “encounters,” the quickly established crisis communication could only dock onto the existing analog proximity and experience but not take their actual place. Therefore, it is not surprising that the best predictors of emotional well-being were spiritual and social well-being, while there was no relevant benefit from digital media usage. In contrast, while respondents spiritual well-being was predicted mainly by emotional well-being, there was a further influence of digital media usage and higher age. The identified predictors of social well-being were too weak upon which to rely.

There are several resources that Adventists rely on to maintain their well-being, not only the digital resources during the restricted time. These might be only additional resources—which are nevertheless important particularly for their spiritual well-being. The ability to deal with stressors (i.e., fear of virus infection, social isolation because of the pandemic restrictions) is closely linked to the availability of internal and external resources, including social relationships. Especially in times of crisis, it is important to actively use these resources (Paulsen & Kortsch, 2020; Krick, Felfe, & Renner, 2018). Access to the resources facilitates self-regulation, a strong predictor of resilience (Kuhl, 2001; Storch & Krause, 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Adventists are increasingly experiencing what Jesus discussed in the parable of the 10 virgins (Matt. 25). Those who have a solid foundation will not be shaken in times of crisis. The skills and experiences

gained as part of their religious life (using the metaphor of “oil” in reference to emotional, spiritual and social attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors) can be utilized as a resource in times of need. Both the free text comments collected as part of this study and the findings of the resources used during Adventists’ phases of spiritual dryness (Büssing, Starck, & van Treeck, 2020b) support this notion. Adventists who can perceive God’s joyful and reassuring presence in their life are more resilient in crises. A varied and fulfilling life of prayer and devotion, supported by understanding, reflection, application, and experience, provides a firm foundation under challenging times. Those who can perceive the expectations of God and the Church in their religious life as “easy” (referring to Matt. 11:30, “For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”) are often more resilient.

Digital media provides a method of keeping these facets of personal spiritual life vital, even during restriction and crisis. During the pandemic, digital communication has become even more central to local church/church community’s life. It should be noted, however, that because we are still amid the pandemic, it is difficult to predict how these experiences will shape the attitudes and behaviors of the community members when the pandemic ends—especially in a church that intends to support the existential and spiritual needs and holistic well-being of its members. Mature reflection, openness for self-criticism, and the ability to adapt are irreplaceable.

Some Adventists cannot cope with the restrictions nor fully benefit from the digital offers of the Church. They may miss in-person encounters with other members, as well as their pastor, and mourn the experience of “togetherness.” Since the crisis has eliminated the concrete and personally experienced love, appreciation, and stabilizing accompaniment by the community, the pandemic has hit some members particularly hard, while others seem to be better able to cope. Presumably, the digital media offers of the Church are not enough for these less-effectively coping persons. While this study did not examine other forms of support for these people, preventive advice and research should be carried out to determine professionally competent support and methods of strengthening this group of people before, during, and after a crisis.

## Limitations

This study was planned as an online survey, and thus persons without Internet access were not reached. However, the proportion of this study’s gender and age cohorts is similar to the general population of German Adventists and could thus be seen as representative for (baptized) Adventists in Germany. Moreover, this study aimed to analyze digital media usage, and therefore access to digital media was vital for participation. Further, we have no information about those who did not participate, including their reasons for not participating and their well-being, which might be strengthened by other, non-digital resources.

## Conclusion

Pandemics—both the COVID-19 pandemic and possible others in the future—will likely remain a part of our personal and ecclesiastical life, at least for the time being. The second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is currently hitting several countries, with increasing numbers of infected and hospitalized persons. Further, local, limited, or complete lockdowns have to be expected. This study determined that religious support through digital media resources is an effective option of spiritual support. Whether these resources' usage prepares both active members and skeptics equally for future difficult times remains to be seen. Persons in leadership roles must carefully consider which persons within the community may feel isolated, those unreached by the Church's digital offers, who may be at risk for depressive states. Approximately 18% of German Adventists are in this group (Cluster 3) and may require psychological and pastoral support. In contrast, a greater number (47%) of Adventists investigated have overall high well-being scores (Cluster 2) and seem better able to cope with the pandemic outcomes. This “high well-being” group includes persons of higher age who might have found strategies to cope during their life and who are probably more stable in their faith. Their self-perceived benefit from digital media offers was highest in the sample.

Christian leadership must consider as the pandemic continues that digital offers may not have reached all persons or provide a similar benefit for faith-strengthening, as found in this study. These interactions provide an excellent opportunity to socially connect and inform persons of similar faith and show interest in their personal situation. Persons in leadership positions need to recognize and support parish members who may experience periods of spiritual dryness (Büssing, Frick, Jacobs, & Baumann, 2016; Büssing, Baumann, Jacobs, & Frick, 2017; Büssing, Winter, & Baumann, 2020), a form of spiritual crisis related to perceived distance from God, feeling that prayers go unanswered—particularly in times of pandemic restriction and isolation.

When developing a common strategy for the future, we can only rely on assumptions of what may come. However, we must begin planning for the future, even though it is unknown; there is no point in merely waiting (Kawhol, 2020). It is clear that the context of church life is changing so quickly that previously used strategies must be reconsidered. It remains church leadership's task to set the course for communication processes to include the entire church community.

We are currently in the preliminary stages of this shift, and the changes have been carried out gradually. These short-term adjustments have developed a new dynamic that enables the Church to be experienced anew. Four main drivers influence this process: (1) digitization, (2) the overall significance of spirituality in society, (3) the influence of the Holy Spirit, and (4) the respective level of matu-

riety of the church organization. Modeling this process to local pastors and congregants within a specific environment/society provides an opportunity and a challenge for church leadership. This study has provided the first clues for reflection and provides a basis for further research. (Church leadership in Germany reflected this study's results on June 9, 2020 via video conference.) This is undoubtedly a first step in an open process of change.

The findings from Adventists in Germany presented in this article may encourage other Christian and non-Christian communities to further expand their digital media resources to present helpful supplies during the subsequent waves of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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