

# CRITICAL INSIGHTS FROM SOCIAL WORKERS ON ADOLESCENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN ALTERNATIVE RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: MEDIA AS A PROBLEMATIC SOCIALISING ENVIRONMENT

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** This study examines the effects of Alternative Religious Movements (ARM) on adolescents, aiming to address a research gap by providing qualitative insights into social workers' perspectives on (1) the outcomes of adolescents' positive perceptions of ARM and (2) the potential influence of social media on their views of ARM.

**Methods.** Focus Group with six experienced social workers provided insights into adolescents' resilience against ARM. Thematic analysis revealed key consequences and examined the role of social media in shaping adolescents' perceptions of ARM.

**Results.** Consequences of ARM involvement included behavioural changes, social isolation, weakened relationships, reduced critical thinking, and dependency on the controversial group. Additionally, the study highlighted the significant role of social media in amplifying the accessibility of ARM content and facilitating adolescents' engagement with these groups through virtual communities.

**Conclusion.** The study highlights the necessity for targeted preventive strategies in social work to address the consequences of adolescents' positive perceptions of ARM, such as behavioural changes, social isolation, and reduced critical thinking. It also underscores the pivotal role of social media in shaping adolescents' religious identities and emphasises the need to guide them through these influences.

**Cognitive Value.** This research enhances the understanding of ARM's impact on adolescents and stresses the importance of targeted interventions. It provides practical insights into protecting vulnerable youth, navigating online environments, and comprehending the "mediatisation of religion" in shaping spiritual identities.

**Keywords:** Alternative Religious Movements (ARM), adolescents' engagement, social work, social media influence, mediatisation of religion

## INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of social work is to objectively identify and address social problems such as unemployment, juvenile delinquency, and poverty through specific measures and activities aimed at explaining, mitigating, and resolving these issues (Slastan et al., 2024). Social work is in a constant state of development, as it must adapt flexibly to evolving social challenges requiring solutions (Budayová et al., 2022). Competent professionals respond to these challenges by providing assistance and support, particularly to individuals in difficult situations, striving to ensure their adequate and satisfactory social existence (Hamarová et al., 2024). Among the increasingly relevant social concerns is the influence of religious or ideological groups on vulnerable populations, particularly young people.

Given that the term "sect" and its etymological roots carry a pejorative and evaluative connotation (Dojčár, 2008; Štampach, 1998), this paper opts for a more neutral term. In scholarly discussions, the term "Alternative Religious Movements" (ARM) is often employed, although it lacks a widely recognised abbreviation in academic literature (Azzolina, 2021). In this study, we will use the term and its abbreviation, ARM, as it best captures the focus on the social dynamics, societal perceptions, and the influence of such groups on young people. We believe, this terminology avoids premature judgment or stigmatisation and preserves objectivity when exam-

ining the potentially problematic aspects of these groups within an already diverse and complex socialising environment.

The immediate social environment significantly influences youth during late adolescence, defined as the period between 18 and 24 years, marking the transition from adolescence to early adulthood (Kingham, 2018; Vágnerová, 2000). This stage is characterised by notable physical changes (e.g., brain maturation, particularly in the pre-frontal cortex responsible for decision-making), psychological developments (e.g., continued identity formation, cognitive abilities, and emotional stability), and social transitions (e.g., adopting roles for social adaptation and achieving independence). Experts describe adolescence as a gradual attainment of maturity and full development of physical and mental capacities (Krejčířová & Langmeier, 1998; State Adolescent Health Resource Center, n.d.).

The complexity and conflict inherent in this developmental stage were described by Granville Stanley Hall, the author of the first comprehensive concept of adolescence, who defined it as a distinct developmental period with unique characteristics. Hall viewed adolescence as a time marked by heightened emotional expression, rebellion, and idealism, describing it as a period of inevitable and dramatic clashes of opposing tendencies within the individual (Hall, 1970). During this turbulent phase, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to manipulations promising friendship, recognition, relational stability, or a sense of belonging (Macanović & Kuprešanin, 2014). The appeal of ARM, which seemingly offers security, acceptance, and a meaning of life, becomes naturally enticing.

Alternative religiosity and its consequences—particularly concerning its impact on specific age groups and their social environments—remain relatively underexplored in Slovakia. Despite the significance of this issue, empirical research addressing the specific characteristics of age groups and potential prevention or intervention mechanisms through social work is limited. Much of the current knowledge stems from non-governmental organisations, and lacks a systematic and comprehensive framework.

Addressing this gap, this study conducts a qualitative analysis of social workers' perspectives on the consequences of adolescents' inclinations toward ARM. It further provides a critical evaluation of the role of social media in shaping adolescents' perceptions of ARM, based on the assumption that social media is a vital socialising environment for this age group.

## ADOLESCENCE AND RISKS OF THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Adolescence represents a critical stage of physical, psychological, and social development, marked by incomplete autonomy and limited capacity for independent decision-making. Researchers identify adolescents, even those in late adolescence, as a vulnerable group susceptible to adverse influences from their social environment

(Klíma & Klíma, 1978). These influences include also the impact of alternative religious movements (ARM), which pose distinct challenges to adolescents' identity formation and decision-making processes (Berdibayeva, 2017; Onwuatiegwu & Nwagu, 2020). Addressing these risks is essential for safeguarding adolescent well-being during this transitional period.

While experts generally acknowledge the positive role of religiosity in fostering moral values, building social connections, and offering emotional support (Murgaš et al., 2023), "vague religiosity"—characterised by a rejection of traditional structures and a personalised, spirituality-focused approach—is seen as less beneficial, particularly among youth (Kondrla et al., 2022). Even greater criticism is directed toward religiosity associated with Alternative Religious Movements (ARM), which may involve unconventional practices with risks such as psychological manipulation, social isolation, and impaired critical thinking, posing challenges to psychosocial health (Svoboda et al., 2024).

Let us add that young people in late adolescence are capable of critically reassessing external influences, with their development being shaped by various issues in their immediate environment. These issues—referred to as risk factors in adolescents' primary socialisation environments—can, according to experts, not only lead to sympathy with ARM but also to adolescents ultimately joining these groups.

One of the key risk factors for adolescents' inclination toward Alternative Religious Movements (ARM) are issues in the family and school. Roman Džambazovič highlights the risk that, in dysfunctional or pathological family environments lacking stability and support, young people often seek out alternative groups that offer them meaning and friendship (Džambazovič, 2007). Similarly, Bohuslav Kuzyšin points out that poverty-stricken families may further increase young people's vulnerability to ARM manipulation, as poverty can reduce their ability to cope with problems or feel life stability (Kuzyšin, 2010).

In addition to the family environment, adolescents can face various other social risks in the school environment, "where a child spends the second most amount of time (after the family environment)" (Culenova et al., 2024, p. 6). School-related risks include bullying, access to drugs, discrimination, academic stress, social anxiety, and others (Savari et al., 2023). Peer relationships also significantly contribute to adolescents' overall life satisfaction (Petrovič et al., 2023) and may influence their inclination toward risky behaviour, including engagement with ARM.

Another significant factor influencing adolescents' susceptibility to ARM is the broader social environment. In particular, the three conditions of the social environment in which adolescents live—whether in urban or rural areas, impoverished neighbourhoods, or marginalised settlements—play a crucial role in shaping social interactions and worldviews (Bednařík, 2004). These conditions can significantly impact adolescents' social development and perceptions, influencing their likelihood of engaging with ARM.



Nowadays adolescents are increasingly exposed to the influence of online environments, which offer easy access to various sources and online communities, including ARM. In this space, social media encourages the spread of ideologies that can attract young people also to different alternative groups, promising a sense of purpose, personal value, or social belonging. The rapid, anonymous access to information, along with the possibility of retreating into virtual groups represent modern trends where traditional religion is replaced by digital religion, and participation in religious services is substituted by online expressions of spirituality, with traditional authorities replaced by other sources. This phenomenon is referred to as “religious mediatisation”, where the media not only provide information about religion but also assume the cultural and social functions of traditional religious institutions (Hjarvard, 2008, pp. 14–16, as cited in Lövheim & Lynch, 2011).

Another risk factor related to the influence and reach of social media on the audience is 4) the proximity of ARM. Studies from post-communist countries illustrate the visible increase in ARM, which is established in various areas of the social environment, including the public or political spheres (Lichner, 2020; Váňe, 2010). Similarly, alternative ideologies aim to influence private lives of their members, introducing “innovations” in areas such as diet, solving personal problems, and building an image. From a sociological perspective, they are often referred to as “protest communities” because they express the belief that the current way of life is insufficient and that a more fulfilling, meaningful, and spiritual existence is possible (Enroth, 1994; Lambert, 2016; Stark & Bainbridge, 1979 and others).

For this reason, attention must be given to 5 sociological factors that better distinguish ARM and their risks; i.e., these factors not only allow for the identification of risky subcultures but also for the analysis of their broader societal impact. In this context, we agree with experts that the following sociological factors are crucial in distinguishing ARM: the closed nature of the subculture, unquestionable authority of the leader, opposition to the majority society, concealment of structures, teachings, and information, “inclusive membership”, high member engagement, and the negative consequences of joining an ARM (Dojčár, 2008; Enroth, 1994; Procházka, 2004; ReviseSociology, 2018; Štampach, 1998; Vojtíšek, 2007; and others).

## METHODOLOGY

### Identification of Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

Controversial religiosity and its consequences in Slovakia remain under-researched areas. Despite the importance of this issue, there is a lack of empirical research that addresses risk factors and their influence on adolescents’ positive perceptions of alternative religious movements (ARM). Most knowledge comes from the work

of NGOs and media, which do not provide a systematic or analytical perspective. This study seeks to fill this gap by qualitatively analysing the views of social workers on risk factors contributing to positive perceptions of ARM among adolescents and the consequences of these perceptions on their development and social behaviour.

The conceptual framework of this study is based on theoretical knowledge about adolescent development, social risk, and the manipulative mechanisms of ARM subcultures. The research focuses on analysing the consequences of positive perceptions of ARM on adolescent social behaviour and development. The findings integrate professional knowledge and the practical experiences of social workers in Slovakia. A second aspect of the study is the critical evaluation of the potential influence of social media (as a significant socialising environment) on the perception of CRS among adolescents.

We believe that Slovakia provides an appropriate context for studying the chosen topic. Since the fall of communism, Slovakia has seen a noticeable increase in ARMs (Beck, 2004; Orbanová, 2010; Podolinská et al., 2013, and others); a similar trend has been confirmed by research in other former communist countries (Kardis, 2014; Palinchak & Holonič, 2019). Eva Orbanová (2010) associates the rising interest in alternative religiosity with communism's suppression of religious needs, which led to an increase in syncretic religions and non-religious subcultures. The most recent Slovak census (2011) also confirmed the increase in individuals identifying with ARM compared to 2001 (Lichner, 2020; Karásek, 2020).

## Research Goal and Questions

The research aimed to examine social workers' perspectives on the consequences of adolescents' involvement in Alternative Religious Movements (ARM) on their social behaviour and development. It also explored the potential impact of social media on the perception of ARM among adolescents.

Research questions:

- Q1) What consequences can involvement in ARM have on adolescents' social behaviour and development?
- Q2) How do social media influences shape adolescents' perceptions of ARM?

## Research Design

The study was conducted using the Focus Group research method, which enables an in-depth understanding of social workers' perspectives and experiences. This qualitative method is primarily based on group discussions moderated by the researcher,

utilising group interaction to gather data and insights that would be more difficult to obtain outside the group (Bloor & Wood, 2006).

The Focus Group method allows for the acquisition of knowledge about the perspectives and attitudes of individuals facing specific social issues and needs, such as those involved in ARM, which is also a subject of social work.

The purpose of research in social work is to generate applied knowledge that supports practical solutions in the field (Krysiak & Finn, 2010). By utilising the Focus Group method, we can gain valuable insights into sensitive topics, offering practical perspectives on the examined issues and informing potential solutions.

### **Characteristics of the Research Sample**

The research sample consisted of six social workers who met the following criteria:

- A university degree in social work;
- Between 7 and 23 years of professional experience;
- Age between 30 and 54 years.

The sample included two men and four women, ensuring a broader perspective on the research topic. Participants were purposefully selected for their direct experience working with adolescents at risk of involvement in ARM. The group represented various professional areas such as fieldwork, counselling, and prevention, thus contributing to variable perspectives.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Methods**

The goal of the Focus Group was to gain in-depth insights into the experiences of social workers with adolescents involved in ARM or those who have observed positive perceptions of ARM in their practice. The group discussion aimed to explore collective views on the influences of ARM and the role of media in shaping adolescents' perceptions of ARM.

Data was analysed using thematic analysis, which helped identify recurring patterns, meanings, and categories. Participation in the research was voluntary, and respondents' anonymity was guaranteed.

### **Limitations of the Research**

The limitations include a small number of respondents and the qualitative nature of the research, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. However, the qual-

itative approach allows a deeper exploration of social workers' subjective opinions and provides practical insights into the studied issue. The research focuses on a specific and underexplored phenomenon of ARM, contributing expansion of knowledge within prevention and intervention in social work. Furthermore, the emphasis on the Slovak context offers valuable insights into the dynamics of controversial religious subcultures in post-communist society, which could inspire similar studies in other countries with similar historical backgrounds.

## RESULTS

This section presents findings from the study, organised around two primary research questions. First, the consequences of adolescents' involvement in Alternative Religious Movements (ARMs) on their social behaviour and development are examined. The analysis highlights key patterns of behavioural, social, and cognitive impacts, offering an understanding of how ARMs might influence vulnerable youth.

Second, the critical role of social media in shaping adolescents' perceptions of ARMs is evaluated. The findings reveal how online platforms amplify exposure to ARM ideologies, enable engagement with alternative spiritual practices, and facilitate connections to ARMs through virtual communities. These results illustrate how ARMs and digital spaces intersect to affect adolescents' social and psychological development, as perceived by experienced social workers.

### **Consequences of Adolescents' Involvement in Alternative Religious Movements on their Social Behaviour and Development (Q1)**

The second research question focuses on the potential consequences of adolescents' involvement in Alternative Religious Movements (ARM) on their social behaviour and development. According to six social work respondents, the primary consequences include six factors.

#### ***Behavioural Changes***

- Adolescents involved in ARM exhibit significant behavioural shifts, including rejection of traditional values, lifestyle changes, and confrontational attitudes. These changes often strain family relationships and increase social isolation.
- Social workers caution that some ARM may isolate young people from their families and friends, further hindering their ability to critically evaluate their environment.

This process can lead to long-term psychological consequences, such as loss of self-confidence, emotional dependence, and inability to make independent decisions.

### ***Social Isolation***

- ARM encourages mental separation from mainstream society and prior support systems. Adolescents' search for "truth" within ARM disrupts family dynamics and promotes conflicts with societal norms.
- Our research findings confirm that acute crises—such as parental divorce, loss of a loved one, breakups, disappointments in love, and bullying within or outside school—can often serve as triggers for adolescents' inclination toward ARM.

### ***Negative Development of Relationship Skills Outside ARM***

- Adolescents involved in ARM show diminished relational skills with those outside the subculture.
- They become hesitant to form close bonds with people who don't share their new values, leading to social isolation.

### ***Impairment of Analytical Thinking***

- ARM involvement undermines adolescents' ability to evaluate situations objectively and make independent decisions. Limited exposure to diverse perspectives hampers their critical reflection, independent decisions, and social interaction skills.

### ***Psychological Mechanisms Reinforcing Dependency***

- ARM use psychological tactics, such as emphasising members' uniqueness and portraying the outside world as hostile.
- This makes it difficult for them to criticise ARM practices or leave the group, even when they experience negative effects.

### ***Loss of Resilience***

- Resilience enables adolescents to manage stress and social pressures, while vulnerability arises when they seek emotional stability and recognition in risky environments.
- Emotional dependence on ARMs increases due to family crises or school problems, diminishing resilience and strengthening their commitment to these groups.
- Late adolescence is a critical period of identity formation, during which young people are more susceptible to influences offering simple solutions to complex challenges.

## **Critical Evaluation of the Potential Impact of Social Media on Adolescents' Perception of Alternative Religious Movements (Q2)**

The second research question examines how social media influence adolescents' perceptions of Alternative Religious Movements (ARM). Based on the analysis, six key aspects were identified.

### ***Key Role of Social Media in Shaping Adolescents' Religious Practices***

- Media platforms, particularly social media, influence adolescents' perceptions of religious groups and practices.
- The influence of media can be positive (providing objective information, educational content, etc.) or negative (spreading controversial views, dangerous religious practices, etc.).

### ***Media Representation of ARM and its Impact on Adolescents' Values***

- Media content depicting ARM influences adolescents' values and behaviour, increasing the risk of their involvement in such groups.
- Regular exposure to controversial religious sources alters perceptions of traditional religious institutions and approaches to religious life.

### ***Shift in the Understanding of Religion and Spirituality***

- The combination of traditional (e.g., church) and modern (e.g., virtual communities) elements leads to a transformation of religion among young people.
- This shift often results in dissatisfaction with traditional religious practices, driving adolescents to engage with religion more through online platforms.
- Social media can spread an image of ARM that no longer appears risky to adolescents but becomes appealing, especially when these groups are portrayed as better or attractive alternatives to traditional religious institutions.

### ***Risk Factors Associated with Social Media***

- Media representation of ARM is a risk factor as it exposes young people to controversial religious information and practices (e.g., occultism, witchcraft, satanism, alternative healing methods, etc.).
- Adolescents may be inclined to explore controversial religious practices due to their desire for experimentation.
- They are exposed to these practices through social media, films, TV shows, and music, which can influence their spiritual and religious identity.



***Impact of Controversial Spirituality on Adolescents' Overall Development***

- Findings suggest that adolescents exposed to alternative spiritualities promoted in the media are more likely to seek similar online communities and/or engage in these groups.
- Exposure to ARM influences adolescents' overall development and well-being, potentially altering their worldview and spiritual identity.

***Role of Online Communities in Reinforcing ARM Beliefs***

- Social media platforms facilitate the formation of virtual communities where adolescents can find support and validation for their beliefs, even if they are controversial or unconventional.
- These online communities might reinforce ARM ideologies through group discussions, shared experiences, and peer support, making it harder for adolescents to question or critically evaluate these beliefs.
- Adolescents may experience a sense of belonging and identity within these digital spaces, leading to deeper engagement and, in some cases, a stronger attachment to the movement.

## DISCUSSION

Using the Focus Group method, consisting of six social workers, the research gathered new insights and findings, relevant to the theoretical framework, and similarly practically beneficial for social work. Discussion within Focus Group, as Michael Bloor and Fiona Wood mentioned (2006), enables the extraction of valuable information that improves social work practices, offering a deeper understanding of the issues at hand, and actionable insights.

In the following discussion, we will explore the potential consequences of adolescents' involvement in Alternative Religious Movements (ARM) as identified by the respondents (Q1). We believe that these insights provide valuable perspectives on how such involvement may influence adolescents' social behaviour, development, and identity. By examining the research findings, we aim to better understand the complex dynamics of these influences and their broader implications.

*Behavioural changes*—Social workers in the research highlighted that adolescents' involvement in ARM significantly affects their social behaviour and development. Changes in interactions with family, friends, and the broader community often include the rejection of traditional values and increased isolation. However, some adolescents openly express rebellion, e.g., by altering their appearance or language. These behavioural changes can increase tension, especially in family relationships, with behaviour becoming more confrontational and less flexible. Literature suggests these changes amplify risks, with adolescents potentially distancing themselves further from mainstream society and its values (Králík,

2023; Šip, 2010; Zozuláková, 2009). Similarly, the “management of psychosocial risks” posed by such behaviour challenges social workers (Slovak et al., 2024).

*Social isolation*—According to social workers, ARM negatively impacts youth by encouraging separation or even isolation from society. This isolation is not primarily physical but mental. “Adolescents influenced by ARM lose a positive view of their previous lives and mentally detach from anything they see as conflicting with ARM.” This manifests in changes in clothing, diet, and overall behaviour. This “disagreement with the surrounding world” leads, as observed by social workers, to social disharmony and conflicts with the environment. Existing research supports these findings (Džambazovič, 2007; Kuzyšin, 2010). In addition, let us add, that social isolation can lead to stigmatisation and marginalisation, further pushing adolescents to seek acceptance within ARM.

*Negative development of relational skills outside ARM*—Adolescents involved in ARM often show diminished relationship skills with individuals outside these subcultures. Their relational abilities are gradually adjusted to ARM’s norms, which often include reluctance to form close relationships with those who don’t share their new values or beliefs. This shift disrupts broader social interactions, further isolating them from the external world. Additionally, respondents noted that young people begin to reject previous authorities (especially parents), seeking “truth” within ARM’s teachings and practices.

*Impairment of analytical thinking*—Social workers in the research group highlighted that involvement in ARM impairs adolescents’ capacity for critical analysis and independent decision-making. Under the influence of one-sided narratives, adolescents are prone to manipulation, diminishing their ability to evaluate situations objectively and reflect critically. This impacts their social development, limiting their engagement in healthy interpersonal relationships. Other studies emphasise the necessity of fostering critical thinking to navigate the diversity of religious subcultures (Onwuatiegwu & Nwagu, 2020).

*Psychological mechanisms reinforcing group dependence*—According to the social workers’ observations in the Focus Group, ARM uses various psychological manipulation techniques, primarily creating a sense of exceptionalism among members, high engagement in the social life of ARM, and portraying the outside world as hostile. These mechanisms, according to the experts, strengthen the emotional and social dependence of adolescents on controversial groups. As a result, they become unable to criticise ARM practices, even if they begin to feel negative effects on their interpersonal relationships or mental health. Leaving ARM becomes problematic.

Psychological mechanisms reinforcing dependence among adolescents identified in this study are also emphasised in the literature, warning about sociological factors present in ARM, such as the closed nature of the subculture, the unquestionable authority of the leader, opposition to mainstream society, secrecy around the struc-

ture and teachings, “inclusive membership”, high member engagement, and others (Dojčár, 2008; Enroth, 1994; Procházka, 2004; ReviseSociology, 2018; Štampach, 1998; Vojtíšek, 2007). The risks are also highlighted due to ARMs distorted religious teachings, abuse of political ideas, economic goals, or manipulation (Berdibayeva, 2017; Netflix, 2019).

*Loss of resilience*—Adolescents’ resilience is a crucial ability that enables them to manage stress, peer pressure, and challenges associated with their personal and social development. Social workers emphasise that the opposite of resilience is vulnerability, which experts associate with adolescents’ tendency to seek meaning, recognition, and emotional stability in environments that provide them with a sense of security and identity. “The environment that meets these needs prevails”, note the respondents. In this way, adolescents become emotionally dependent on ARM, which paradoxically reduces their resilience and strengthens their commitment. This dependency often arises as a reaction to family crises or school problems, the consequences of which are also highlighted by other experts (Chung, 2023; Džambazović, 2007; Kuzyšin, 2010; Petrovič et al., 2023; Savari et al., 2023). As noted in the theoretical section, late adolescence is a time when young people are still shaping their identity, making them more susceptible to external influences that offer simple solutions to complex life challenges (Macanović & Kuprešanin, 2014).

The discussion section further critically evaluates the role of social media in shaping the image of ARM among adolescents (Q2). In short, the study highlights the significant influence of social media on adolescents’ perceptions of Alternative Religious Movements (ARMs) and their religious practices. Key findings include: a) Media platforms play a central role in shaping adolescents’ views, both positively and negatively; b) Regular exposure to ARM content alters adolescents’ values, increasing their likelihood of involvement in such groups; c) A shift in understanding spirituality occurs as adolescents turn to social media as a more appealing alternative to traditional institutions; d) Social media exposes adolescents to controversial practices, influencing their spiritual identity; e) Online communities reinforce ARM beliefs, fostering a sense of belonging while making it difficult for adolescents to critically evaluate these ideologies.

Moreover, respondents noted that social networks are most influential due to their ability to spread content rapidly and without regulation. They allow presentation ARM ideologies and create the illusion that these groups are harmless and accepted, which can motivate adolescents to get involved. Social workers believe that such media portrayals can influence adolescents, potentially increasing the risk of their engagement with such groups. This aligns with previous research, which indicates that frequent use of religious internet sources affects users’ perceptions of religious institutions and changes also approach to religious life (Campbell & Connelly, 2020; Lövhelm, 2013). This research observation represents a shift in understanding religion and spirituality, as it combines traditional (e.g., church

as meeting places) and modern elements (e.g., virtual communities as meeting places); while corresponding with professional literature and earlier research (Neumaier, 2019). Let us add, that modern elements of digital religion, driven by current technological trends, might lead individuals to increasingly isolate themselves, which might negatively affect their personal and social development (Králik et al., 2024).

The media representation of ARM poses a risk during peak adolescence because social media plays a crucial role not only in acquiring information but also in spreading controversial religious content and especially experiences (Lövheim & Hjarvard, 2019; Wexler, 2019). According to social workers, the adoption of potentially controversial religious practices from social media is risky for adolescents. Respondents' experiences suggest that adolescents engage in variable occult practices, alternative healing methods, and esoteric philosophies. Moreover, adolescents are exposed to these practices not only through social media but also through films, series, and music; i.e., audiovisual media is highly preferred among youth (Azizi et al., 2023). Respondents agree that these controversial practices can significantly influence adolescents' spiritual and religious identities. Thus, media content becomes a potential means of drawing adolescents closer to controversial religious groups and practices, and, thus, could be seen as initiators of their approach or even involvement in ARM.

Additionally, it is interesting that social media not only provide information about religion or provoke controversial religious practices, but also, according to Stig Hjarvard, take on cultural and social functions traditionally held by religious institutions. These include offering spiritual guidance, moral orientation, rituals, or a sense of belonging. Hjarvard's concept of "religious mediatization" highlights this trend, particularly in modern, industrialised societies (Hjarvard, 2008). A parallel trend is the emergence of "cultural religion" (a form of religion centered on symbolic practices with limited spiritual engagement) and "hyper-religion" (an intense, dogmatic approach where religion permeates all aspects of life), both of which are shaped by popular culture and can be mediated through online platforms (Mahan, 2012; Possamai, 2009).

Research findings highlight the need for a comprehensive understanding of the dual impact of social media: as both a source of valuable religious content and a potential amplifier of harmful ideologies. Adolescents' increasing exposure to ARM ideologies through digital platforms raises concerns about their overall development, worldview, and spiritual identity. It is crucial to recognise the potential for social media to either positively or negatively shape adolescents' engagement with religion. Therefore, targeted interventions are necessary to guide adolescents in navigating these digital spaces, helping them critically evaluate the religious content they encounter and ensuring they are protected from potentially harmful influences.

## CONCLUSION

In the field of helping professions, including social work, it is acknowledged that social workers must be able to provide effective assistance and services to their clients (Martin et al., 2023). Insights from the focus group discussions with social workers underscored this need by revealing a wide range of consequences arising from adolescent involvement in Alternative Religious Movements (ARM), including changes in behaviour, social isolation, weakened relationship-building, reduced critical thinking, heightened dependency on the group and loss of resilience. These findings align with existing literature, which emphasises the risks of psychological manipulation, social disintegration, and the detrimental effects of such groups on young people's development and overall well-being.

Social media amplifies these risks by serving as a space where adolescents are exposed to ARM ideologies, increasing their susceptibility to manipulation and risky behaviour. The easy accessibility of online content enables the rapid spread of ideologies, which may entice adolescents into groups promising belonging and the meaning of life. This phenomenon is compounded by adolescents' immersion in virtual communities, often replacing traditional religious practices with digital expressions of spirituality. This transformation, known as the "mediatisation of religion", marks a shift from institutional to non-institutional religious engagement, where media assumes roles once held by traditional religious institutions.

The increasing role of online platforms in spiritual exploration further blurs the lines between traditional and alternative belief and practice systems. This shift leads adolescents to embrace "cultural religion" or "hyper-religion", both of which can be shaped by popular culture and exist also in virtual space. Here, adolescents are exposed to practices like occultism, esotericism, alternative healing, witchcraft, satanism, and unconventional and controversial belief systems which are becoming more prevalent in social media content. These trends necessitate a critical evaluation of how media shapes adolescents' religious and spiritual practices.

In conclusion, the Focus Group technique proved invaluable in identifying the risk factors associated with adolescent involvement in ARM, offering valuable insights for social work practice. These findings provide essential information for educators, parents, and community workers, enabling them to better support adolescents in navigating the media landscape, improving communication, and preventing harmful involvement with ARM.

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