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Types of Internet Activity and the Religious Commitment of American Adults

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the ongoing debate surrounding the connection between Internet use and religious identity, belief, salience, and practices. Using data from the 2021 wave of the Baylor Religion Survey ($N = 1248$), we analyze the relationships between different types of Internet activity and religious outcomes. We find that time spent on online gaming is associated with a higher likelihood of holding atheist or agnostic beliefs and with lower levels of both private and public religiosity. In contrast, posting original content to social media is positively associated with personal scripture reading and religious attendance, suggesting that some forms of digital engagement may reinforce religious practices. Other activities, such as general social media use and video chatting, have no significant associations with religious commitment. Our findings suggest that the Internet and religiosity are not always at odds. Both Internet use and religion are multifaceted phenomena whose relationship varies depending on the nature of online engagement and the religious outcome in question.

1 | Introduction

In recent decades, the religious landscape of the United States has undergone a significant social change, marked by secularization and increasing religious diversity. This shift has led to a decline in religiosity and a notable growth in the population of religiously unaffiliated individuals, often referred to as "religious nones." Scholars attribute this trend to various factors, including demographic shifts, sociocultural influences, and broader societal changes (Putnam and Campbell 2012; Hout and Fischer 2014; Uecker et al. 2016; Strawn 2019; Levin et al. 2022; Smith 2025). Although overall levels of religiosity and religious belief are clearly declining in the United States (Voas and Chaves 2016; Brauer 2018; Kasselstrand et al. 2023; Smith 2025; Voas 2025), pockets of resistance to secularization and even religious growth still exist. For example, some evidence suggests intense religion has not declined (Schnabel and Bock 2017, 2018; Uecker and Bowman 2024) or has declined slowly (Voas and Chaves 2018), and some scholars suggest that new individualized and spiritualized forms of religion have emerged to take the place of traditional religious expression (e.g., Ammerman 2014). Moreover, the presence of religion in digital media is sometimes seen as evidence of societal re-sacralization (Hjarvard 2016).

The growth of the religiously unaffiliated and decline in levels of religious commitment and belief have occurred at the same time as the rapid diffusion of Internet access into the homes of US adults. From 2000 to 2023, the percentage of US adults saying they used the Internet increased from 52% to 95%, and the percentage with broadband Internet access in their homes increased from 1% to 80% (Pew Research Center 2024). Although the trend of secularization began long before widespread adoption of in-home Internet (Smith 2025), it has become more heightened since its arrival (Downey 2014).

Despite the concurrence of these two significant changes in American social life, research on the association between Internet usage and religious commitment is limited. Previous research has produced inconclusive evidence. Some argue that increased Internet use contributes to declining religiosity by exposing individuals to a wide variety of religious and spiritual content, leading to a "tinkering attitude" (Armfield and Holbert 2003; Downey 2014; McClure 2017; Uecker and McClure 2022) and displacing the time previously devoted to religious activities (Putnam 2000). Others contend that it enhances religious activities by offering a convenient forum for like-minded people to discuss their religion (Campbell 2012; Kluver and Cheong 2007). More empirical research is needed to fully comprehend the complex relationship between Internet activity and religious commitment, especially in the context of declining religiosity and the increasing visibility of religion in digital media. Complicating this analysis is the proliferation of different types of Internet use as the medium has evolved. Some Internet uses, like Web surfing, research, or streaming, are more individualized pursuits, while other uses, like social media sites and video conferencing, are more interactive. Still other uses, like gaming, could serve either function.

Thus, this study seeks to assess the relationships between different Internet activities and religious commitment, drawing on secularization theory (Berger 1967) and theories of digital religion (Campbell 2012). Heeding the call for research to examine more than a broad measure of Internet use (McClure 2020), we acknowledge the Internet's multifaceted nature and complex purpose and recognize that distinct online activities could be associated with users' religious lives in very different ways. The medium itself may not be the salient factor, but rather the different activities it enables. We use data from the 2021 Baylor Religion Survey (BRS) to examine the relationship between time spent on social media sites, video streaming, online gaming, video chatting, and posting original content to social media and different religious outcomes. Our findings highlight the fact that the association of the Internet with religious commitment is neither entirely negative nor entirely positive, but rather varies by both the type of Internet use and the religious outcome in question.

1.1 | The Effects of the Internet on Religious Commitment

Research on the effect of the Internet on individual and collective levels of religious commitment is surprisingly limited (Uecker and McClure 2022). This dearth is particularly notable given the assumption that the Internet would be a secularizing force due to its technological embodiment of modernity (Helland 2000). Some existing evidence suggests this might be the case. Downey (2014), for example, found that Internet use accounts for 20% of the growth in religious non-affiliation from 2000 to 2010.

However, the Internet's influence on religion remains contested. While some scholars argue it promotes secularization (McClure 2017; Taira 2020), others claim that religion thrives online, particularly through individualistic, personalized practices (Campbell 2010; Cheong 2017). The shifting religious authority in the Internet age may have significant and multifaceted implications for an individual's religious commitment and the Internet's role in shaping it, potentially contributing to both the decline in traditional religiosity and the rise of more personalized, digitally mediated spiritual practices. We now turn to theoretical arguments for why the Internet may be negatively and positively related to religious commitment.

At the core of secularization theory lies the argument that modernity, along with technological advancement, weakens traditional institutions, including religion (Berger 1967). As society progresses, it becomes more rationalized and pluralistic, leading to a decline in religious authority and participation (Chaves 1994). McClure (2017) has argued that the Internet contributes to this process of religious decline by exposing individuals to diverse beliefs and worldviews. The overwhelming variety of worldviews, beliefs, and religious ideas encountered in online experiences may enable individuals to learn about different spiritual options, making it more likely for them to reject the exclusive truth claims of one religion. As such, the coexistence of religious and secular discourses online fosters a "pluralism in the mind," corresponding with religious individuals questioning religious leaders, approaching them to discuss existential problems, and doubting various religious worldviews (Berger 2014; Pfadenhaeur 2016). In line with this, McClure (2017) finds that Internet use correlates with more non-affiliation and less religious exclusivism in the 2010 BRS but does not correlate with changes in time-related religious activities (including service attendance and congregation-based religious activities). Thus, the Internet may relate to changes in the "sacred canopy" (Berger 1967), the shared religious worldview that sustains a society's collective religious commitment. This exposure to different religious options may also be viewed as a challenge to traditional sources of religious authority (Chaves 1994).

In a subsequent study, McClure (2020), following Taylor (2009), observed that the Internet acts as a buffering agent, diminishing the influence of traditional religious institutions by promoting self-directed spiritual or secular beliefs. Using data from the 2017 BRS, he found that greater Internet use is associated with lower levels of religiosity, including religious service attendance, frequency of prayer, reading sacred texts, religious salience, and spiritual salience, as individuals engage with diverse ideas that challenge the authority of religious institutions. He also found that those who use the Internet more frequently show a higher likelihood of being religiously unaffiliated or identifying as an atheist. In this view, the Internet does not necessarily erode religion per se but corresponds with its transformation, as it adapts to late modernity's individualistic orientation (Campbell and Golan 2011). The Internet fosters religious individualism (Bellah et al. 1985) by offering a flexible free religious marketplace, enabling individuals to curate their spiritual experiences, beliefs, and practices. These individualized forms of religiosity are particularly evident in the rise of the "nones," who often reject organized religion but maintain spiritual beliefs.

In addition to providing a space for individuals seeking to maintain their religious and spiritual beliefs away from the authority of organized religious institutions, the Internet can also serve as a space for promoting and cultivating nonreligious identity. Smith and Cimino (2012) argue that the Internet serves as a liberatory platform for Atheists to express their views and connect with like-minded individuals. Although traditional

religion has declined in membership and cultural influence, this does not necessarily imply a decrease in spirituality or belief in the transcendent. Many individuals seek personal meaning, connection, and transcendence outside organized religion. Moreover, among the "nones" are those who uphold religious and spiritual beliefs without belonging to organized religion. Therefore, the Internet may serve as a platform for seeking deeper meaning and connection in an increasingly secular world. Similarly, Dawson and Hennebry (1999) maintained that the Internet provides an avenue for socially isolated individuals dissatisfied with their current religious affiliations to explore alternative religious movements, as exemplified in an ethnography of young people drawn to Wicca and Satanism (Lövheim 2013). Individuals who identify as religious "nones" may face social stigmatization and marginalization in American society, where religion still holds influence (Edgell et al. 2016). Thus, online communities provide spaces for individuals to connect with like-minded others and explore distinctive forms of expressing their religious or nonreligious beliefs (Campbell and Golan 2011), while also helping them navigate the stigma associated with marginalized identities (Smith 2013). Together, the Internet plays a multifaceted role in the deconversion process, religious non−affiliation, and atheism by promoting self-spirituality or secular beliefs (Downey 2014; Starr et al. 2019; McClure 2017, 2020).

The research reviewed thus far argues that the Internet acts as a secularizing force by providing opportunities for contesting religious authority, increasing religious pluralism, and supporting nonreligious identities. However, with religion's persistence in late modernity, qualitative studies revealed that the Internet does not necessarily diminish the importance of religious authority (Campbell 2010) but may reinforce and enhance such authority. The Internet enables various religious practices, particularly those connecting geographically distant worshippers or facilitating access to religious services when physical attendance is challenging (Campbell 2010; Cheong 2017; Martino 2016). In this context, religious practitioners may reinterpret the digital environment and utilize web-based artifacts to bring religious rituals online (Campbell 2012), such as live-streaming religious services, creating virtual prayer spaces, or sharing religious texts and teachings through websites. Similarly, the Internet provides a platform for individuals who identify with minority religions to access resources to deepen their faith (Kluver and Cheong 2007; Singh 2014; Bunt 2009; Becker 2011). The global COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, as religious communities transitioned to online platforms when in-person gatherings were restricted. Approximately 30% of American adults report going online for religious and spiritual purposes (Pew Research Center 2022). This surge in online religious activities during the pandemic prompted scholars to contemplate whether the pandemic has accelerated or intensified the impact of the Internet on religiosity. There is a growing belief that religious individuals may opt for individual spirituality over in-person church attendance in the post-−COVID era (Baker et al. 2020).

1.2 | The Effects of Religiosity on Internet Use

Although the theoretical frameworks explored to this point argue that digital environments may influence religious beliefs and practices, it is equally plausible that individuals' pre-existing religious orientations shape the ways they engage with the Internet. For instance, individuals with strong religious convictions may be more likely to avoid online content that conflicts with their values and instead gravitate toward faith-affirming platforms or communities. Early religious socialization, often rooted in family and community norms and typically predating significant Internet engagement (Smith and Denton 2005), may shape how individuals navigate digital spaces (Bengtson 2013; Bobkowski 2009). Evidence from studies of older forms of media suggests that both causal directions may be at work here. Research suggests that more religious adolescents watch less television in general and consume less mature media like R-rated movies and Internet pornography (Smith and Denton 2005), and that they actually prefer less mature television entertainment (Bobkowski 2009). From this perspective, media choices are made in line with individuals' identity construction (Brown 2000), leading to selective exposure to certain types of media (Steele and Brown 1995). Even so, Davignon (2013) finds that viewing R-rated movies decreases religiosity, controlling for prior levels of religiosity and R-rated movie consumption. This could reflect a process of self-socialization, wherein individuals choose the media they consume, which in turn socializes individuals in particular ways (Arnett 1995).

Indeed, emerging research indicates that online environments can challenge or reshape deeply held beliefs, particularly among younger individuals less embedded in religious institutions. For example, screen time has been found to negatively correlate with religious commitment among adolescents raised in highly religious households (Uecker and McClure 2022). This aligns with a growing body of scholarship suggesting that digital spaces expose individuals to pluralistic worldviews, foster alternative forms of community, and encourage more individualized forms of belief (Campbell 2013; McClure 2017, 2020). These processes may, over time, contribute to declining religious commitment or to the development of hybrid or nontraditional spiritual identities. Nevertheless, it is likely that both processes—selection and socialization—are at work in any relationships observed between religion and Internet use.

1.3 | Current Study

From the literature reviewed above, there is no consensus on whether the Internet acts as a secularizing force or aids in the resurgence of religion (or neither). The divergent findings in these studies may result from treating the variable "Internet use" as a unidimensional concept in empirical research (Valkenburg and Peter 2007), a limitation noted in McClure (2017). Further, scholars acknowledge the complexity of religion and suggest that the effect of the Internet on religion may also vary depending on the specific aspects of religiosity (Uecker and McClure 2022). Similarly, Campbell (2010) emphasizes the need to clarify which aspects of religious authority the Internet challenges. Qualitative research suggests that religion can actually thrive and be revitalized in digital space (Kluver and Cheong 2007; Singh 2014; Bunt 2009; Campbell 2013). Given the lack of longitudinal data on religion and Internet use, there also remains some question about causal direction and whether observed relationships between Internet use and religiosity merely reflect selection into Internet activity on religious characteristics.

These nuanced findings indicate the need to think more critically about the different activities facilitated by the Internet. The Internet is no longer a static platform; it has transformed into a more dynamic and interactive space where users not only consume content but also actively engage in creating and sharing content, connect with others, and participate in discussions on a wide range of religious topics. Therefore, the current study seeks to assess the relationship of different types of Internet activities—online gaming, social media use, content posting, video chatting, and video streaming—to religious commitment. Given that each activity is a different type of interaction, we hypothesize that these activities will have different associations with religiosity.

The interactive nature of online games that require players to be actively involved and embody multiple identities and roles, such as agents of gods, druids, priests, shamans, or monks, may expose players to diverse viewpoints and foster skepticism and doubt about religious beliefs and doctrines. Online players may encounter challenging questions or alternative interpretations that may prompt them to reevaluate their religious commitments and seek personal spiritual quests. For example, players of online games such as World of Warcraft (WOW) and Second Life often undergo religious and spiritual reflexivity (Schaap and Aupers 2017), as these massive multiplayer games convey symbolic elements and mythologies that resonate with religious and spiritual themes such as archetypal characters, symbolic artifacts, and epic narratives (Geraci 2014). Therefore, it is expected that this pluralistic engagement in online gaming may have a negative effect on traditional religious beliefs and practices. It could also be that highly religious people avoid these types of games that include material at odds with the teachings of their faith.

Whether posting original content on social media—an active and expressive form of online engagement—can influence and shape discussions related to faith, spirituality, and religious beliefs is unclear. On one hand, social media provides individuals with a platform to share personal insights and critique religious figures or institutions, potentially shaping the discourse around religious topics within these online communities. Engaging in this discourse can expose people to voices critical of religion and foster discussions that challenge traditional beliefs, while also perpetuating echo chambers and polarizing debates. For example, there is a section on the Foundation for Science and Reason's website dedicated to Richard Dawkins, where users share testimonials about their journey toward nonreligiosity and can read about other people's experiences (Campbell 2013). On the other hand, religious individuals may predominantly use social media as a platform to share and promote their own religious content. According to a survey, 17% of American adults post or share religious content on social media, with 11% posting prayer requests online (Pew Research Center 2022).

Furthermore, consistent with findings that suggest high engagement with video streaming and watching television displaces time dedicated to religious activities (Putnam 2000; McClure 2017, 2020), streaming videos is likely to be negatively associated with religious practices. Video chatting, however, likely does not have any secularizing effect, since it typically serves as a tool for direct interaction between individuals or groups. Unlike other Internet activities, its focus is primarily on facilitating real-time conversations and interactions, often centered around personal relationships and work-related matters.

Based on previous findings (Uecker and McClure 2022), social media usage is expected not to have any effect on religiosity. There may be counteracting mechanisms in this case, however, with some individuals strengthening religious commitment through social media networks, and others diminishing religious commitment due to exposure to viewpoints that challenge their religious beliefs.

We also expect that these activities' association with religious commitment varies by the religious outcome in question. In the case of religious identity, activities like online gaming may serve to promote varieties of secular identity, while streaming videos may pose less of a direct challenge to religious affiliation. Internet activities could also be more direct competition for private religious activities like prayer and scripture reading than public activities like religious service attendance, which is a more scheduled activity. Belief in God and religious and spiritual salience could either be undermined by conflicting religious messages received in online spaces or reinforced and fostered by particular religious messages.

In summary, our study aims to examine the relationship between various Internet activities and religious commitment, recognizing the diverse nature of Internet use and its implications for different types of religiosity. Rather than proposing formal hypotheses, we focus on investigating the varied ways Internet activities may be associated with religious commitment, drawing on insights from existing literature and theoretical frameworks. By doing so, our study acknowledges that the relationship between Internet activities—such as gaming, social media, and video streaming—and religious commitment may be unexpected and different across various aspects of religious life. This exploratory stance enables us to analyze how each activity interacts with distinct dimensions of religious commitment, such as identity, belief, salience, and practices. This research seeks to provide insights into the dynamic interplay between the digital environment and evolving religious expressions, offering valuable contributions to the understanding of religiosity in an increasingly digital world.

1.4 | Data, Measures, and Methods

The data for this study come from the BRS, Wave VI, a recent nationally representative study of the values and beliefs of the American public, administered by Gallup. The survey took place from January 27 to March 21, 2021, using a combination of mail and web-based methods. Eleven thousand US households with individuals aged 18 years or older, residing in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, were randomly selected. Respondents had the option to respond to the survey through a web link or on paper, in both English and Spanish. Due to postal delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the overall response rate, using the AAPOR1 calculation, was 11.3%, resulting in a final sample size of 1248 respondents. To account for the probability of selection and non-response, the samples were weighted, using demographic information from the Current Population Survey (CPS) 2020 population projections. The weighting aimed to match the demographic characteristics of the US adult population in

terms of geographic Census region, age, education, gender, and race/ethnicity. Although the response rate is relatively low, the weighting procedures help mitigate biases and ensure that the sample is broadly representative of the US adult population. Analyses used the *svy* prefix in Stata to apply the weight and adjust standard errors for the complex survey design.

Listwise deletion was used to exclude all cases with missing data across the variables of interest. Only one variable had more than 5.1% missing values. That variable—the belief in God variable—had 9.0% missing values owing to those who said they had "no opinion" being coded as missing. The median percent missing for any one variable was 2.1%. Notably, those who were missing from the analysis (between 15.5% and 21.2% of the sample, depending on the dependent variable) were significantly older—with an average age around 55 compared to 49—less educated, and more likely to be non-White. Subsequently, the average religiosity and Internet use are lower for the nonmissing sample and our findings may not be as representative of older adults, the highly educated, and non-Whites. Analysis using multiple imputation (of 30 data sets) produced results very similar to those presented here. However, we use listwise deletion because the percent missing is modest and we are not confident the data are missing at random (Sterne et al. 2009; Jakobsen et al. 2017). The multiple imputation results are available as Supplementary Table 1 in our Supporting Information.

The decision to use the BRS for this study is driven by its inclusion of detailed Internet and religion variables—which provide the opportunity to analyze different types of Internet activity and measures of religious identity, salience, and practices—as well as it being a national probability sample. The BRS sample has been compared with other national data sets, such as the General Social Survey (GSS) 2018, and found to be closely aligned in terms of demographic characteristics. For further details, see the BRS Wave VI codebook and methodology report available at baylorreligionsurvey.research.baylor.edu.

2 | Measures

2.1 | Dependent Variables

We examined several variables to capture respondents' religious identity, belief, salience, and practices. Religious affiliation was measured by the question, "With what religious family, if any, do you most closely identify?" For this study's main analysis, respondents were divided into two groups, with those having no religious affiliation (marking "No religion") coded as 1 and those identifying with a religious tradition coded as 0. For supplemental analysis, we used a modified RELTRAD coding scheme, with respondents categorized into seven religious traditions (Steensland et al. 2000; Dougherty et al. 2007).

Religious belief was measured with a single question that asked respondents to choose a statement that best reflects their personal beliefs about God. This question had six answer choices, with categories 1 to 4 representing varying degrees of belief in God, a higher power, or some cosmic power, and categories 5 and 6 indicating not knowing if God exists (agnostic) and disbelief in God (atheist). A binary variable was created from these responses, with 1 indicating atheist/agnostic (no belief in God or higher power) and 0 indicating belief in God or higher power. To evaluate respondents' subjective religious and spiritual beliefs, two questions were asked: "How religious do you consider yourself? And how spiritual do you consider yourself?" Both variables were assessed with a four-point scale of 1 = *not religious/spiritual*, 2 = *slightly religious/spiritual*, 3 = *moderately religious/spiritual*, 4 = *very religious/spiritual*.

Public and private religious practices were measured by inquiring about the frequency of religious service attendance, personal prayer, and reading sacred texts. Religious attendance was measured by asking respondents how often they attended religious services at a place of worship, with answer choices ranging from 0 (never) to 7 (several times a week). Frequency of prayer was measured by asking, "How often outside of religious services do you pray alone for less than 5 minutes?" Response categories ranged from 0 (never) to 5 (several times a day). Additionally, respondents were asked about their scripture reading habits outside of religious services, specifically how often they spend time alone reading the Bible, Koran, Torah, or other sacred books. The response options ranged from 0 (never) to 8 (several times a week).

2.2 | Key Independent Variables

Five key independent variables were used to assess respondents' usage of various Internet activities, including using social media sites, streaming videos, video chatting, online gaming, and posting original content to social media.

To measure this, respondents were asked: "How often do you spend time doing the following: Using social media sites or applications (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.); Streaming videos or watching television; Video chatting or meeting (zoom, skype, etc.); Playing online games; Posting original content to social media?" For each of these variables, the response options are (0) never, (1) about once a month or less, (2) about once a week, (3) about once a month, (4) several times a day, and (5) almost constantly.

2.3 | Control Variables

To mitigate the influence of confounding variables, several demographic factors linked to both the dependent variable (religion) and the independent variable (Internet activity) were used as controls in all the regression models. These controls include gender (dummy system for male, female, other gender), age (measured in years), marital status (married = 1), race/ethnicity (dummy system for White, Black, Hispanic, and Other race), total household income last year before taxes (1 = $10,000 or less, 2 = $10,001–$20,000, 3 = $20,001–$35,000, 4 = $35,001–$50,000, 5 = $50,001–$100,000, 6 = $100,001–$150,000, and 7 = $150,001 or more), education (ranging from (1) less than eighth-grade completion to (7) postgraduate work), region (dummy system for Northeast, South, Midwest, and South), and political party identification (1 = Strong Republican, 2 = Moderate Republican, 3 = Leaning Republican, 4 = Independent, 5 = Leaning Democrat, 6 = Moderate Democrat, 7 = Strong Democrat).

2.4 | Analytic Approach

We begin by presenting descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the data. Subsequently, we employ various regression models to examine the influence of different Internet activities on various religious outcomes. Binary logistic regression was used to analyze the religious identity outcomes (the religiously unaffiliated and atheist/agnostic). Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used to analyze the other religious outcomes: frequency of religious attendance, prayer, reading sacred texts, religious salience, and spiritual salience. Although these outcomes are ordinal, we present linear regression results. Ordered logistic regression was conducted, but Brant tests revealed that four of these five models (not the scripture model) violated the parallel regression assumption. The ordered logistic results are substantively identical to the OLS results and are available as Supplementary Table 2 in the Supporting Information. Techniques like multinomial logistic regression that do not assume ordering of the dependent variable greatly increase the number of comparisons being made and thus vastly reduce statistical power. Other solutions like collapsing the variables into dichotomous variables require making arbitrary cutoffs and results in loss of information.

We present OLS results for a practical reason as well. Although some ways of reporting logistic (and its extensions) results—such as average marginal effects, average discrete change, and discrete change at the means (Long and Mustillo 2021)—are straightforward to interpret, since we are only interested in an average effect estimate and the substantive conclusions are not different, deriving average marginal effects (or average discrete change) from logistic procedures can be understood as a "complicated detour" (Mood 2010, 78) compared to OLS.[1] We do conduct logistic models for our binary outcomes, and not LPMs, because the probabilities for each outcome are low and thus an LPM is not a good option (von Hippel 2015).

The regression table is comprised of seven models, one for each of the religious outcomes. Each model includes all five Internet variables while controlling for sociodemographic variables. In ancillary analyses, we ran five other models for each outcome with each of the five Internet variables entered separately (along with the control variables). Results from these other models are consistent with those presented here. We tested for multicollinearity using variance inflation factors (VIFs), and no evidence of multicollinearity was detected in any of the analyses based on the cutoff value of 2.5 (Allison 1999).

3 | Results

Before presenting the regression models, descriptive statistics for the study variables are shown in Table 1. The results revealed that 16% of respondents have no religious affiliation, while 17% hold beliefs that are atheist or agnostic. On average respondents attended religious services several times per year (mean 2.47), engaged in personal prayer between monthly and weekly (mean 2.46), and read sacred texts around several times a year (mean 2.67). On average, they are moderately religious and spiritual (mean 2.44 and 2.81), respectively. They used social media between once a day and once a week (mean 2.64), frequently engaged in streaming videos (mean 3.50), engaged in online gaming between once a week and once a month (mean 1.42), posted original content to social media on a rare basis (mean 1.03), and engaged in video chatting between once a week and once a month (mean 1.64). Regarding sociodemographics, 52% of the respondents identified as female, 47% as male, and 1% as other gender. The average respondent aged 49.4 years, with 51% married. In terms of race and ethnicity, 65% were White, 11% were Black, 17% were Hispanic, and 8% were of another race or ethnicity. The average respondent had attained a college or university degree.

Table 2 presents the odd ratios and unstandardized coefficients from OLS regression models predicting the effect of various Internet activities on religious outcomes while controlling for sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, marital status, race, education, income, political identification, employment status, and number of children). Although not reported in the table, the results of the control variables are consistent with previous literature on religiosity. Older individuals, non-Whites, women, married individuals, those with more children, individuals with higher levels of education, and residents of the South and Midwest geographic regions tend to have higher levels of religious commitment, while Democrats tend to have lower levels of religious commitment (Uecker et al. 2007; Putnam and Campbell 2012; Uecker et al. 2016; Baker and Smith 2009; Hout and Fischer 2014; Levin et al. 2022). The results including controls are found in Supplementary Table 3 in the Supporting Information.

Moving to the central analyses of the study, logistic regression results revealed that, among the Internet variables, none was found to be significant associated with being religiously unaffiliated. For atheism/agnosticism, online gaming was the only Internet variable that was significantly associated with the outcome after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics. Specifically, each unit increase in time spent playing online games was associated with a 25% increase in the odds of identifying as atheist or agnostic (OR = 1.248), net of controls.[2] In terms of probability, the likelihood of identifying as either atheist or agnostic increased from about 0.14 for those who never game online to about 0.27 for those who report gaming "almost constantly."[3]

Regarding religious salience, the OLS regression results reveal a negative and significant association between online gaming and religious salience, indicating that each unit increase in gaming time is associated with a 0.053 decrease in considering religion important in one's life. Similarly, among the Internet variables only online gaming is significantly related to spiritual salience. For every reported unit increase in game time, spiritual salience decreases by 0.061, net of sociodemographic characteristics.

For religious attendance, the results indicate that time spent streaming videos and playing online games were significantly and negatively related to more frequent religious service attendance, while posting original content online was significantly and positively related.[4] Specifically, after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, religious attendance decreased by 0.400

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics, BRS 2021, weighted.

Variable	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Religious attendance	2.47	2.53	0	7
Prayer	2.46	1.86	0	5
Reading sacred texts	2.67	2.91	0	8
Religious belief salience	2.44	1.06	1	4
Spiritual belief salience	2.81	1.02	1	4
No religious affiliation	0.16		0	1
Atheist/agnostic	0.17		0	1
Social media	2.64	1.72	0	5
Streaming video	3.50	1.07	0	5
Playing online games	1.42	1.68	0	5
Posting original content to social media	1.03	1.27	0	5
Video chatting	1.64	1.53	0	5
Gender				
Male	0.47		0	1
Female	0.52		0	1
Other gender	0.01		0	1
Age	49.4	17.78	18	98
Education	5.28	2.13	1	9
Race/ethnicity				
White	0.64		0	1
Black	0.11		0	1
Hispanic	0.17		0	1
Other	0.08		0	1
Married	0.51		0	1
Region				
Northeast	0.18		0	1
South	0.37		0	1
Midwest	0.21		0	1
West	0.24		0	1
Political identification	4.32	1.84	1	7
Income	4.41	1.76	1	7
Child	1.69	1.65	0	21
Employment status				
Employed		0.52	0	1
Self Employed		0.13	0	1
Unemployed		0.35	0	1

Note: N ranges from 1136 to 1241 based on the number of missing values for each variable.

and 0.154 for every unit increase in time spent on streaming videos and playing online games, respectively. In contrast, posting original content to social media was associated with increased religious attendance, with each unit increase in content posting corresponding to a 0.218 increase in attendance. Social media use and video chatting were not significantly related to religious attendance, suggesting that religious attendance may be relatively unaffected by these forms of digital technology and vice versa.

Concerning reading sacred texts, the results revealed both positive and negative significant relationships with Internet activity. As was seen with religious attendance, both streaming videos and online gaming are negatively associated with time spent reading religious texts. Specifically, each increase in time spent on streaming videos is associated with a 0.346 decrease in time reading sacred texts, while an increase in time spent playing online games is associated with a 0.187 decrease in time spent

TABLE 2 | Odd ratios and unstandardized coefficients from regression models regressing religious outcomes on Internet activity and control variablesA.

Predictors	Religiously unaffiliated	Atheism/ agnosticism	Religious salience	Spiritual salience	Religious attendance	Scripture reading	Prayer
	OR	*OR*	*b*	*b*	*b*	*b*	*b*
Social media	0.880	0.958	−0.019	−0.019	0.019	0.021	−0.010
	(0.082)	(0.086)	(0.027)	(0.030)	(0.067)	(0.075)	(0.048)
Streaming videos	1.163	0.970	−0.063	−0.050	−0.400***	−0.346**	−0.117
	(0.156)	(0.136)	(0.043)	(0.040)	(0.097)	(0.133)	(0.069)
Playing online games	1.050	1.248**	−0.053*	−0.061*	−0.154**	−0.187**	−0.117**
	(0.076)	(0.09)	(0.022)	(0.024)	(0.051)	(0.057)	(0.038)
Video chatting	1.149	1.051	0.024	-−.012	0.059	0.069	0.025
	(0.131)	(0.092)	(0.030)	(0.032)	(0.067)	(0.074)	(0.049)
Posting content	1.213	0.944	0.041	0.050	0.218*	0.250**	0.100
	(0.143)	(0.102)	(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.097)	(0.096)	(0.059)
Constant	0.044***	0.035*	2.501***	2.363***	2.432***	3.119***	2.293***
	(0.035)	(0.03)	(0.315)	(0.312)	(0.713)	(0.909)	(0.503)
R^2	0.264	0.25	0.301	0.19	0.248	0.214	0.299
N	1018	983	1022	1024	1052	1055	1026

Note: Models include control variables listed in Table 1. *N* varies across models due to missing values on the dependent variables. Robust standard errors in parentheses.
***$p < 0.001$,
**$p < 0.01$,
*$p < 0.05$.

reading sacred texts, after controlling for sociodemographic variables. In contrast, posting original content on social media shows a positive association, with a 0.250 increase in time spent reading religious texts for each additional increase in time devoted to posting original content on social media. Using social media and video chatting have no statistically significant relationship with reading sacred texts.

The findings for prayer revealed that among the Internet variables, only online gaming has a statistically significant association with private prayer. Specifically, time spent in online gaming is negatively associated with time spent in personal prayer, with each unit increase in gaming corresponding to a 0.117 decrease in prayer frequency. Other forms of Internet activity—including streaming videos, posting original content, social media use, and video chatting—were not significantly associated with private prayer. In our analysis using multiple imputation, however, posting original content was significantly and positively associated with prayer frequency ($b = 0.157$; $p < 0.01$).

3.1 | Supplementary Analysis

To further assess the generalizability of our findings, we conducted supplementary analyses using data collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. These data include some comparable measures of Internet use, such as social media engagement, online gaming, and video streaming. The results from this analysis, included as Supplementary Table 4 in our Supporting Information, generally support the robustness of our main findings, suggesting that the observed patterns are not solely artifacts of the pandemic context but reflect broader trends, particularly in relation to Internet use and religious behaviors. Streaming video results appear more muted in the 2021 data, however, suggesting the increased prevalence and decreased selectivity of this activity during (and after) the pandemic. Some general social media use results are also significant and positively associated with religious outcomes in the 2017 data but not the 2021 data, though we also find positive associations between *posting* social media and religious outcomes. Online gaming results are more consistently and negatively associated in 2021 than they were in 2017.

Additionally, due to existing evidence that gender influences patterns of Internet use and susceptibility to its potential harms (Anderson et al. 2017; Nelson and Pieper 2020), we conducted a supplementary analysis to explore gender-related differences. The results indicate that the statistical effects of online gaming on religious outcomes show a stronger negative relationship for men compared to other gender groups ($p < 0.05$). This aligns with existing literature suggesting that men show stronger associations between Internet use and various behavioral outcomes, and they are the group targeted by video game developers (Anderson et al. 2017; Nelson and Pieper 2020).

Also, given that in our main analysis we found that online gaming is associated with being an atheist or agnostic, we conducted a supplementary analysis to explore this relationship further. In this analysis, we compared atheists and agnostics to individuals

who believe in a personal God and those who believe in a higher power. The results showed a consistent positive association between online gaming and identifying as an atheist or agnostic compared to each of the other two groups. This strengthens our main finding, showing that online gaming has a positive effect on being an atheist or agnostic, even compared to those who do not believe in a *personal* God.

Furthermore, we ran models with and without the samples of those who are religiously unaffiliated. Remarkably, both samples yielded the same result, as did models incorporating the interaction of the dichotomized religious affiliation variable with Internet activity variables. Therefore, we opted to present the results using the full sample. This implies that the observed negative relationship of streaming videos and online gaming, and the positive relationship of posting original content on social media with religiosity, are robust even when accounting for religiously unaffiliated individuals. The consistency of results across different sample compositions strengthens the argument that Internet activity is related to religiosity for both affiliated and unaffiliated individuals. Our data do not provide definitive evidence, however, on whether religious individuals are more inclined to seek out affinity spaces compared to nonreligious individuals. Notably, there is evidence suggesting that nonreligious individuals, including atheists (36%) and agnostics (29%), are more likely than most other religious groups to block or unfollow others due to religious content (Pew Research 2022). It remains possible they are also more likely to seek out affinity spaces than religious individuals.

Lastly, additional ancillary results suggest there are differences in Internet–religiosity relationships across different religious traditions. Supplementary analysis revealed that the negative association of streaming videos was particularly pronounced among evangelical Protestants, and video chatting was positively associated with some religious outcomes for evangelicals, but negatively for some outcomes for Catholics and black Protestants. Additionally, while online gaming was negatively associated with religious outcomes in our main models, it showed a positive relationship with prayer among Jewish adherents and with spiritual salience for both Jewish adherents and individuals from other religious traditions. Notably, these models have small cell sizes and thus we interpret them with caution.

3.2 | Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the extensive research on factors influencing religious change in the United States, few studies have empirically examined the role of the Internet in this process. This study draws on secularization theory and contributes to the existing literature on American religious trends and the discourse on the relationship between the Internet on religiosity. Previous research on the relationship between the Internet and religion has primarily suggested a negative association, indicating that increased Internet use correlates with decreased religious beliefs and behaviors (Downey 2014; McClure 2017, 2020), aligning with Putnam's (2000) time displacement hypothesis. However, we argue there is a more complex relationship between the Internet and religion. The Internet does not uniformly exert a secularizing influence; specific aspects of online engagement may reinforce existing religious beliefs. Moreover, it is likely that people make choices about Internet use based on their religion, and that their Internet use then influences their subsequent religiosity. We utilized recent national data from the 2021 BRS, which includes different Internet activities such as online gaming, video chatting, streaming videos, online content, and social media sites, seeking to isolate the relationship of different Internet activities with religious identity, beliefs, salience, and practices. Thus, this study addresses a gap in previous research on the Internet and religion by distinguishing between different types of Internet usage, as well as different forms of religious commitment.

Our study revealed several intriguing relationships between various Internet activities and aspects of religious commitment. Notably, our study revealed a positive relationship between online gaming and being an atheist/agnostic. Specifically, increased time spent on online games is associated with a higher likelihood of having atheist or agnostic beliefs. Additionally, our study found that online gaming is negatively associated with both religious and spiritual salience, and religious practices such as religious attendance, personal prayer, and reading sacred texts, countering the prevailing assumption that online gaming is a shallow and unvalued form of expression (Grieve and Campbell 2014). Indeed, online gaming is the Internet activity most robustly related to religious commitment.

We are unable to specify empirically why this is the case, though we suspect several processes may be at work. This relationship is likely due in part to the inclusion of religious stories, characters, and symbols within the interactive elements and narratives of online games (Grieve and Campbell 2014). Unlike other Internet activities such as video streaming, online gaming involves high interactivity that requires players to assume multiple identities to immerse themselves in different game worlds. For example, players may become an agent of gods in one game, a druid or priest in another, a shaman in another, or a monk in another. This diverse engagement can lead players to be more open to various religious perspectives and even embark on personal spiritual quests. For instance, players of online games such as WOW often undergo religious reflexivity (Schaap and Aupers 2017; see Bainbridge 2013 for more details on the effect of video games on religion). As players engage in these games, they are exposed to various religious elements, which can sometimes prompt questioning or even lead to doubt in their religious beliefs (Berger 2014; Pfadenhauer 2016). Consequently, players may turn to the virtual world to navigate existential challenges, escape real-world problems, and adopt coping mechanisms traditionally provided by religious institutions.

The social nature of gaming also allows individuals, particularly those with secular viewpoints, to connect with like-minded people, which can further influence their religious or spiritual beliefs (Campbell and Golan 2011; Smith 2013; Helland 2000; Starr et al. 2019). Gaming may also occupy time that might otherwise be devoted to both public and private religious activities (Putnam 2000). It is also likely the case that more religious individuals are less likely to select into playing these games, given the imagery and narratives that are frequently at odds with religious teachings.

Additionally, we found that increased time spent streaming videos is linked to lower religious attendance and less frequent reading of sacred texts. This aligns with previous research that links video streaming to decreased participation in time-based religious activities, likely driven by the entertainment and leisure aspects of the online community (McClure 2017, 2020). These findings reinforce Putnam's (2000) time displacement hypothesis, which suggests that the time individuals spend watching television is negatively associated with their social and community engagement. Causality may also run in the other direction, with religious individuals being taught that streaming content is either not a good use of time or contains objectionable material.

In addition to these negative relationships between Internet use and religion, one of our findings supports a contrasting perspective that departs from previous quantitative research. Some of our findings raise the possibility of the Internet acting as a tool for the re-sacralization of religion (Hjarvard 2016) and a form of implicit religion. Notably, we find that posting original content on social media is positively associated with both private religious practices, such as scripture reading, and public religious behaviors, such as attending religious services. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that religious practitioners may reinterpret the digital spaces as extensions of their spiritual lives, using online platforms to access religious content, share faith-related reflections, and stay connected with religious communities. In doing so, they may recreate or adapt elements of offline religious practice for online engagement (Campbell 2012; Singh 2014; Bunt 2009; Becker 2011).

Although the effect sizes of our findings are not large, they are comparable to well-established sociodemographic predictors of religiosity, such as marital status, race/ethnicity, income, and gender. This suggests that the Internet's relationship to religion may become more salient as it becomes increasingly widespread (Putnam 2000; McClure 2017; Geraci et al. 2022).

3.3 | Limitations and Direction for Future Studies

While our study has made a valuable contribution to the literature on the influence of Internet use on religious identity, beliefs, salience, and practices in the United States, it does have several limitations that future studies should address. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data used makes it challenging to establish causal direction. While our study provides theoretical support for a bidirectional relationship, it is also possible that only one direction of influence is operative. Nevertheless, we suspect both are occurring and resulting in a process of self-socialization (Arnett 1995), wherein individuals both select their Internet use based on their religiosity and then see their religiosity influenced by it.

Second, although our study delved into different facets of Internet activity, it is important to acknowledge that each category encompasses a wide range of content and behaviors. Future research should strive to develop more comprehensive measures for assessing Internet activity to determine whether it is time spent on the Internet, the content viewed on the Internet, or the interactions facilitated by the Internet that are related to one's religious commitment.

Third, our analysis focused solely on religious identity, beliefs, salience, and practices as outcome measures. Future research should explore additional aspects, such as the Internet's impact on religious authority, religious individualism, and religious pluralism. The Internet could play a role in reinforcing the transformation or decline of religious authority, while also acting as a force for pluralism and individualism (Chaves 1994; Campbell 2012; Berger 2014; McClure 2020).

Future research should also explore the effects of Internet activity across different religious traditions. Supplementary analysis revealed differences among evangelical Protestants, Catholics, black Protestants, and Jewish respondents. These findings highlight the role of religious traditions as cultural frameworks that influence how digital media impacts religious life. Future research should build on these insights using larger samples, as the current sample size limits the ability to draw definitive conclusions for some religious groups.

Furthermore, future research should closely investigate the role of online gaming in relation to religious beliefs and behaviors, as this area remains largely unexplored. Additionally, assessing potential mediating factors like general trust, health, and time pressures would enhance our understanding of the relationship between Internet use and religious commitment. Moreover, selection effects may have influenced our outcomes, as individuals with specific pre-existing characteristics or beliefs might be more inclined to engage in certain Internet activities. This selection bias can complicate the interpretation of whether observed associations reflect true relationships or are simply the result of these pre-existing traits. It is also important to note that the data for this study were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period when many individuals were at home, which may have influenced both response rates and the behaviors measured. This context could affect the generalizability of the findings to a broader pre- or post-pandemic population. Future research should consider whether the relationships observed in this study hold during non-pandemic periods, with longitudinal studies providing more insights into the impact of such contextual shifts. Our analysis of the 2017 BRS suggests our findings are not merely a function of the pandemic. Somewhat similar patterns of association between online gaming, streaming videos, and religious outcomes were observed in pre-pandemic data, supporting the robustness of these relationships across different periods. Lastly, we need more experimental and longitudinal studies to comprehensively explore these relationships, as there have been limited investigations examining the effect of Internet activity on religious beliefs and behaviors.

In conclusion, our findings reveal the nuanced relationship between Internet activity and religious commitment among American adults. While some Internet activities, such as online gaming and video streaming, are associated with lower religiosity, other forms of engagement, such as posting original content on social media, are linked to greater participation in religious practices, including scripture reading and religious attendance. These findings introduce the possibility that digital spaces can simultaneously support both religious and secular expressions, depending on the nature of online activity. As such, the Internet should not be viewed as a monolithic secularizing force but rather as a multifaceted arena where religious beliefs and practices

can be both contested and reinforced. Nonetheless, further research, including longitudinal studies and the use of more comprehensive measures for Internet activity is needed to further explain this complex relationship. As the boundaries between online and offline life blur, our findings underscore the relevance of digital spaces in understanding contemporary religious changes.

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Data Availability Statement

The data and materials utilized in this study, including coding instructions, required for replicating our results, will be made available upon request.

Endnotes

[1] Mood (2010) was writing specifically about comparing linear probability models (LPMs) and logistic regression models, but this logic extends to ordered logistic models as well. See endnote 1 of Mood (2010).

[2] Because of the plausibility that individuals may not believe in a personal God but still believe in a supernatural power, in a supplementary analysis, we categorized belief in God into three groups: belief in a personal God, belief in a higher power or cosmic power, and atheism/agnosticism. Results are substantively the same: Increased gaming time was found to be positively associated with being an atheist/agnostic relative to both groups. For parsimony, we opted for a binary categorization.

[3] These predicted probabilities were calculated with all control variables set at their means.

[4] The relationship between posting original content and attendance had a *p*-value of 0.072 in the analysis using multiple imputation.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supplementary Table 1: Coefficients from Regression Models Regressing Religious Outcomes on Internet Activity and Controls, Multiple Imputation of 30 Data Sets. **Supplementary Table 2**: Unstandardized Coefficients from Ordered Logistic Regression Models Regressing Religious Outcomes on Internet Activity and Controls (BRS 2021). **Supplementary Table 3**: Odd Ratios and Unstandardized Coefficients from Regression Models Regressing Religious Outcomes on Internet Activity and Controls, Including Results for Control Variable (BRS 2021). **Supplementary Table 4**: Odd Ratios and Unstandardized Coefficients from OLS and Logit Regression Models Regressing Religious Outcomes on Internet Activity and Controls (BRS 2017).