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## DOUBLE CODING OF PILGRIMAGE AS A SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATION INSTITUTION IN THE CONTEXT OF MEDIATIZATION

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**Abstract.** In modern society, pilgrimage increasingly appears not only as a form of religious practice, but also as a social and communication institution, formed under the influence of mediatization processes (Panchenko & Rizun, 2025a). In this context, pilgrimage functions as a structured system of production, transmission and interpretation of meanings, which at the same time operates at the institutional and interpretive levels (Baggio, 2005; Butler, Suntikul, 2018). The aim of the article is to conceptualize pilgrimage through the prism of the concept of double coding, which allows us to capture the interaction between the explicit institutional-ritual code and the implicit interpretive-narrative code.

The research is based on a social and communication approach, focused on the analysis of communicative practices, media representations and the circulation of pilgrimage narratives beyond the theological understanding of pilgrimage (Jirásek, 2011; Rizun, 2022; Ivanov, 2003; Korniciev, 2016). The theoretical basis is classical pilgrimage studies and modern theories of mediatization and mediated communication. An illustrative case is the international Dual Pilgrim Program, which combines the Japanese Kumano Kodo route and the European Camino de Santiago (Ito et al., 2025; de Sousa & da Rosa, 2020). The analysis of this case demonstrates how formalized institutional mechanisms of pilgrimage recognition (routes, pilgrim ID, stamps) are combined with processes of individual meaning-making, narrative integration, and mediatized representation of personal spiritual experience (Are you a «Dual Pilgrim?»; Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

As a result, it is proven that mediatization does not create a separate semantic level of pilgrimage, but rather enhances the interaction between explicit and implicit codes, creating conditions for interpretive drift and transformation of sacred meanings in the public social space (Lundby, 2014; Schulz, 2004). The concept of double coding allows us to consider pilgrimage as a dynamic communicative structure, where institutional stability is combined with openness to interpretive transformations, while ensuring the heredity and adaptability of pilgrimage practices in modern sociocultural conditions (Coleman & Eade, 2004; Couldry, 2012).

**Key words:** pilgrimage, social and communication institution, double coding, mediatization, interpretive drift, Dual Pilgrim Program.

**Introduction.** Pilgrimage as a social and communication institution functions not only as a form of religious practice, but also as a stable system of production, transmission, and interpretation of meanings in the social and communication space (Turner & Turner, 1978; Eade & Sallnow, 1991). In this context, the application of the concept of double coding allows us to analytically capture the structural feature of pilgrimage - the simultaneous presence of two interconnected, but not identical, semantic levels (Rettberg, 2017; Turner, 1969).

The first level is an explicit, institutionalized code that includes the physical route, ritual acts, sacred objects, normative practices, and established forms of communication between pilgrims. This code is socially regulated and is subject to reproduction within the framework of tradition and institutional memory (Turner, 1969; Rinschede, 1992).

The second level represents the implicit, interpretive code that is formed through personal spiritual experience, symbolic understanding of the path, individual narratives and media representations of pilgrimage. It is at this level that meaning-making takes place, which cannot be fully formalized, but actively circulates in social space through narratives, visual images, digital media and storytelling (Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Couldry, 2012; Rahimi & Amin, 2020). Within this process, we can speak of interpretive drift – a gradual change and rethinking of sacred meanings under the influence of accumulated experience and new narrative-media frameworks, which does not destroy the ritual basis of pilgrimage, but adapts it to modern socio-cultural conditions (Johannsen & Ohrvik, 2020: 520; Eade & Sallnow, 1991).

**Main part.** In the current mediatization of pilgrimage, double coding acquires a special emphasis. The media do not create a separate «third code», but act as a mechanism for broadcasting and reinforcing the implicit level, translating personal sacred experience into a form of public communication (Hjarvard, 2013; Hepp, 2020). Photographs of shrines, video diaries and posts on social networks function as explicit signs that simultaneously activate hidden meanings related to faith, identity and collective memory (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Goffman, 1978).

Precisely in this process of media circulation interpretive drift is formed, in which the meanings of the ritual are gradually reinterpreted through narratives and visual representations, without violating the institutional heredity of pilgrimage practices (de Sousa & da Rosa, 2020: 6). Thus, the double coding of pilgrimage within the social and communication approach appears not as a quantitative layering of meanings, but as a binary structure of communication in which the institutionally given code and the mediatized interpretive code are in constant interaction (Rizun, 2022; Van Leeuwen, 2025; Couldry, 2012). Exactly this interaction ensures the stability of pilgrimage as a social and communication institution and, at the same time, openness to interpretive drift and socio-cultural transformations (Afonina, 2018; Panchenko & Rizun, 2024).

An example of institutionalized double coding of pilgrimage is the «Dual Pilgrim Program», which combines the Japanese Kumano Kodo route and the European Camino de Santiago. The use of a single pilgrim credential at two UNESCO World Heritage sites involves the collection of stamps that serve as explicit institutional markers of route completion, recognition, and legitimization of pilgrim status (Sanchez Amboage, Ludeña Reyes & Viñán Merecí, 2017).

At the same time, the common passport activates an implicit interpretive level that ensures the narrative integration of culturally different sacred journeys into a single personal experience of the pilgrim. In this sense, the «Dual Pilgrim» functions as a communicative medium that simultaneously stabilizes the institutional meaning of pilgrimage and creates conditions for interpretive drift in transnational pilgrimage practices (Kumano Travel; Camino de Santiago Office) (Wu H. C. et al., 2019; Hussain, T., Wang, D., 2024).

The «Dual Pilgrim Code» presents the «Dual Pilgrim Program» (Kumano Kodo + Camino de Santiago) – a special form of recognition for individuals who have done both pilgrimage routes: the ancient Japanese Kumano Kodo and the European Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James), using a single pilgrim credential for both routes (Kato & Prozano, 2017; Amaro et al., 2018). The program marks these two routes, which are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List (Afonina, 2018; de Sousa & da Rosa, 2020).

Pilgrims collect stamps on both sides of the certificate, one for each route, and receive a final stamp at designated centers in Spain (Santiago de Compostela) or Japan (Kumano), which certifies the acquisition of «Dual Pilgrim» status (Are you a «Dual Pilgrim?»); Johannsen, Ohrvik, 2020).

**Let's consider the main components of the program:**

Routes. The Japanese Kumano Kodo route, which is covered on foot, and the Spanish Camino de Santiago, which can be covered on foot, by bike or on horseback.

Pilgrim's credential. A special passport with two sides - separately for each route, in which stamps are collected at temples, shrines, churches and information centers.

**Algorithm for participating in the program:**

Start. Obtaining a Dual Pilgrim certificate at tourist centers, in particular at the Tanabe Information Center in Japan, or through a tour operator.

Passing and collecting stamps. Collecting stamps on the corresponding side of the certificate while completing each route.

Completion. After completing both routes, the certificate with the collected stamps is submitted to the corresponding registration center to obtain a special final Dual Pilgrim stamp.

The Dual Pilgrim Program is **the only known example** where all these elements are present simultaneously:

1. Two different pilgrimage routes – different cultural, religious and civilizational contexts (Japan / Europe);
2. A single pilgrim credential – one document for two paths;
3. Formalized institutional recognition – final registration and official Dual Pilgrim status;
4. Support from official institutions – tourist offices, international centers, UNESCO context (Dual Pilgrim – Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau).



**Fig. 1. Official logo of the Dual Pilgrim Program**

URL: <https://dual-pilgrim.spiritual-pilgrimages.com/are-you-a-dual-pilgrim/>

The Dual Pilgrim logo combines two culturally distinct symbols of pilgrimage: the shell, a classic symbol of the European Camino de Santiago, which serves as a landmark and a symbol of pilgrim identity, and the Yatagarasu crow, mythologically associated with guidance and spiritual accompaniment in Japanese tradition, particularly on the Kumano Kodo route. This combination of emblems represents the communicative logic of dual coding, where a single visual sign unites institutional and culturally conditioned meanings (The pilgrimage creates bonds; Paschinger, 2019).

**Methods of research.** The research is based on a social and communication approach, within which pilgrimage is considered as a social institution that functions through stable and variable communicative practices aimed at the symbolic production, translation and interpretation of sacred meanings. In this context, attention is focused not on the theological aspects of pilgrimage, but on the forms of social communication that structure the pilgrimage experience in public and mediated social space (Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Couldry, 2012). The social and communication approach in the research performs a framework function, allowing us to conceptualize pilgrimage as an institutionalized system of meaning circulation (Couldry, 2007; Couldry, 2012; Ivanov, 2003; Kornieiev, 2016).

Methodologically, the study combines an interpretive approach with a social and communication analysis of pilgrimage narratives, visual representations, and media practices (Havrylets & Rizun, 2024). The interpretive approach is used to analyze the processes of meaning-making and interpretive drift within the implicit code of the pilgrimage experience. The social and communication analysis of media practices allows us to consider communication technologies not as an external factor, but as an element of the communicative infrastructure of the social and communication institution (Polus & Carr, 2021; Rettberg, 2017).

For the analytical interpretation of the material, the concept of double coding is used as a theoretical and analytical tool, which allows us to capture the interaction of the institutionally given explicit code and the implicit interpretive code, which is formed in the process of social communication and mediatized circulation of pilgrimage narratives (Hall, 1980; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Digital tools based on artificial intelligence (in particular ChatGPT) were used as an auxiliary tool for structuring and clarifying the theoretical material (OpenAI, 2023; Zhou et al., 2023).

**Results and Discussions.** Dual Pilgrim status is granted to pilgrims who have completed both the Japanese Kumano Kodo and the European Camino de Santiago routes, in accordance with formalized requirements established by the program organizers. These requirements function as an explicit institutional code that regulates the recognition of the pilgrimage experience and provides its symbolic legitimation.

The Camino de Santiago route requires at least the last 100 km to be walked or on horseback, or at least 200 km to be cycled. In the case of the Kumano Kodo route, the institutional criteria require that one of the designated walking sections be completed (in particular, from Takijiri-oji to Kumano Hongu Taisho; from Kumano Nachi Taisho to or from Kumano Hongu Taisho; from Hoshinmon-oji to Kumano Hongu Taisho with a mandatory visit to the Kumano Hayatama Taisho and Kumano Nachi Taisho shrines; or from Koyasan to Kumano Hongu Taisho). It is important that within the Kumano Kodo, only walking is permitted, which emphasizes the ritual-physical nature of this pilgrimage route (Serrallonga, 2018; Van Leeuwen, 2025).

The completion of each route is recorded through an official completion stamp, which acts as a material communicative marker. For the Camino de Santiago, such a stamp is issued at the pilgrims' office near the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, while for the Kumano Kodo, it is issued at a specially designated point near the main shrine of Kumano Hongu Taisho (Amaro et al., 2018).

After completing both routes, the pilgrim contacts one of the program's information centers to receive a double stamp of completion, which certifies the integration of two autonomous pilgrimage experiences into a single institutional status of Dual Pilgrim. In the socio-communicative dimension, this stamp acts as an explicit sign of legitimation, which simultaneously activates implicit narratives of personal spiritual journey and transnational pilgrim identity (Are you a «Dual Pilgrim?»; Shmueli & Collins Kreiner, 2018).

The interaction of explicit and implicit codes forms a zone of interpretive drift in which the processes of semiotic layering of meanings and mediatization of pilgrimage occur (Panchenko & Rizun, 2025b). It is right in this zone that institutionally assigned sacred signs acquire new meanings through personal narratives, visual representations, and digital storytelling, simultaneously ensuring both the reproduction and transformation of the sacred in social space (Johannsen & Ohrvik, 2020, p. 520; de Sousa & da Rosa, 2020, p. 6).

In today's digital mediatization environment, an additional tool to support this interpretive drift is artificial intelligence-based chat systems (in particular ChatGPT), which are used by pilgrims to record spiritual experiences, keep digital diaries, verbalize inner experiences, and structure individual narratives in the social and communication space (OpenAI, 2023; Zhou et al., 2023).

In this context, the concept of double coding allows us to capture the binary structure of meaning-making in pilgrimage, where the ritual-institutional level coexists with the open interpretive space

of personal experience (Turner, 1969). The explicit and implicit codes of pilgrimage in this study are conceptualized, respectively, as the institutional-ritual and interpretive-narrative levels of social communication, the interaction of which explains the mechanisms of adaptation of pilgrimage practices to the conditions of modern media culture (Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Couldry, 2012; Hjarvard, 2013).

Table 1

**Double coding of pilgrimage as a social and communication institution**

<b>Level of analysis</b>	<b>First code (explicit) Institutional-ritual</b>	<b>Second code (implicit) Interpretive-narrative</b>
<b>Ontological level</b>	Physical movement to a sacred place	Inner spiritual path
<b>Type of practice</b>	Ritual, bodily, spatially fixed	Symbolic, reflective, narrative
<b>Form of communication</b>	Regulated, institutional	Individual and collective-interpretive
<b>Key elements</b>	Route, ritual, shrine, rules, norms	Personal experience, inner meaning, spiritual transformation
<b>Material/sign media</b>	Path, sacred objects, pilgrim's passport, bodily practices	Images, symbols, memories, narratives
<b>Level of meaning-making</b>	Reproduction of established sacred meanings	Interpretation and reinterpretation
<b>Role of media</b>	Fixation and representation of the event	Translation, interpretation, storytelling
<b>Social function</b>	Institutional stability of pilgrimage	Cultural dynamics and interpretive drift

**Conclusions.** Within the social and communication approach, pilgrimage appears not only as a religious practice, but as a complex institutionally organized communicative process, which combines normatively given structures and individually and collectively constructed meanings. The application of the concept of double coding allowed us to record the binary nature of this process, which is based on the interaction of an explicit institutional code and an implicit interpretive code (Turner & Turner, 1978; Vidal Casellas, Aulet & Crous Costa, 2019).

Analysis of the Dual Pilgrimage program has shown that the formalized requirements for walking the Kumano Kodo and Camino de Santiago routes, the credential system, and the completion stamps function as an explicit communicative code that provides institutional legitimation for the pilgrimage experience. At the same time, these material and symbolic markers do not exhaust the meaning of the pilgrimage, but rather serve as entry points for individual reflection, narrative reinterpretation, and mediated representation of the personal spiritual journey (Hussain & Wang, 2024).

It is right in this zone of interaction between the normatively assigned meaning of a sign and its subjective and public interpretation that interpretive drift manifests itself - a process of gradual displacement and multiple recoding of meanings in social space. In the case of Dual Pilgrimage, interpretive drift manifests itself in the transformation of the institutional status of the «double pilgrim» from a formal confirmation of the passage of routes into a symbol of transnational identity, spiritual mobility and personal biographical significance, which actively circulates through narratives, visual images and digital media (Couldry, 2012; Hjarvard, 2013; Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

Thus, the double coding of pilgrimage is not reduced to a mechanical layering of meanings, but appears as a dynamic communicative structure in which institutional stability is combined with openness to interpretive transformations. The case of «Dual Pilgrimage» demonstrates that contemporary pilgrimage programs can function as laboratories of social meaning-making, in which religious tradition, bodily experience, and media communication form a single social and communication institution capable of adapting to cultural and technological transformations without losing symbolic integrity (Reader, 2007).

The concept of double coding proposed in the article complements the theoretical approaches of pilgrimage studies, offering an analytical framework for studying pilgrimage as a social and communication institution in the context of contemporary socio-cultural dynamics.

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