

Megachurch Pastoral Online Authority and Influence Cultivation

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### Abstract

This study investigated the online behaviors of megachurch pastors on Twitter in order to assess if these pastors emulated the tactics of secular social media influencers. Although social media influencer behaviors, megachurches, and the Church's relationship with new media have individually received significant research attention, the online behaviors of pastors has yet to be studied. Thus, a qualitative content analysis was performed on the Twitter profiles of five prominent megachurch pastors. tweets were coded into three themes: *rapport building*, *biblical* concepts, and *personal promotion*. Pastor online communication was assessed for its adherence to influencer best practices and the pastors were compared and contrasted among each other. The researcher determined megachurch pastors appear to be utilizing these best practices. The practical and theoretical implications of these findings were discussed.

*Keywords:* megachurch, authority, influence, imagined audience, parasocial relationship, social media influencer, influencer marketing

### Megachurch Pastoral Online Authority and Influence Cultivation

In recent years, social media has provided an opportunity for the layperson to gain authority in the digital space. Whereas previously one was required to be a scholar in a field, social media has leveled the playing field, with the widespread reach of social media now allowing those with the highest number of followers to be the gatekeepers of knowledge rather than those with the highest degree level (Berger, 2016).

Recent studies (e.g., Rasmussen, 2018; Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2016) have shown that consumers are more likely to buy a product or service that is being sold to them by social media influencers rather than through traditional media such as television or print ads. Six in 10 YouTube subscribers say they would follow the advice of an influencer on the purchase of a service or product over advice given by a traditional celebrity, company, or even friend (thinkwithgoogle.com, 2016). Most millennials, defined as those born between 1981 and 1996 (Pew Research, 2018), even feel that their favorite influencers understand them better than do their closest friends (“Youtube stars,” thinkwithgoogle.com, 2016).

It is generally accepted that anyone who has between 2,000 and 100,000 followers on any given platform is considered a micro-influencer (Forbes, 2017). These individuals are sought after by brands to promote their products and services. Anyone with over 100,000 followers truly begins to start making money as an influencer on a post-by-post basis, most charging over \$400 per post (Forbes, 2017). Zoe Sugg, known on platforms as Zoella and one of 2018’s top media influencers, boasts over 10m followers on Instagram alone and earns \$16,000/post on monetized posts. Millions of young girls look to her for advice on beauty and lifestyle products because of her rapport with her audience. Her influence is massive, and her following has given her

authority—followers trust that Sugg will not steer them wrong when it comes to products and services.

The current research seeks to determine what the rise in social media influencer marketing means for the Church and how pastoral influence and authority is constructed online. This study seeks to assess if megachurch pastors adopt the same techniques as mainstream social media influencers to gain and retain this authority and influence. Recently, the Protestant Megachurch, defined by the Hartford Institute (2015) as any Protestant Church with more than 2,000 regularly attending members, has become active on social media platforms. Megachurch communication departments are abandoning the fear the church has previously expressed regarding social media and seem to be looking to the practices of social media influencers to create a similar social media plan to bring the younger generations in their doors. Diaz-Ortiz, a Twitter senior executive, found that many of the most engaged with tweets on the platform are not from celebrities like Justin Bieber and Katy Perry, but are from pastors and religious leaders in the protestant community like Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen (O’Leary, 2012).

While many studies have been performed regarding social media influencers as well as the development of the megachurch, the integration of both regarding authority and influence within the Church is an area worthy of exploration. The purpose of this literature review is to define how authority and influence is constructed on social media and within the Church to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon being researched here. To this end, the review will examine the Protestant megachurch, pastoral authority, and influencer marketing best practices as it relates to the Church as a whole.

## Literature Review

### Definition and Development of the Megachurch

The development of the megachurch began in post-World War II America in the 1980s (Eagle, 2015). As Lyle Schaller of *Christianity Today* noted, the megachurch is the most important development in modern Christian history (Eagle, 2015; Schaller, 1990). Megachurches are defined as any church having more than 2,000 members (Hartford Institute, 2015). In the U.S., the South holds nearly 49% of the country's megachurches, and 53 of the top 100 largest churches. Tennessee has the most megachurches per capita of any state, with one megachurch for every 99,254 residents (Hartford Institute, 2016).

The megachurch must meet the spiritual, emotional, educational, and recreational needs of its members (Eagle, 2015). Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Christian Church, equated the rise of the megachurch to the rise of shopping malls in the United States (Eagle, 2015). No longer are shoppers going into mom and pop shops on the strip; instead, they are frequenting malls where there is a multitude of goods and services that can meet their needs. The same goes for the mass exodus from small, community churches to massive churches boasting tens of thousands of members and niche ministries for each member's individual needs.

Given the growth in the number of megachurches in the U.S., the current paper is interested specifically in the technologically-mediated communication of their pastors via social media. If the rise of the megachurch has followed the same pathway as shopping malls overshadowing small businesses, will the rise of the celebrity pastor follow the rise of the social media star? To begin to answer this question, it is first important to examine the sometimes-tumultuous relationship between the Church and technology adoption.

### **The Megachurch and Communication Technology**

The Church's historical relationship with communication technology has been one of early adoption. For example, "[t]he Bible itself can be seen as a tangible expression of technology and media in that it is typically a human-created physical artifact," (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 24). Further, the Bible was the first book to be printed on the printing press (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 24). In subsequent centuries, however, Campbell and Garner (2016) describe the ever-changing relationship between the Church and technology as tumultuous. Historically, various groups within the Church have tended to approach technology from one of three perspectives; namely, technological optimism, pessimism, or ambiguity (Campbell & Garner, 2016). Technological optimism, the authors say, is seeing "technology and media as having a positive impact on the nature and function of the church" (p. 30). The opposing view, technological pessimism, sees, "the way technology pervades modern society [as having] a number of negative effects," (p. 31). As the authors note, this view typically stems from fear of technology, not a Biblical view of new media. With technological pessimism, the internet is viewed through a lens that it is leading to the breakdown of face-to-face relationships, replacing the physical worship space, and encouraging computer-mediated-communication within religious and spiritual life (Campbell & Garner, 2016; Wynne-Jones, 2009).

The Vatican's Pontifical Council for Social Communications also believes that the internet provides pathways for youth into pornography, consumerism, and other issues such as violent fantasy and isolation, a concern which is echoed through many reports of pastors becoming addicted to internet pornography and other immoral practices ("Ethics in Internet," 2002; Garner, 2001). The middle ground argument between technological optimism and

technological pessimism is technological ambiguity, which views technology through a lens of intention (Campbell & Garner, 2016). If the right people in the right context use the tool of technology, it can be utilized for the spread of the Gospel. If it is not, however, technology can do great harm and cause massive chaos throughout the Church.

Jaques Ellul (1970) makes an important distinction that must be considered when determining the view the Church takes on technology and modern media. He determined that there is a difference between technology and technique (Ellul, 1970). He defined *technology* as the mechanical inventions of humans to better their lot in life. This would include such items as the printing press, which, as Campbell and Garner (2016) note, was an important invention for the church. *Technique* involves the various phenomena of advertising, propaganda and psychological coercion, and the organizational structures that intend efficiency and social control, while also involving the promotion of products for the betterment of one's life. Ellul's (1970) position on *technique* can be applied to both the promotion Gospel message and advertisements or propaganda because *technique* is not negative or positive on its own accord. Rather, *technique* is any message or system that can be marketed to consumers. Hence, the promotion of products by marketers or the system in which Christians spread the gospel message, including the promotion of local churches on- and offline, falls under the banner of *technique*. This also includes the use of social media advertisements and the utilization of the social influencer.

The Church always has and continues to be an early adopter of technology (Campbell & Garner, 2016; Sims, 2001), but the Megachurch has also been an early adopter of technique. For

example, the Potter's House Church led by T.D. Jakes in Dallas, TX, housing over 12,000 people every Sunday (Sims, 2001), were early adopters of technology. As Sims (2001) noted:

Within the sanctuary, 200 pews provide power and data terminals so worshippers can download sermon notes, PowerPoint presentations, and Bible passages. Alter attendants armed with Palm Pilots and Pocket PC's collect prayer needs and new-member data to download into the church server. The sermon is translated via wireless headphones into one of six languages. (p.7)

Quickly-growing megachurch Crossroads Church located in Cincinnati, Ohio, boasts 34,000 weekly attendees across ten physical locations and adopted technique in the early 90s. The church was developed by Proctor and Gamble brand executives in 1990 (bloomberg.com, 2017). Rather than merely starting a church, the founders focused on collecting demographic data from the area, creating a brand image and brand positioning for the church, and marketing their church concept to mainstream audiences in an attempt to make their church enticing to those who had been "turned off" by the Church in prior years. "Crossroads has been described by the Cincinnati Business Courier as both an entrepreneurial church and a church for entrepreneurs," (bloomberg.com, 2017). It is a perfectly marketed church. Since 1990, tens of thousands of people attend online, on-site, and even in prisons. Additionally, the church runs a successful blog that is separate from the church but still allows people to interact with the gospel. Using search engine optimization techniques so that when a Google search regarding, for example, a failing marriage is made, Crossroads blog posts and articles appear near the top of the search engine results. None of these methods of making the Gospel message tangible for all peoples would be possible without the early adoption of technology and technique.



### **Social Media Integration in Megachurches**

Technique and technology also include the integration and use of social media. Roar (2012) found that 98% of people reported that their church utilized social media, and 46.1% of those churches reported that social media is their most effective form of outreach compared to traditional media and word-of-mouth marketing. In the same study, over half of the churches responded that their social media is managed by a tech-savvy staff member, while a meager 1.18% said their church hired someone to manage their social media sites. However, megachurches likely make up that 1.18%, considering they are the exception to the average church environment, not the rule.

One vital facet of many megachurch's social media presence is the profile of their Senior Pastor, sometimes referred to as the Lead Pastor, Lead Follower, Vision Pastor, or Lead Minister. A Senior Pastor is the elder in the church in charge of teaching, preaching, and leading the church. In megachurches, there is typically a plurality of leadership including a board of directors called Elders of the church and, typically, a Teaching Pastor, also called the Preaching Pastor or Teaching Elder, who is the second in command (Gibert, 2002; Koon, 2017; Rainer, 2013). A Teaching Pastor is often considered first as the successor for the Senior Pastor when the Senior Pastor retires. This line of succession has occurred, for example, at Saddleback Christian Church in Lakewood, California. For the purpose of this study, the terms Senior Pastor and Teaching Pastor will be used to differentiate between the pastors in leadership at megachurches.

Of the top fifteen megachurches in the United States, all Senior Pastors utilize Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to promote themselves, their books and speaking circuits, and their churches, and some choose to update websites and blogs regularly to increase personal following

as well as church attendance. Celebrity pastors such as Rick Warren, Stephen Furtick, Andy Stanley, Louie Giglio, and Craig Groeschel command massive social media presences and are in high demand as speakers for conferences and retreats (24/7 Wall St., 2017). Although the ultimate goal of a megachurch pastor's social media influence is presumably to spread the Gospel, the use of social media strategies utilized by these leaders is strikingly similar to top social media influencers using their celebrity or micro-celebrity to sell products for companies, which complicates the message the Church and their pastors are trying to communicate. Two conceptual frameworks are of particular import to this investigation: the online construction of authority and the cultivation of celebrity and the utilization of its resulting influence.

### **Traditional Authority**

Campbell (2007) determined when writing on Church authority that there is no true definition of authority universally agreed on by all researchers. Instead, recalling definitions from Weber (1947), authority can be categorized by legal, traditional, and charismatic authority (Campbell, 2007).

Often, authority is linked to power structures or hierarchies such as the Catholic Archdiocese and the Holy See (Campbell, 2007; Reese, 1989;). Pastoral authority is a type of *traditional* authority in which obedience is given to the person who occupies the traditionally followed position, such as a Senior Pastor. This title is typically assumed by a Church leader who has been ordained and given power by the church elders. This is the typical style of leadership in the non-denominational church. In *Exploring Ecclesiology*, Harper and Metzger (2009) explained the differences between High and Low church ecclesiology and strong and weak ecclesiology (p. 292-293). Non-denominational megachurches (those who do not associate with

a denomination) and Southern Baptist megachurches have Low church and weak ecclesiology. These types of churches put a stronger emphasis on preaching and teaching, less emphasis on the Eucharist, a stronger emphasis on a right relationship with God rather than the church, and less emphasis on membership. The Southern Baptist church has a checks-and-balances system based in the denomination and puts more authority in the church body than the pastor. The Non-denominational church is typically built around each individual pastor, so the authority is placed in the pastor along with a board of elders as their sole checks-and-balances system. The churches studied here hold to this type of ecclesiology.

### **Online Authority and Influence**

Online authority falls in the category of *charismatic* authority, which is “based on devotion to an individual who exhibits a particular characteristic, ideal, or exemplary quality that motivates others to adhere to the normative patterns sanctioned by that individual,” (Campbell, 2007, p. 4). Online, pastors occupy both traditional and charismatic authority categories presumably, but it complicates the structure because a pastor cannot be ordained in the church of “Instagram.”

Online authority plays a significant role in the influencer’s ability to sell products and services to their audience. Online authority is approached by scholars (Campbell, 2007; Ruggiero & Winch, 2005) as cultural authority, meaning the power to define and describe reality. Social media influencers employ several strategies to construct this charismatic, cultural authority, including the fostering of parasocial interaction and creating content for an imagined audience (Rasmussen, 2018). In terms of parasocial interaction, “Overtime, audiences develop intimate bonds that mirror real-life social interactions, which are intensified when viewers gain

information regarding the personal lives of celebrities,” (Rasmussen, 2018, p. 4). Berger (2015) proposed “six principles of contagiousness” a social media influencer should provide: social currency, triggers, emotion, public, practical value, and stories (p. 21). Influencers are encouraged to note that for any product or idea to spread rapidly, it should contain some combination of these elements. The created content must give consumers social currency within their community, contain elements that trigger the audience to talk about it, make an emotional connection with the audience, advertise itself so that it is in the public eye, add practical value to the viewer’s life, and be presented in a well-told story (Berger, 2015). Influencer Jamie King noted five key influencer best practices in an interview with *medium.com*: 1) show people they matter, 2) embrace micro-influence, 3) focus on your niche, 4) be vulnerable to allow people to see themselves in your story, and 5) be consistent (medium.com, 2018). The influencer, in short, has become the new opinion leader, giving an edge to their ability to sell and market goods and services (Rasmussen, 2018; Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2016).

Online authority is additionally constructed by imagined audiences (Marwick and Boyd, 2010). Because authors of blogs and owners of social media pages write for an imagined audience (2010), they often adopt tones of authority, hoping to reach their intended audience, when in fact it is quite difficult to fully anticipate the scope of the real audience for a given piece of content. In goal-oriented thinking, influencer figures are highly conscious of their audience and the ways to speak to the audience they intend to influence.

### **Celebrity Pastor as Authority and Influencer**

Pastors can create this same type of parasocial relationship via social media due to their already established traditional authority by which members of the church body already have an

assumed trust in the pastor. Paired with the charismatic authority that online influencers employ and which is transferred to a leader in the Church with an influencer dynamic shared with their followers, Christians are likely to develop a parasocial relationship with megachurch pastors as the pastors themselves develop a celebrity-like image.

If influencers are considered anyone who has over 2,000 followers on social media (Forbes, 2017), most megachurch pastors would be generally accepted as influencers. It would follow then that the product or service they are selling would be the church they pastor and the supposed salvation their church offers through its particular reading of the gospel and theology. However, Andy Stanley's teaching greatly differs from that of Steven Furtick, whose teaching often differs from Rick Warren and so on. Pastors also do not have the same ease of audience receptivity that other social media influencers do because of the content they put out, the higher standard to which are held, and the higher power to which they answer.

The question to be discussed here is that of the aforementioned application of both charismatic authority and traditional authority. Megachurch pastors seem to employ both. It appears that pastors claim their sense of authority from maintaining traditional authority within their churches. However, the online authority they command tends to follow that of a charismatic authority structure. Codone (2014) analyzed megachurch pastors' Andy Stanley and Rick Warren social media accounts for content creation to determine what practices each pastor utilized most. It was found that Rick Warren tended to post much less about his church and much more about what the author classified as *Random Thoughts*. Andy Stanley tends to promote his church, his books, his church's events, and events he is speaking at more than anything else, classified as *Self-Promotion* (Codone, 2014). Both men have created great rapport with their Twitter

audiences according to this study, and are both sought after to speak at events. Warren's church Saddleback Christian, located in Lake Forest, California, has grown to 22,000 weekly attendees since 1980. Stanley's church, North Point Community Church located near Atlanta, Georgia, averages 38,000 people and is the second largest church in the United States as of 2017 (Outreach Magazine, 2017). Both men command massive social media presences. Surprisingly, Warren commands a larger social media presence than Stanley across Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, but Stanley's church is larger. They both have employed Influencer best practices, but it appears that Stanley has promoted his church through his social media after gaining rapport with his audience while Warren continues to build rapport (Codone, 2014). It could be deduced that Stanley's use of rapport-building similar to that of influencer marketers has aided in church attendance and member retention, but further study is required.

Another study conducted by Horner (2014) noted that the Twitter accounts of Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen average more interactions per 50,000 followers than Justin Bieber, indicating that they have a larger social reach and greater charismatic authority. One important note is Meyer does not pastor any church nor is she ordained as a pastor from any seminary, but she is considered an influencer in her field and has been sought after nearly as much as many megachurch pastors, if not more, for speaking events. Her impact is purely because of charismatic authority (Horner, 2014).

As this research has been presented, one can extrapolate that the megachurch pastor could be considered an influencer marketer, but to what extent? The authority that pastors carry online is cultural, charismatic, and traditional, which could leave pastors in a challenging position in deciding how to explore and exercise said authority online and behind the pulpit. Whether these

pastors choose to utilize influencer best practices remains to be seen. Therefore, the researcher seeks to answer the following:

RQ: What influencer tactics are megachurch pastors using on Twitter?

### **Method**

Due to the lack of research in the field of communication in regards to pastoral social media activity, a qualitative content analysis was used in this exploratory study. Qualitative content analysis is defined as, "...a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns," (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005 p. 1278). The current project is particularly interested in the ways in which megachurch pastors use social media to construct online authority and online influence.

### **Sample**

The sample was determined using a purposive sample. The goal of a purposive sample is, "to produce a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the population. This is often accomplished by applying expert knowledge of the population to select in a nonrandom manner a sample of elements that represent a cross-section of the population," (Lavrakas, 2008, p. i). A purposive sample is appropriate in this case for two reasons. First, the sample chosen best represents the studied population of megachurch pastors. Second, the researcher has an intimate knowledge of the megachurch environment having grown up a member of the twelfth largest megachurch in the United States.

In order to study the phenomenon of pastoral use of social media, five prominent pastors were chosen based on three criteria: 1) the size of their social media following, 2) weekly

attendance size at each church, and 3) the adherence of their church to the definition of a healthy church. Each criterion will be elaborated in turn. First, the pastors were chosen based on size of social media following and engagement. If the pastor had less than 100K followers, they were eliminated, following the Forbes (2017) definition of a social media influencer. Second, church attendance played a small role in choosing the pastors studied in this research. Although it was not an eliminating factor, men pastoring churches which fit the definition of a megachurch were necessary for this study (i.e., any church having more than 2,000 members, Hartford Institute, 2015). The official ranking of the largest megachurches in the country, released by *CBS News* (2018), noted that the top 30 largest churches in the country range in weekly attendance from 10,000 to 47,000 people. Thus, pastors were chosen from this ranking. Third, pastors were chosen based on the definition of a healthy, protestant church in that a church must, “be consistently preaching the Word, distribute the sacraments as often as the church sees fit, and be rightly ordered,” (Dr. C. Bounds, personal communication, February 18, 2019). If the pastor is not pastoring a church that adheres to the proper definitions of a healthy church, they were eliminated

As the rankings of the largest churches in the country (*CBS News, 2017*) was consulted, the researcher determined that the following senior pastors would provide the most insight into the phenomena of interest: Craig Groeschel, Louie Giglio, Andy Stanley, Stephen Furtick, and Rick Warren. See Appendix A for each pastor’s church name, weekly attendance, and Twitter following.

Please note that, given the purposive and exploratory nature of this sample, not all criteria were waited evenly. Also, although Louie Giglio’s church is considerably smaller than the others



studied, his conference Passion Conference has the largest attendance rate of any Christian conference in the nation. He also commands a large social media presence with more followers than most megachurch pastors. His Twitter behavior and presence offered a rich textual analysis for online pastoral charismatic authority cultivation.

**Social Media Selection.** The Twitter presence of each pastor was chosen for analysis. Twitter is, “an online social networking service that enables users to send short, [280]-character messages,” (Quesenberry, 2015, p. 106). Users can express themselves through multimedia elements and can like, comment, and retweet other users tweets. Previous researchers have studied Twitter because of its technological affordances, offering close to real-time communication with a potentially-massive reach. It was also chosen as the social media platform to analyze because it offers a valuable repository of rich textual data for analysis due to the frequency of use by the majority of pastors studied.

For each pastor, a sample of tweets was pulled for analysis that included all Twitter content from November 2018-January 2019, paying specific attention to each individual pastor’s Twitter presence as a whole. Although a relatively short period of time, the rationale for this decision is this time frame covers every major holiday except Easter. Many megachurches have special sermon series’ for major American holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year’s Day, and Valentine’s Day, among others such as Black History Month and more. These holidays allow the church to cover topics such as inclusion, sex and sexuality, the importance of family, New Year’s Resolutions (such as reading the Bible all the way through) and the birth of Christ, the only major church holiday in this time frame. Pastors spend the most time on social media during these holidays promoting special church services, church events, and even release

topical books around the holidays. This period allowed the researcher to gather rich data while maintaining a manageable amount of data. However, the researcher elected to extend the sample time period if necessary to allow for richer data analysis if the individual pastor had very few tweets within the time frame.

### **Data Analysis**

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) suggest that qualitative content analysis takes one of three approaches: conventional, directed, or summative. This study adopted the directed approach, which involves the researcher starting analysis with a theory or relevant research findings as guides for coding and textual analysis. The researcher determined grounded theory would best serve this study. Grounded theory is generally accepted as a methodologically systematic approach to qualitative analysis. Saldana (2013) defines this as a process that usually involves meticulous analytic attention by applying specific types of codes to data through a series of cumulative coding cycles that ultimately lead to the development of a theory – a theory “grounded” or rooted in the original data themselves (p. 51). The researcher discovered emerging patterns in the data which allowed a thematic analysis of the data to be performed to group tweets together. The primary function of theming the data, “[at minimum] describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon.” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii). At its heart, “theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole,” (DeSantis and Ugarriza, 2002, p. 362).

Therefore, to analyze the sample to begin open coding, the researcher immersed herself in each pastor’s Twitter profile, studying how each individual tweet contributed to the pastor’s Twitter presence as a whole. The primary unit of analysis was thus determined to be each

individual pastor's individual tweets, focusing on how each pastor expressed their online authority and uses it to cultivate influence. Individual tweets were pulled as examples of these phenomena. Initial codes from the data were defined from previously given definitions of both authority and influence and formed conceptual categories.

## Results

Findings related to the study's research are presented here in turn. Three themes emerged when coding the data analyzed. Tweets from each pastor were divided and categorized by *rapport building*, *biblical concepts*, and *personal promotion*. Throughout these results, full tweets are quoted verbatim to illustrate key findings.

### Craig Groeschel

Groeschel is the pastor and founder of multisite and online non-denominational megachurch Life.Church boasting 32 locations in eight states all under Groeschel's leadership. Groeschel has tweeted 237 times since November 1, 2018. This allowed the researcher appropriate depth and breadth of data when analyzing the sample. Thirty-three of these tweets contained inspirational verses falling in the category of *biblical concepts*. One hundred thirteen of these tweets featured photographs or video content promoting Groeschel's podcast, sermons at his church, and his books and were thus coded as *personal promotion*. Twenty-two tweets were coded as *rapport building* due to showcasing his wife and family. The remaining 124 tweets did not contain rich enough data for analysis as they included retweets or pictures without text.

Groeschel has employed influencer best practices in his posts by making the audience know they matter by providing relevant Bible verses that allow people to know they are loved. He knows his audience size and focuses his niche. He posts content of his wife and family as

well as personal content, showing his audience he is relatable. Finally, Groeschel posts once a day, sometimes multiple times a day. Using these influencer tactics allows Groeschel to grow closer to his audience, sell more books, and promote his church. Because his audience trusts him through his Twitter presence, he is able to more easily market to them as well.

The use of relevant hashtags allows his content to reach as many users as possible. The hashtags used on his Twitter such as, “#ThursdayThought,” “#leadershippodcast,” “#inspirationalquotes,” and, #mondaymotivation,” have nothing to do with a gospel message but are being used by a pastor. Groeschel utilizes his authority to host The Leadership Podcast leveraging his relevant experience pastoring one of the largest churches in the country to appeal to all types of leaders through this podcast, not just pastors.

Groeschel has employed an advisable strategy of posting engaging content during holiday seasons. On Christmas, he tweeted a trendy graphic featuring a script font and a starry sky containing a selection from Isaiah 9:6, “For a child is born to us, a son is given to us, the government will rest on his shoulders,” (December 25, 2018). He also tweeted a humorous anecdote, a photograph of his wife holding a stocking embroidered with the phrase, “no thanks” and captioned the photo, “Guess what Amy typed in the box that said, "Would you like a name to personalize your stocking?" 🤔❤️,” (Dec 20, 2018).

Groeschel proves his knowledge of influencer best practices and employs them on Twitter effortlessly, gaining rapport and influence with his audience and exerting his authority with his followers through his podcast and sermon videos. His fans’ replies and interactions with his tweets are positive overall. Because he has given his audience reason to trust him, he has

been given charismatic authority by his online audience and both traditional and charismatic authority by his church.

### **Louie Giglio**

Giglio is the outlier of this study as he pastors a church of only 8,000 weekly attendees (Passion City Church in Atlanta, Georgia) but has over 571K followers and nearly 55,000 attendees at his yearly conference, Passion Conference, “one of the largest Jesus-focused collegiate events in history,” (louiegiglio.com). Although his church is significantly smaller than the other churches pastored in this study, Giglio offers unique insight into online pastoral influence as a household name in the evangelical community and a massive influencer for college students.

Giglio has tweeted 166 times since November 1, 2018. One hundred four of these tweets were links to Instagram posts, indicating that Giglio’s main social media platform is not Twitter but Instagram. This offered interesting results because only 62 of his tweets could be analyzed from Twitter. However, this also allowed the researcher to extrapolate that Giglio is aware of the demographics of his target audience. The majority of his audience is college students ranging from 18-24 which make up only 14% of Twitter users while 23% of Instagram users are in his target market. Therefore, Giglio is utilizing Berger’s best practice of making marketed content available to the public eye. These 104 tweets were categorized as *rapport building* because, regardless of content, he is getting to know and interacting with his audience on the platform they prefer.

Of the remaining 55 tweets, seven were coded as *rapport building*, 22 as *biblical concepts*, and 26 as *personal promotion*. The majority of his tweets are considered *rapport*

building due to the manner of coding for Instagram posts. However, because 18% of his tweets are *rapport building*, 40% are *biblical concepts*, and 47% are *personal promotion*, the researcher chose to apply this dispersion of tweets per category to Instagram, determining that the majority of Giglio's social media posts are for personal promotion closely followed by *rapport building* with the imagined audience. Giglio's main source of charismatic authority, therefore, comes from his perceived vulnerability with his audience and the parasocial relationship he has built with his followers. This relationship has allowed his general likability by his audience to have an overwhelmingly positive tone.

Most of Giglio's holiday content was promotion for Passion City Church's Christmas services and an Instagram post reposted to Twitter of a photograph featuring his wife for Valentine's Day. Giglio did not interact with his audience for Thanksgiving nor New Year's Day on Twitter. Giglio's use of relevant hashtags for his "brand" is lacking outside of the occasional use of, "#passion2019," to promote his conference.

### **Andy Stanley**

Stanley is the pastor and founder of North Point Community Church in Atlanta, Georgia, which houses over 43,000 attendees each week, making Stanley's church the largest in this study. Stanley also grew up under the leadership of his equally if not more famous father, Pastor Charles Stanley. This sets a precedent for Stanley's media usage as he was raised under the tutelage of a celebrity pastor father.

Stanley has tweeted 112 times since November 1, 2018. One hundred one of these tweets were analyzed while another 11 were discarded as they were retweets from other users. Of these tweets, 25 were categorized as *rapport building*, 24 as *biblical concepts/inspirational messages*,

and 52 as *personal promotion*. Stanley released a book entitled *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World* on September 18, 2018. This gives an explanation as to why 51% of Stanley's tweets analyzed were categorized as *personal promotion*. Thirteen of these tweets contained the hashtag, "#ReclaimingIrresistible," which Stanley has encouraged his followers to use. His tweets contain all six of Berger's best practices for social media marketing. Stanley's goal is not to pastor his online community but to sell books, regardless of the Biblical nature of said book. Of the 24 tweets coded *biblical concepts*, none included a Bible verse but were instead either inspirational thoughts with Biblical tones or quotes from *Irresistible*. This book has sparked major controversy within the Christian community online, making Stanley's online likability neutral, veering toward negative.

During the holiday season, rather than promote Biblical principles, Stanley promoted his book and book tour. He utilizes influencer best practices daily, cultivating a positive, encouraging Twitter presence that has the tone of an opinion leader rather than a pastor.

### **Stephen Furtick**

Furtick pastors North Carolina-based megachurch Elevation Church, home to the popular worship music group by the same name. The church has 25,000 weekly attendees across 17 locations. However, unlike his counterparts, Furtick has tweeted only 12 times since November 1, 2018, so the analysis of his Twitter was expanded to 100 tweets to allow the researcher the breadth and depth of data necessary to complete the analysis. The analysis was expanded for Furtick to March 26, 2018.

Of the 100 tweets analyzed, six were categorized as *rapport building*, 86 were categorized as *biblical concepts*, and the remaining eight were categorized as *personal*

*promotion*. Of the eight tweets categorized in personal promotion, all were promoting sermons Furtick had given the previous week that are now streaming online. 86% of his tweets are thoughts that also build rapport with his audience due to their inspirational nature. Only four of these 86 tweets contained any specific mention of a Bible verse, and none contained a complete verse.

While Elevation Church tweets nearly every day, Furtick does not tweet often, does not employ influencer best practices, and has a weak social media presence overall. However, he has the second largest following of the pastors in this study, implying that, although he does not tweet often, he has cultivated such influence with his audience that he does not need to tweet often to retain his following.

### **Rick Warren**

Warren is the pastor of Saddleback Christian Church. While this is the smallest church in this study (excluding Giglio's Passion City), Warren has the largest social media following of the five pastors studied by far, boasting 2.32M followers on Twitter alone. However, Warren also lacked sufficient tweets within the timeframe given, so the researcher expanded the analysis to 100 tweets which spanned from October 11, 2017, to March 26, 2019.

Given such few tweets in such a large time frame, while still retaining such a large following, it is clear that Warren, like Furtick, has cultivated massive online influence. However, Warren was one of the first megachurch pastors, leading Saddleback in 1989 with only 5,000 members. This has given Warren ample time to develop and exercise his traditional authority, so he has virtually no need for charismatic authority cultivation as many of his online followers have considered him an opinion leader since the early '90s.



When the researcher performed the content analysis of Warren's Twitter, 32 tweets were categorized as *rapport building*, 42 as *biblical concepts*, and 24 as *personal promotion*. Over half of Warren's tweets in the *biblical concepts* category contain Bible verses rather than encouraging quotes. Even tweets like his recent, "Since all humans are "made in God's image"(Genesis 1:26) with God-given dignity(Psalm 8:5) racism is evil and bigotry is wickedness. The massacre of people praying in Christchurch is a despicable act that should cause both tears and resolve to unite against acts of inhumanity," (March 15, 2019), contain Biblical citations for the opinion he is stating, something the other pastors have failed to do. Of the tweets coded as *personal promotion*, only three were for personal projects. Rather, the majority of these tweets promoted events at his church. Additionally, the most important distinction between Warren and the other four pastors is his tweets coded *rapport building*. Warren builds rapport not by telling the audience about himself but engaging his audience publicly by tweeting at his followers and friends.

Although Warren does not tweet regularly, Warren utilizes influencer best practices in that he creates parasocial relationships with his audience. His audience receives him with outstanding positivity, and he has created such a distinct presence both on- and offline that his church community has fondly titled him "Papa Rick," ([saddleback.com/visit/about](http://saddleback.com/visit/about)). This has given Warren an advantage in that he has cultivated his charismatic authority offline so that he can have a seamless influence over his audience online as well.

## **Discussion**

The above analysis reveals that, although each pastor brings their own unique flavor to the concept of influencer marketing, all five do utilize some if not all of Berger's (2016) best practices when constructing tweets, communicating with their audience and cultivating parasocial relationships. This demonstrates that these pastors have at minimum a rudimentary knowledge of influencer best practices as well as a working knowledge of how to develop a brand for themselves. In this discussion, key findings will be discussed, the Twitter behavior of the pastors will be compared, and study limitations and future directions will be presented.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The study revealed that each pastor's social media presence could be seen as occupying one of four quadrants. The Y-axis ranged from traditional to progressive, and the X-axis ranged from active to inactive. For example, while Warren is traditional and somewhat inactive, Groeschel is progressive and very active. However, Warren has six times the number of followers as Groeschel. Additionally, Life.Church's weekly attendance is over twice the size of that of Saddleback Christian Church. These trends seemed to remain consistent as the larger the church, the more progressive the pastor seemed to be regarding social media usage. However, the more progressive a pastor seemed to be, the fewer followers that pastor retained on social media. This is counterintuitive to the traditional social media marketing influencer best practices in that the more active and progressive an influencer is, the more followers the influencer retains. It seems then that the size of the pastor's following is about more than a formula of when to post and about what to post.

This suggests to the researcher that follower count may be more affected by open communication with the audience and perceived authenticity than influencer best practices such as posting schedules and basic marketing skills. As previously noted in the literature review, social media influencers like Sugg did not originally join social networks to market products but rather to enjoy social media and online networking. Warren and Giglio best display this behavior, interacting with their audiences and developing parasocial relationships with their audience. In contrast, Stanley and Groeschel fail to do this, opting to sell books and market podcasts to their audience rather than develop a bond with their audience. This is reflected in that the majority of Groeschel's and Stanley's tweets were coded as *personal promotion* while Warren and Giglio focused on *rapport building* and *biblical concepts*.

Due to Millennial and Gen Z distrust in traditional companies and traditional marketing, instead trusting the social influencer over a company or celebrity, it can be assumed online behavior that outright markets to the audience rather than builds rapport first is less attractive to the digital generations. However, older millennials and Gen X generally trust businesses and traditional marketing. This is an area for further exploration. What is the target market for each pastor? To what generation are they marketing? Does this affect the manner in which they post and what best practices they follow?

### **Comparing and Contrasting Online Behaviors of Pastors**

Although each pastor's tweets could be divided into three themes, these tweets greatly differ from each other as each pastor has a different approach to these categories. Many of Furtick, Stanley, and Groeschel generally approach *rapport building* by sharing personal anecdotes while Warren and Giglio approach *rapport building* most often by sharing about their

prayer lives and their participation in their church's events. Furtick's, Stanley's, and Groeschel's tweets coded *biblical concepts* tend to fall into a subcategory of *inspirational messages* as these tweets were general, catchy thoughts or ideas about God or quotes from a book they had recently released, especially in the case of Stanley's *Irresistible*. Warren and Giglio tend to tweet more Bible passages or verses overall, allowing the Gospel to speak for itself rather than interpreting an idea. Although both are valid approaches, while Furtick, Stanley, and Groeschel take a progressive, technologically optimistic approach to utilizing Twitter, Warren and Giglio remain traditional. Finally, in tweets coded *personal promotion*, Warren and Giglio tweeted only promotion for their respective church's services and products (such as Giglio's Passion City's most recent album or their Advent season devotional available online). Furtick's, Stanley's, and Groeschel's tweets coded *personal promotion* were significantly more mixed between book and podcast promotion and church promotion. See Appendix B for a detailed comparison/contrast chart with example tweets.

### **Practical Implications**

Several practical implications emerge from this study. If the Church is to take a technologically optimistic view of social media, the Church can applaud the work these men have done on social media and model after pastors such as Furtick, Stanley, and Groeschel. These men have a clear grasp of how to sell services and products, and this model can be extremely useful for other churches or pastors who have not yet mastered social media marketing. It may be strategic for churches developing a social media presence to look to these pastors for advice. If the Church chooses, instead, to take a technologically ambiguous position toward social media, Warren and Giglio provide an advisable method for developing their online

presence to retain and create greater charismatic authority with both their church and their imagined audiences beyond the walls of the church they pastor.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The current study analyzed five pastors' social media presences by coding tweets and separating tweets into themes for analysis and review. However, not all possible themes could be examined. For example, *biblical concepts* could have been divided into several subthemes such as *inspirational thoughts*, *biblical quotations*, etc. Future research in this area should consider subthemes into which the data could be coded and categorized. Additionally, because of the need to assemble a sampling frame, the current study was unable to include more than five pastors or more tweets than approximately 100/up to November 2018. Warren and Furtick had not tweeted many times since November 2018, requiring the researcher to determine that 100 tweets would be advisable for coding given the study time restraints. Future study should consider studying a larger amount of tweets as well as determining the implications of the number of tweets within a given time frame.

Despite these limitations, this topic offers multiple opportunities for future research. It is clear that these pastors use social media similarly, but to what cost? Examining this cost from a perspective of the detriments of groupthink could be beneficial to the study of social media usage, communication research, and sociology research as it applies to the Church and the greater academic environment. Does this type of "blind leading the blind" that occurs in groupthink occur in pastoral use of social media? Second, the findings from this study could be used to inform the beginnings of the analytic coding categories necessary to conduct a quantitative content analysis of megachurch pastoral online behavior. Third, the relationship

between Twitter behavior and regionality could be investigated. Does the location of a church, therefore the location of the target audience, influence Twitter behavior? Do megachurch pastors in California tweet differently than pastors in Tennessee or New York? Effectively, how do target markets determine social media tone, activity, and presence for users, especially pastors? Finally, what are the ethics of marketing faith? In a digital environment, ethics are called into question regarding the Church's use of new media, especially social media (Campbell & Garner, 2016). Entire sermon series are dedicated to how Christians should be using social media, but there is no explicit instruction on these topics in the Bible, so the Church has a challenge when determining what view of technology to take (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 30-33).

### **Summary**

In conclusion, this study provides the first gestalt perspective of megachurch pastoral use of Twitter. Findings suggest that pastors utilize influencer best practices to promote themselves and their media on Twitter and beyond. These five pastors provide a groundwork for further study as well as a model for recommended pastoral use of social media depending on what view of technology the Church chooses to assume. This study provides a springboard for a plethora of potential research, including questions of ethics, groupthink, and sociology in the megachurch environment as a whole.

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## Appendix A

Pastor's Churches, Church Attendance Numbers, and Twitter Followings<sup>1</sup>.

<b>Pastor</b>	<b>Church</b>	<b>Weekly Attendance</b>	<b>Twitter Following</b>
Rick Warren	Saddleback Church	22,100	2.32M
Stephen Furtick	Elevation Church	25,000	602K
Andy Stanley	North Point Community Church	43,500	590K
Louie Giglio	Passion City Church / Passion Conference	8,000 / 55,000	571K
Craig Groeschel	Life.Church	53,000	363K


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<sup>1</sup> Weekly attendance numbers taken from *CBS News*, 2018

## Appendix B

## Comparison and Contrast of Pastors' tweets by Category

	Rick Warren	Stephen Furtick	Andy Stanley	Louie Giglio	Craig Groeschel
<i>rapport building</i>	Mar 4, 2019: Tuesday I'm praying for my list of #ProAthletes who #LoveJesus. If you want your name added to my private prayer list, just tell me. I'm proud of your witness. "In a race, only one runner gets the prize, so run YOUR race #InSuchAWay that you win." 1 Cor. 9:24	July 4, 2018: "Weird is currently my least favorite word."	Jan 6, 2019: "When you get up at 4:45 to take your daughter to the airport and decide there's no point in going back to bed..."	Feb 23, 2019: "Could not be more excited/expectant about tomorrow @passioncity!"	Feb 14, 2019: "My best friend. My bride. My forever Valentine, @amygroeschel ❤️"
<i>biblical concepts</i>	Mar 15, 2019: "Habakkuk's cry is still true 2,600 yrs later: "Must I forever see this sin and misery all around me? Wherever I look, I see destruction and violence. I am surrounded by people who love to argue and fight." Habakkuk 1:3 (NLT)"	May 23, 2018: "The very need you're asking God to eliminate in your life might be the space He created to show His supply."	Feb 27, 2019: "Don't be content with making a point. Make a difference. #ReclaimingIrr esistible"	Mar 20, 2019: "Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death. Psalm 68:20"	Feb 16, 2019: "Be faithful in the small things. It's often the small things that no one sees that bring the big results that everyone wants."

<p><i>personal promotion</i></p>	<p>Dec 24, 2018, ““At Just the Right Time” is a major theme of the Christmas story. My Christmas message extracts 5 lessons on HOW TO TRUST GOD’S TIMING in every area of your life instead of stressing out when you’re in “God’s Waiting Room.” Watch online <a href="https://saddleback.com/watch">https://saddleback.com/watch</a> . Enjoy!”</p>	<p>Jan 14, 2019: “Backseat DJs -- streaming now. <a href="http://bit.ly/2AVPmnt">http://bit.ly/2AVPmnt</a> #FlipTheFlow”</p>	<p>Mar 13, 2019: “Still haven't read Irresistible? This week only, get the e-book for \$3.99. <a href="https://amzn.to/2SX3J0L">https://amzn.to/2SX3J0L</a> ”</p>	<p>Dec 3, 2018: “Don't get steamrolled by the Christmas season. Our daily Advent Guide is a great way to prepare your heart and is just \$1.99 for Kindle here.”</p>	<p>Mar 21, 2019: ““Serve one another humbly in love.” - Galatians 5:13</p> <p>New #leadershippod cast with Horst Schluze, Co-Founder of The Ritz-Carlton. This episode is packed with powerful tips on establishing excellence through servant leadership. You don't want to miss it.</p> <p> <a href="https://apple.co/2FdHlv6">https://apple.co/2FdHlv6</a> ”</p>
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