Chapter 3

#MarketingFaith

The Megachurch Pastor as Social Media Influencer

Elizabeth B. Jones, Sydney O. Scheller, and Nathan A. Vick

Social media influencers (SMIs) have become crucial in many brands' marketing strategies. For most brands, the business objective driving the use of SMI marketing tactics is to increase profits by leveraging the preexisting trust (Lou & Yuan, 2019) and relationship between SMIs and consumers (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). However, when the definition of "brand" expands to include a wider swath of organization types, the SMI's role and goals may become multifarious and encompass both tangible and intangible objectives. This chapter examines one such non-traditional brand context: the Christian megachurch. Specifically, we examine the Twitter communication practices of megachurch pastors from an SMI perspective. Although all SMIs strategically construct their online identity through the technological affordances available to them (Marwick, 2016), megachurch pastors arguably face unique challenges as they attempt to create a social media presence that simultaneously sates followers and honors God.

To frame the current investigation, we focus on three central questions that capture the tensions confronting megachurch pastors as SMIs: (1) What is the megachurch, and can it be conceptualized as a brand? (2) Can megachurch pastors legitimately be defined as SMIs? and (3) How might documented SMI communication practices shape megachurch pastors' online self-presentation strategies? These questions will culminate in an original qualitative content analysis of the Twitter communication of the pastors of the largest churches in America.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE MEGACHURCH AS A BRAND

Defining the *Megachurch*

The megachurch is defined as "any Protestant Christian congregation with a sustained average weekly attendance of 2,000 persons or more in its worship services" (Hartford Institute, 2015, "Megachurch Definition" section). In addition to size, megachurches tend to share other traits, including massive recreational programs, large staffs and volunteer ranks, and flourishing communication departments, all intended to meet the spiritual, emotional, and educational needs of members and spiritual seekers (Eagle, 2015; Hartford Institute, 2015). The megachurch, in its current form, first proliferated in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s (Hartford Institute, 2015). Of particular relevance to the current investigation is the role of the megachurch's leader, the senior pastor,[1] a position typically defined as the elder in the church in charge of teaching, preaching, and leading. In the United States, almost all megachurch pastors are male, display an authoritative leadership style, and demonstrate personal charisma (Hartford Institute, 2015). Given this definition of the *megachurch*, can this institution accurately be defined as a *brand*? This question has been widely debated, and we next present a brief summary of relevant positions.

Defining a *Brand*

Brands originally served a legal function to denote the origin of a particular good and to prevent theft (e.g., a cattle brand designated the owner of livestock; Kapferer, 2012). This term has since evolved into a "name that influences buyers, becoming the purchase criterion" (Kapferer, 2012, p. 8). The brand name exerts its influence through the mental associations the customer holds that engender positive emotions such as trust and respect (Kapferer, 2012). These positive mental associations add intangible but real equity to an organization (Keller, 2009). Brand management, therefore, strategically separates one's brand from other competitors through the process of differentiation, in which a brand highlights its unique attributes and value (Kapferer, 2012). Narratives, stories that surround and inform brands, play a crucial role in this brand differentiation process and are "utilized whenever there is a surplus of interchangeable goods" (Twitchell, 2004, p. 4).

Given this definition of "brand," two primary schools of response emerge when weighing whether or not to include religious institutions within its purview. The first position opposes the branding of faith. The critiques in this camp center on a resistance to the "commodification" of faith and argue that this commodification leads to deleterious outcomes such as a cheapened

faith practice and an unjust evangelical industrial complex (e.g., Miller, 2003; Johnson, 2017; Wigg-Stevenson, 2009).

The second and arguably more popular position accepts megachurch branding as largely unproblematic and, pragmatically, as necessary and even desirable. From this view, commodification is a sociologic reality that permeates all spheres of life, including the religious (Kaperferer, 2012; Twitchell, 2004). If brands emerge whenever there is a surplus of interchangeable goods, then religion must follow suit, for it is also fungible, in that all varieties offer some permutation of salvation and epiphany (Twitchell, 2004). Further, in a nation with no state-sponsored religion and a bombardment of commercial advertisements that promise earthly meaning, fulfillment, and transcendence, religious institutions must market themselves as a valuable commodity (Einstein, 2008). Rather than seek new converts, many religious institutions tend to compete for congregants internally amid—to use marketing parlance—an already existing "target market" of believers (Twitchell, 2004).

Although church leaders reject the premise that Christianity is a fungible good, they nonetheless also tend to embrace the branding of faith enthusiastically. Church how-to resources train pastors in marketing strategies and argue that church leaders must become conversant in the lingua franca of self-branding or else suffer missional aphasia. Pastors view branding through social media as one important way to communicate the Christian gospel message and to foster worship attendance, goodwill, and fundraising support (e.g., Cooke, 2012).

This impulse within many churches to adopt new communication channels for evangelistic goals has strong precedent. First, it reflects the *optimistic* stance that the Church has historically adopted toward new communication technologies, rather than the concurrent strands of technological pessimism or ambiguity (Campbell & Garner, 2016). This optimistic position holds that the benefits of technology for the salvation of souls and betterment of earthly injustices outweigh potential problems. Further, the contemporary megachurch's embrace of social media marketing strategies builds upon a long Protestant history of using entertainment and new communication for mass evangelism (Eagle, 2015). It is plausible that many current megachurch pastors identify with this optimistic technology stance and view faith branding as instrumentally useful. However, as Einstein (2008) notes, "Marketing religion is a balancing act—a delicate dance of how far one must go to remain relevant while at the same time remaining true to one's faith. This is no easy task" (p. 15). When megachurch pastors act as SMIs, they use various communication strategies in service of this negotiation.

THE MEGACHURCH PASTOR AS SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER

If the megachurch is to be branded, a logical next step is the selection of a brand endorser. For most megachurches, that endorser is, de facto, the senior pastor. As Christian ministry consultant Phil Cooke (2012) notes, "One thing I've discovered is that the pastor or ministry leader is the hub of the brand. Everything else revolves around his or her role" (p. 94). The contemporary focus on the senior pastor as a church representative is not entirely novel. Protestant church architecture, for instance, has long reflected the primacy of the speaker within worship (Eagle, 2015). Eagle (2015), for example, described a 1601 church structure as possessing a roof with the "characteristic lantern shape of many Protestant Temples, which *amplified the speaker's voice* [emphasis added]" (p. 592). We do not wish to stretch the comparison too thin; however, we argue that contemporary social media affords new and historically coherent possibilities for pastoral amplification through digital channels. Although the pastor plays a clear role in supporting the church brand, little research has explored if and how they function as an SMI. We next define the term "SMI" and compare our conceptualization of megachurch pastor as SMI with existing definitions, which focus on commercial contexts.

SMI *Definition*

Scholars define "SMI" in varying ways within the research literature. The burgeoning of social media that affords SMI marketing is relatively recent (Fox & McEwan, 2019), and thus multiple conceptualizations of SMIs are unsurprising. One oft-cited definition designates SMIs as "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90). Other academic definitions emphasize varying dimensions of the role, including the technical competencies needed to create sophisticated social media content that appeals to a niche audience (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2018), or the identification of social influence through the examination of online social network structures (e.g., Agonisto et al., 2019). Others have argued that SMIs are professionals who approach the cultivation of their online persona as a job and generate income (Albindin, 2017). Some scholars have proposed boundary conditions for SMIs, in order to differentiate SMIs from traditional celebrities and to highlight instead their "micro-celebrity" (e.g., Khamis et al. 2017; Marwick, 2016; Schoutten et al., 2019). Instructional marketing resources in the popular press tend to be more inclusive in their definition of an *SMI*, proposing a continuum of SMIs ranging from traditional celebrity to

micro-celebrity. What all of these definitions hold in common is an emphasis on social influence and the creation or amplification of that influence through the strategic exploitation of social media.

Situating the Megachurch Pastor within Commercial *SMI* Definitions

Many megachurch pastors demonstrate qualities that would categorize them as SMIs as thus defined. For example, some megachurch pastors are preexisting celebrities by virtue of their "well-knownness" (Boorstin, 1962; Gamson, 2011), and are sometimes referred to as "holy mavericks" (Lee & Sinitiere, 2009) who command social media followings of millions. Further, many of the most engaged-with tweets on Twitter are not from traditional celebrities like Justin Bieber but from pastors like Joel Osteen (O'Leary, 2012). As well-known megachurch pastors enter the realm of social media and fame becomes more easily attained, the line between pastor and influencer becomes blurred.

Not all megachurch pastors, however, can be classified as celebrities, and there is likely considerable variation in a given pastor's level of engagement with the strategies for social media communication. Pastors, or their social media communication teams, potentially also demonstrate varying amounts of technical skill and content-creation acumen. Given these concerns, we argue that the question of how megachurch pastors function as SMIs requires additional research attention. To that end, we next briefly review research on how the technological affordances of social media shape influencer communication practices and the unique tensions megachurch pastors may encounter.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

Several bodies of work inform our study of the communication practices of SMIs, most notably from computer-mediated-communication, public relations, and digital religion studies. First, it is important to note that all SMI communication is shaped by the technological affordances of a given communication channel. These technological affordances are the attributes of a particular object that enable or constrain use in interaction (Gibson, 1979). We understand communication technologies in part by the various affordances they possess, which include their level of interactivity, accessibility, visibility, and personalization (Baym, 2015; Fox & McEwan, 2019). Social media affordances allow SMIs to create a desired identity of authenticity, to engage in relationship management through dialogue, relational labor, and parasocial interaction, and to co-construct pastoral authority.

In terms of identity, social media allows users to construct the persona they wish to present to the world through identity cues (Baym, 2015; Goffman, 1959), including markers of storied religious identity (Campbell & Garner, 2016). This identity construction is social, in that SMIs assemble their identity in light of an imagined social media audience, whose true size and composition can seldom fully be known by the online content creator (Marwick & boyd, 2010). As research has suggested, one valued identity characteristic of SMIs is authenticity (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2018). *Authenticity* is a term that is elusive but tends to encompass ideas of being true to a "real" self and behaving in a manner consistent with that ideal.

One of the ways SMIs create perceived authenticity is through relationship management. *Relationship management* involves two-way communication between the SMIs and their followers, though this communication is often asymmetrical. One such form of communication is the dialogue between content creator and audience, as afforded by the structural capabilities of interactive social platforms (e.g., Watkins & Lewis, 2014). These dialogic relationship studies often build on the work of Kent and Taylor (1998), who defined *dialogic communication* as "any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions" (p. 325). In addition to dialogue between an SMI and their followers, SMIs engage in other forms of relational labor, which is conceptualized as the "ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time" (Baym, 2018, p.19). This relational labor facilitates a sense of ongoing access to the day-to-day, "backstage" (Goffman, 1959) life of the SMI. Prolonged relational labor may facilitate parasocial interaction, defined as the relationships that audiences form with media figures (Horton & Whol, 1956). This parasocial interaction between an SMI and their audience may engender positive attitudes toward the SMI (e.g., Rasumussen, 2018). We argue that megachurch pastors who desire to be successful SMIs must attend to all of the aforementioned communication concerns. However, we also posit that megachurch pastors may face unique SMI challenges. To date, the most extensively studied area of potential tension is online pastoral authority.

Campbell (2007) notes that religious authority "differs from the general concept of authority, in that it draws on a particular form of legitimization, often linked to a divine source" (p. 1046). However, religious authority, even with the addition of divine legitimization, also relies on "systems, roles, and personified beliefs" (Campbell, 2007, p. 1046). Given the extensive reach and democratic opportunities that social media affords to SMIs (Baym, 2015), many religious institutions have feared that voices unsanctioned by the religious establishment will rise to prominence (Campbell & Garner, 2016). At the same time, religious institutions have viewed social media as a way to reassert traditional forms of authority. As Campbell and Garner (2016) note, "Religious institutions are increasingly learning to leverage social media to build their influence

and harness the power of the web to display their expert knowledge online" (p. 74). The limited body of work related to the communication of pastoral online authority corroborates the stance that social media tends to reinforce, rather than undermine, traditional religious authority (e.g., Campbell, 2010; Cheong et al., 2011). However, traditional understandings and enactments of religious authority have arguably shifted with the widespread adoption of social media.

For example, Cheong (2016) argues that contemporary religious authority is "discursive, relational, and emergent" (p. 84). From this perspective, ministers do not abdicate their pastoral authority when they communicate online; rather, they engage in practices of strategic arbitration (Cheong et al., 2011). Strategic arbitration involves the communicative process of self-presentation as a sage and sociable curator of spiritual wisdom in a highly fragmented information landscape (Cheong et al., 2011). For example, in a study of how megachurch pastors used Twitter to engage in strategic arbitration, Cheong (2016) found that ministers cultivated an approachable yet authoritative online persona through their Twitter bios, personal promotion, connections to offline religious institutions and rites, "behind the scenes" glimpses into the pastoral profession, and spiritual teachings.

Taken together, these findings help determine the unique situations megachurch pastors may face as they attempt to maintain and reinforce clerical authority. An additional challenge pastors as SMIs may encounter is pressure to represent their churches and the Christian faith well. Pastoral exposure on social media can invite unwanted censure. For example, the Instagram account @PreachersNSneakers lampoons prominent faith leaders' social media photos by identifying the materialistic displays of consumption, such as designer sneakers and handbags, found therein (Rojas, 2019). This commentary captures the incongruity between laypeople's expectation of pastoral austerity and the observation of (possibly) tithe-funded excess. In sum, past research on the social media communication of megachurch pastors has tended to focus on ministers as an undifferentiated group or to present case studies of one or two pastors. The current study updates these findings and expands theorizing into the area of SMIs.

METHOD

This study examined the Twitter communication practices of megachurch pastors from the twenty largest megachurches in the United States through the method of qualitative content analysis, defined by Hseih and Shannon (2005) 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" (p. 1278). Twitter is a microblogging platform that

allows users to communicate with "tweets," short posts that are no more than 280 characters long (Twitter, 2019, "Getting started" section). We selected Twitter as our focal social media for several reasons. First, it is widely used in the United States, with 22 percent of adults using the platform (Pew Research, 2019). Forty-two percent of these Twitter users report that they use the platform at least once a day (Pew Research, 2019). Second, it is relatively simple to acquire Twitter data for research purposes. Twitter web scrapers are readily available, and unlike platforms such as Facebook, Twitter does not draw a distinction between posts and comments.

Sample

Megachurch Identification

This study focused on the Twitter presences of the megachurch senior pastors from twenty of the largest Protestant churches in the United States. Identifying the twenty largest megachurches is admittedly fraught, as church attendance is self-reported, and may not be made available. To construct our sampling frame, we first consulted a megachurch size ranking available through the Hartford Institute for Religion Research (2015, "Database of megachurches in the U.S. section"). We then updated and cross-referenced this list against each megachurch's website information and Outreach 100's (2019) self-report list of the largest U.S. congregations. Reported estimates of weekly worship attendance for the churches in the sample ranged from 17,294 (New Life Church in Arkansas) to 43,500 (Lakewood Church in Texas).

Tweet Identification

Once the megachurch sampling frame was completed, the senior pastors from each congregation were identified. Two churches did not have a senior pastor at the time of sampling and thus were removed from the study. Next, Twitter was searched to establish which of the identified pastors had an active Twitter presence, defined as posting a tweet (i.e., "tweeting") at least once during the sampling period. In this step, two pastors were eliminated; one who had not tweeted in over one year and one who did not appear to have an account. Thus, sixteen pastors were included in the final sample.

Once the list of senior pastors was determined, study data was scraped from each pastor's Twitter profile. The unit of analysis was each individual tweet sent by each pastor within a designated timeframe. We chose a three-month period lasting from July 1, 2019 to September 30, 2019, in order to provide both a manageable sample from prolific Twitter users and sufficient data from infrequent Twitter users. This period contained 636 tweets with an average number of 37.4 tweets per pastor, with one being the lowest number of tweets sent by a pastor and 68 being the highest number. The data was

Table 3.1 Senior Pastor Twitter Following and Church Affiliation

Senior Pastor	*Twitter Followers*	*Church Affiliation*	*Estimated Weekly Worship Attendance*
Joel Osteen	9.04M	Lakewood Church	43,500
Rick Warren	2.33M	Saddleback Church	22,055
Steven Furtick	652K	Elevation Church	25,998
Andy Stanley	595K	North Point Community Church	30, 629
Craig Groeschel	378K	Life.Church	30,000
Ed Young	302K	Fellowship Church	24,162
Robert Morris	113K	Gateway Church	28,000
Chris Hodges	99.5K	Church of the Highlands	44,872
Joseph W. Walker III	73.2K	Mount Zion Baptist Church	19,723
Kyle Idleman	44.7K	Southeast Christian Church	21,764
Jud Wilhite	43.4K	Central Church	21,055
Rick Bezet	23.6K	New Life Church	17,294
Jim Burgen	6.3K	Flatirons Community Church	16,703
Dr. Ed Young	5.0K	Second Baptist Church	20,656
Bob Merritt	3K	Eagle Brook Church	22,211
Ashley Wooldridge	2.9K	Christ's Church of the Valley	35,000

Note. Pastors are presented in order of highest number of Twitter followers to lowest number of Twitter followers. *M* designates "million"; *K* designates "thousand."

acquired with a Twitter Advanced Search web scraper. See table 3.1 for senior pastor, Twitter following, and church affiliation information.

Data Analysis

We adopted grounded theory techniques in order to analyze the data (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Thus, to analyze the final sample of pastors' Twitter communication, the researchers immersed themselves in the tweets of each megachurch pastor. The individual tweet, therefore, constituted the primary unit of analysis. We subjected each tweet to a close reading to break apart the data for ideas and to ascertain the number of tweets within a given megachurch pastor's Twitter presence that coalesced on a particular topic. Initial codes emerging from the data were formed and refined into overarching conceptual categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Themes were generated inductively by the team of three researchers, rather than adopted a priori. Last, we compared and contrasted these themes across pastors.

RESULTS

We examined the Twitter communication practices of megachurch pastors from an SMI perspective. We thus investigated if megachurch pastors adopted similar self-presentation and relational labor strategies to market

themselves, their churches, and their Christian faith, as those used by secular SMIs. We were particularly attuned to the practices used to reconcile self-branding and the divine imperatives of the pastoral role. We observed commonalities in SMI practice across pastors in the sample, as well as patterns of meaningful variation. Findings related to the chapter's aims are thus presented here in turn. Three overarching themes of influencer practice emerged across the sample: *promotion*, *rapport building*, and *edification*. Throughout these results, tweets are quoted verbatim to illustrate findings. We then describe how the pastors created unique configurations of these practices in their Twitter communication.

Promotion

In the marketing literature, "promotion" involves the process of coordinating "channels of information and persuasion in order to sell goods and services or promote an idea" (Belch & Belch, 2012, p. 12). Commercial SMIs engage in promotion frequently through, for example, brand partnerships (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2018). Megachurch pastors also used Twitter to publicize goods and to encourage action. Similar to secular micro-celebrities who promote goods that will resonate with the idiosyncratic desires of their niche audience (Marwick, 2016), so too did megachurch pastors cast promotions as the fulfillment of the needs of the online flock. Three subcategories were identified within the larger *promotion* theme: *personal promotion*, *network promotion*, and *church promotion*.

First, tweets that fell into the category of *personal promotion* emphasized the pastor, as a self-branded entity, selling or publicizing his independent ventures, most commonly in the form of books, podcasts, and speaking tours. Andy Stanley and Robert Morris are examples of pastors who exemplified this category. These promotional tweets did not engage in "hard sell" tactics (i.e., "take it or leave it"); rather, they noted the unique and positive values that this commodity offered to the disciple or the way that the item would solve a felt problem. For example, Andy Stanley (2019) promoted a link to an online store that sold an audiobook version of his recent book *Irresistible*:

> Andy Stanley (@AndyStanley) on August 13, 2019, at 7:43 a.m.: Don't have time to read Irresistible? How 'bout I read it to you? [Link to audiobook and image attached].

Also, one common motif within the promoted materials was that of "leadership," through which megachurch pastors indirectly modeled how leaders should promote themselves and their offerings. Further, some pastors engaged in name-dropping within their self-promotional tweets, which may

have served to bolster the perceived credibility of a given endeavor. For example:

> Andy Stanley (@AndyStanley) on September 21, 2019, at 11:15 a.m.: Had an amazing day with Reggie Joiner, Joel Thomas, and the fine folks at Mission Community Church talking about Irresistible. On to Kansas City & Austin! Click here for more info: [Link and image attached].

Second, in addition to promoting their independent endeavors, many senior pastors also engaged in *church promotion*, defined here as tweeting about church events and worship services. Rick Warren, Robert Morris, Ed Young, and others exhibited this communication practice. Within this tweet category, pastors used Twitter's digital affordances to attract online followers to a physical locale. Similar to the *self-promotion* category, church promotion tweets also described the unique values of participating in a physical worship experience. For example, Robert Morris (2019) tweeted:

> Robert Morris (@PsRobertMorris) on September 21, 2019, at 12:05 p.m.: God is 100% grace all the time. I hope you'll join me at @gatewaypeople this weekend as I continue the "God Is . . ." series. For service times & locations, visit http://times.gatewaypeople.com.
>
> #GatewayPeople #GatewayLife #GodIs [Sermon video attached].

This tweet accomplished several communicative functions simultaneously, as it evoked positive emotion through an emphasis on a winsome attribute of God (his grace), invited a potentially lonely online populace to join a community (@gatewaypeople; #GatewayPeople), and informed about both the nature of the divine and worship service logistics.

The third and final subcategory associated with the *promotion* theme was *network promotion*, in which pastors publicized the products and services of friends, colleagues, and organizations. Many pastors, including Idleman, Morris, and Warren, promoted the books, podcasts, and events of other individuals and organizations. For instance:

> Chris Hodges (@Chris_Hodges) on September 3, 2019, at 5:18 p.m.: Excited about this new book from my friend @pastorbrady. Check it out here: [Image with link attached].

Through these forms of network promotion, pastors ostensibly introduced their online followers to organizations and individuals of value to them. Through this practice, pastors also solidified their own religious identity in

connection to those with whom they associated (Baym, 2015). This established the in-group identity as a demarcated, yet accessible, class of faith leaders.

Rapport Building

The second overarching theme we identified was that of *rapport building*, whereby pastors engaged in relationship building with their online Twitter followers. As noted previously, secular SMIs tend to be adept at communicating with audiences in a manner that creates the perception of an interactive relationship (e.g., Rasmussen, 2018). Pastors also engaged in these rapport-building practices, though in a manner that infused an undercurrent of pastoral care for the online community. The subcategories that emerged within *rapport building* were *audience engagement*, *persona construction*, and *celebration*.

Audience engagement included tweets in which the pastor demonstrated two-way interaction with the Twitter community. Common forms of audience engagement included live videos, responses to individual Twitter followers, solicitation of prayer requests, and asking questions of followers. Bishop Joseph Walker, III, for example, frequently used Twitter's live broadcast feature (i.e., Periscope) to engage with his followers. The affordances of the live broadcast allowed Bishop Walker to present his audience with a seemingly authentic, "raw and unedited" view into his life (e.g., "Bishop JWW3 Sunday Night Reflections"). Further, the live broadcast format allowed for synchronous interaction, as live viewers could chat, ask questions, and indicate liking or agreement by tapping their mobile screens to share hearts. Other pastors also deviated from the one-to-many tweet structure typically adopted for promotional tweets in order to interact with individual users. For instance, Kyle Idleman (2019) engaged regularly with individual followers, often in a pastoral tone:

> Kyle Idleman (@Kyleidleman) on July 28, 2019, at 8:53 a.m.: So sorry you are feeling that way and experiencing this—saying a prayer for you now. It's no accident I saw your tweet! Hold on though, He's in the business of making beauty from ashes.

In terms of the solicitation of prayer requests, Ed Young (2019) notes the following:

> Ed Young (@EdYoung) on September 3, 2019, at 1:30 p.m.: We should never underestimate the power of prayer; it undeniably moves the heart of God. Our team here @fc wants to pray for YOU! Send us your prayer requests in the comment section below.

Other pastors provoked discussion and engagement by asking questions, which often focused on a spiritual theme like heaven or forgiveness.

In addition to audience engagement, the pastors also demonstrated *persona construction*, which included efforts to convey authenticity through tweets that emphasized identity aspects *other than* the pastoral role. Through these tweets, followers were able to view the pastor not only as a divinely appointed leader but also as an embodied and multifaceted person. Tweets about marriage, familial relationships, vacations, and hobbies such as fishing and sports occurred most frequently. Tweets in this subcategory, more than others, tended to use humor—often self-deprecating. They also sometimes referenced pop culture and Internet culture, such as memes and hashtags. For example, Ed Young tweeted a short video of comical photoshoot outtakes with the caption "#Mood." Others encouraged their followers to engage with online content in accordance with general Internet conventions, such as photos with "caption this" prompts and #tbt (throwback Thursday) tweets. Although tweets in this category did not tend to be explicitly religious in nature, they all could be described as wholesome and upbeat.

The *celebration* subcategory included tweets in which the pastor explicitly rejoiced over the actions of the members of either his physical church congregation or online following. Examples included the pastor celebrating baptisms in the church or highlighting the production staff. This category exemplified the pastor's ability to be "one of" the community himself, and to share the success of his followers with a large audience.

Edification

Edification was the final theme that was identified. This theme is arguably the SMI Twitter communication practice unique to the pastoral role. Through tweets that focused on *edification*, pastors emphasized their status as shepherds and teachers vertically connected to the divine. Thus, these pastors acted as conduits who translated complex theological principles into 280-character tweetable snippets. Of note, some tweets coded as *edification* linked followers to longer video or audio versions of sermons. No tweets in our sample were overtly controversial. Instead, these tweets appeared to encourage frequent, pleasant attention to the divine and to uplift, inform, and encourage. Three subcategories embodied this theme, namely, *positive thoughts*, *biblical concepts*, and *theological comments*.

Positive thoughts were defined as tweets that were inspirational in nature but did not reference a specific biblical passage or theological concept. For example, Jud Wilhite (2019) notes that "worry never fixes tomorrow, but it always ruins today." Similarly, Craig Groeschel (2019) asserts that "passion always follows purpose." *Biblical concepts* were also inspirational in nature

but included a specific Bible quotation or discussion of any event, parable, or story within the biblical text. Several examples of *biblical concepts* are as follows:

> Steven Furtick (@stevenfurtick) on August 1, 2019, at 6:30 p.m.: You CAN survive whatever wilderness you may be facing right now. Here's how. (See Matthew 3:17) [Video of sermon snippet attached].

> Ed Young (@EdYoung) on September 14, 2019, at 11:30 a.m.: "My strength is made perfect in weakness."—Jesus We are only as strong as our weakest moment!

A *theological comment*, in contrast, was defined as a tweet about a religious concept that did not directly reference the Bible. For example:

> Craig Groeschel (@craiggroeschel) on August 27, 2019, at 9:43 p.m.: Fear doesn't come from God.

> Steven Furtick (@stevenfurtick) on August 6, 2019, at 7:00 p.m.: Jesus has already taken care of what's tormenting you. [Video of sermon snippet attached].

All of these forms of pastoral edification served to solidify the pastor as a SMI who is uniquely influenced by the divine, and who may thus legitimately influence his followers accordingly.

Variations in Pastoral SMI Communication Practices

In addition to examining the common themes that emerged *across* megachurch pastors in terms of their SMI Twitter communication, we also investigated the variations among ministers in the enactment of those practices. Although our investigation was primarily qualitative, we did quantify how often each of the pastors in the sample exhibited each of the identified themes and subthemes. The pastors demonstrated significant variation in which SMI Twitter communication practices they exhibited with the timeframe of our investigation, suggesting that megachurch pastors are not monolithic in their self-presentation strategies. Although almost all the pastors in our sample employed each of the previously discussed themes occasionally, each pastor made different choices in terms of the configuration of influencer practices they emphasized. As will be addressed in the discussion of our findings, these differences could be attributed to multiple factors; however, the trends we observed are briefly described here.

For example, some pastors emphasized Twitter as a promotional tool more heavily than did others. Andy Stanley was the pastor in the sample who demonstrated the highest proportion of *self-promotion* tweets. Another subset of pastors' communication practice clustered around *positive thoughts* and *theological comments*. This cluster of megachurch pastors, interestingly, tended to be from some of the largest churches in the sample and commanded "celebrity pastor" status (e.g., Joel Osteen, Craig Groeschel, Steven Furtick). Some pastors, like Robert Morris, focused on *church promotion*, while others (e.g., Kyle Idleman; Joseph Walker, III) participated more fully in *audience engagement*. Future research should further examine the variations within megachurch pastor communication practices. The implications of these findings are next discussed.

MEGACHURCH PASTORS AS EXEMPLARS AND CHALLENGERS OF SMI CONCEPTUALIZATION

This chapter examined megachurch pastors as SMIs through a qualitative content analysis of their Twitter communication. Our results indicated that megachurch pastors used many of the communication practices commercial SMIs employ, including self-branding through personal promotion and the construction of an approachable and ever-present online persona. Simultaneously, megachurch pastors expressed their clerical identity even as they engaged in these commercial SMI practices. We also observed differences in how individual megachurch pastors configured their online self-presentation. Each of these findings will be discussed in turn.

First, our findings affirmed the enthusiastic embrace of branding by the megachurch (Twitchell, 2004). Specifically, megachurch pastors appeared to accept and exploit social media as a contemporary means of amplifying influence. At the time of data collection, almost all megachurch pastors of the twenty largest megachurches in the United States possessed an active Twitter account. Our method of content analysis was unable to discern if a given pastor's Twitter account was managed by the pastor himself or a communication team. However, regardless of the source of Twitter management, the tweets posted typically displayed content-creation best practices. For example, the pastors often used hashtags, links, and professionally produced videos, graphics, and images in their tweets. Tweets were often published using commercial social media management software, which suggests a high level of social media strategy savvy. Of course, the use of communication teams to produce and publish content raises questions about the perceived authenticity the pastors seek to cultivate. Further, we found the megachurch pastors'

Twitter communication imbued with the marketing imperative to focus on a brand's unique value (e.g., Kapferer, 2012). As previously noted, ministers contextualized much of their communication—even promotional tweets—as satiating some felt need (whether physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual) of their online flock.

Second, our findings demonstrated how megachurch pastors functioned as SMIs while maintaining their clerical role. We found that, although pastors largely embraced branding and commercial SMI practices, each of these communication events was infused with a "Christian flavor," or, to be more specific, an essence of evangelical megachurch. For example, pastors promoted books that dealt with faith topics and engaged with their online community through the solicitation of prayer requests. Even the subtheme we identified that was not explicitly religious, *persona construction*, abstained from "off-color" content and promoted values in alignment with evangelical Christendom, such as a focus on marriage and family. Further, our findings related to the potentially unique challenges faced by megachurch pastors as SMIs largely corroborated earlier work on the construction of pastoral authority through online communication (e.g., Cheong, 2014; Cheong, 2016; Cheong et al., 2011). Specifically, as has been previously reported, the pastors in our sample also legitimized their authority by casting themselves as kind sages who could translate complex theological concepts into tweetable snippets.

Third, one of our most interesting findings involved the variations among megachurch pastors in terms of how they configured their adoption of SMI strategies, which suggests that megachurch pastors do not act as SMIs monolithically. As previously reported, some pastors more heavily emphasized a given theme (i.e., promotion, rapport building, edification) in their tweets than did others. These differences could be attributed to many factors. Possible factors may include, for instance, the timing of our cross-sectional sample. Because the study focused on one three-month period of tweets, a higher proportion of tweets for a given minister may be an artifact of a book release rather than a sustained practice in his SMI communication. Future longitudinal research would help to clarify this potential explanation.

The differences among pastors' SMI Twitter communication practices may also relate to their larger pastoral persona, which is constructed from a number of interconnected information systems, of which Twitter is typically only one component. For example, Cooke (2012) described Joel Osteen's brand as "the inspirational guy" (p. 28), which is carried across multiple media platforms and properties. Thus, the constellation of SMI Twitter communication practices observed for an individual pastor may be derived from and consistent with his larger personal brand image. Alternately or additively, pastors

may also shape their social media communication in light of other markers of social identity, such as gender or race (e.g., Martin et al., 2011).

A final proposed potential explanation for our findings is that they reflect conscious or unconscious negotiations with the tensions associated with uploading the pastoral persona. For example, some pastors may find self-promotion distasteful, and therefore focus on the communication of church events, the teaching of biblical principles, or the intentional engagement of online audiences. In reality, all of the themes identified in our study integrate and interact in layered ways to position the pastor as an SMI. For instance, although *church promotion* does not explicitly focus on the pastor, it does so indirectly because the pastoral delivery of a religious message has long been a centerpiece of Protestant worship (Eagle, 2015).

Taken together, the findings from this investigation enrich and challenge current conceptualizations of SMIs. For example, this examination of megachurch pastors on Twitter encourages reflection on the boundary conditions of the SMI designation. Given the various conceptions of the SMI role previously reviewed, do all megachurch pastors automatically qualify as such? For example, is motivation or desire to influence a prerequisite for the designation? Presumably, megachurch pastors are fundamentally motivated to influence because they are directed by the Great Commission of Jesus to make and teach disciples. Alternatively, does the size of one's preexisting network solidify this distinction? Again, many megachurch pastors arguably exert considerable influence, given the size of their congregations and reach of their social and other media properties. Other possible boundary conditions may include technological skills, the extent and nature of SMI practices, and quantitative and qualitative characteristics of audience interaction. Future research should work to clarify the perimeters of the SMI role.

Another fruitful stream of future research could examine how followers respond to megachurch pastors' Twitter communication, and how this feedback iteratively shapes SMI practices. The current investigation focused on pastors, rather than their followers; however, preliminary results suggest that pastors face decisions between depth and breadth in audience engagement. Future comparisons between sacred and secular audience expectations, communication and behaviors could also be informative.

This investigation also revealed the unique challenges some influencers may face because of the real or perceived inconsistencies between their role and expectations for SMIs. For this particular investigation, the pastoral role was arguably unique in that it originated in the divine. Megachurch pastors demonstrated varying strategies for reconciling this potential discrepancy. However, it is plausible that this finding may extend to any kind of SMI who perceives such a disconnect. Future research can examine if this pattern

emerges for other types of SMIs, and if and how they communicatively forge reconciliation.

In conclusion, this chapter examined the role of the megachurch pastor as SMI. The qualitative content analysis of megachurch pastors' tweets revealed patterns of communication that both aligned with and diverged from commercial SMI practices as documented in the literature to date. The unique clerical position both enhances and challenges traditional conceptions of the SMI role. We remain intrigued to observe how, going forward, megachurch pastors metaphorically amplify their voices in the temple of Twitter.

NOTE

1. Titles vary. Other monikers include *Lead Pastor*, *Lead Follower*, *Vision Pastor*, or *Lead Minister*.

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