

Influencing a Generation: How Romans 12:2 is Reflected Through Social Media and its Effects
on Young Adult Christians and Churches

Gabrielle Louis
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Introduction

Throughout the course of history, individuals have longed for community. Community that is based on region, based on history, and, more importantly, based on religion. With the evolution of technology and the growth of the internet, now more than ever, there is a wide sense of community that is digital. Communities that previously relied on closeness and proximity now were able to be formed solely on shared interests through digitization. The rise of the digital age has brought about the need for communities that are not only physical but also digital, allowing for a once large and vast world to be simplified through the use of a handheld or portable device. These digital communities grew into what is today called social media. Social media is “an online platform that encourages user interaction and provides users with the ability to create, share, and communicate with one another as well as other users of the platform”.¹

With the rise of the internet came the rise of leaders within these digital communities. Those who have made a purpose to lead others within their niche. Matthew 28:9 states, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” Following this command, numerous individuals have utilized the tool of social media to fulfill this duty to Christ. Yet, each individual’s practice of sharing the Gospel has differed based on region, audience, and nation. With four out of five people with access to the internet having some form of social media, the use of social media as a form of evangelization has become a necessity.² Between 2008 and 2018, the amount of social media users within the United States bloomed from 10% of the population in 2008 to 77% of the population in 2018.³ The implementation of social media and social networking sites have

¹ Kumar Pradyot Dubey, Amedapu Srinivas, Shikha Gupta, Abhinav Srivastava, and Jitendra Sharma, *Factors Affecting Influencer Marketing Vs Social Media - An Empirical Study*. (2023). (Journal of Pharmaceutical Negative Results 14), 1811.

² Audrey Lim, *Effective Ways of Using Social Media: An Investigation of Christian Churches in South Australia*. (Australia: Christian Education Journal 14, no. 1, 2017), 23.

³ Melody Nouri, *The Power of Influence: Traditional Celebrity vs Social Media Influencer* (2018). (Santa Clara: Pop Culture Intersections), 1.

created a different approach to sharing a message and, more specifically, sharing the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. But how is this biblical command being followed in the real world?

Romans 12:2 states, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” As believers of the gospel and followers of Christ, there is a command to be upheld in which we are not to be like the world, but instead impact the world. This then begs the question, how are audiences being influenced by these Christian content creators and how does the age of the audience impact the influence? How are social media influencers and Christian churches active on social media utilizing this key Biblical verse using social media and social networking? This paper seeks to examine this question, as well as how Christian content creators have influenced churches and their social media presence.

Methodology

To properly explore the question of influence, it is important to define the specific forms of social media studied. There are numerous social media networks available globally, with the most popular being Facebook. Having a total of approximately 2.9 billion users, Facebook far surpasses the next populous social networking site YouTube, which totals 2.5 billion users, followed by WhatsApp and Instagram with about 2 billion users respectively.⁴ The amount of users on these sites alone account for approximately 25 percent of the world’s population. The advent of the internet created a new niche that allowed individuals worldwide to receive the same information, regardless of the language spoken or the nation lived in. With this ability to unify the world, there grew the implementation of digital community groups.

For this study, the focus is on the social networking sites YouTube and Instagram. These sites in particular include a smaller sample size of social media content creators as well as

⁴ Statista, *Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2023*

churches, and often the creators and churches utilize both Instagram and YouTube to promote their content and their church, respectively. According to a 2021 study found on Statista, Instagram was found to be the third most popular social media site used by teens, with 22 percent of the teenagers listing this social networking site as their preferred.⁵ These two social networking sites provide a means for creators to interact with their audience through likes, shares, and comments. Oftentimes, creators respond to their audience and familiarize themselves with frequent commentors and frequent interactors. Instagram in particular allows for audiences to not only like, comment, and share, but audiences can additionally respond through reactions. The use of the “Reels” tab on Instagram provides a medium through which even more interaction can happen. Increased interaction for churches and for social media content creators provides increased exposure and more people gaining access to their content.

For this study, there was further research conducted that related to Christian social media influencers. Emails were sent to a total of 19 creators who are active on both Instagram and YouTube. The Instagram follower count of these creators vary from approximately 700 followers to as many as 2 million followers, in order to provide a sample that is diverse. Of the 19 creators emailed, each are between the ages of 18 and 35, and each of the creators are people who identify as Christian women. The purpose of the email interviews was to gauge any correlation between their faith and their content, as well as the practices they deem most useful in order to obtain the most interaction. Their identities were kept private for the study, and the creators were asked the following questions:

1. How long have you been creating content on social media?

⁵ Statista, *Most popular social networks of teenagers in the United States from fall 2012 to fall 2021*

2. What kind of content do you produce? Please be specific, eg.: home-making, lifestyle, the Christian journey, etc.
3. What led you into the field of content creation?
4. How has your faith impacted the type of content that you produce?
5. What social media platform do you prefer in sharing your content?

Despite not receiving responses from all 19 of the creators, one creator, who will be named Kelly for anonymity purposes, shared her experience posting faith-based content online. Kelly noted that she became an influencer because of her faith. Speaking on sharing content with her husband, Kelly noted:

We would spend hours responding to messages from young believers all who were asking the same important 10 questions (in different ways). It got the point where we could not afford to reply to all these messages because we also needed to work so we decided to record a video answering some of the questions from a broad point of view and posted it so that when someone asked us the question we could just send them the video! But then the video performed well on YouTube and that lead to use creating more and more and more fast forward now we work with a team to produce encouraging content for the audience right behind us!

She does not consider herself to be a “creative” but felt the pull to share online following frequent faith-based questions she received from young believers. She quoted Acts 4:20 as the basis for choosing to share about Jesus, stating, “How can we not but share about what we have experienced and witnessed!” In terms of the type of content Kelly produces, she noted that she and her husband share 70 percent faith-based content, and 30 percent lifestyle. Though Kelly shares content on both Instagram and YouTube, she notes that YouTube is her preferred. This is because, in her experience, sharing on YouTube feels as though she is sitting and chatting with a friend.

Kelly additionally noted that while YouTube is her preferred method for sharing content, it includes challenges that has led her to consider prioritizing sharing the Gospel through different methods. Kelly noted:

... We can feel podcasts becoming more and more fun for us as the audience is more dedicated and is focused on listening to what you are sharing as it is less sensational. YouTube requires strong thumbnails, titled and audience retention in order to promote your audience so you feel a pressure to perform or makes things “more” than they naturally are. We love the platform but it can be unhealthy if you don’t have the right boundaries!

An issue that will be further espoused upon through this study is the understanding of audience retention, and how some creators are able to maintain their audience. How are their speech patterns, their upload frequency, and their overall message bringing people to their page. Not only that, but how are they keeping their audience invested in their content? Is the audience invested because of the type of content shared? Is it because of the personality of the creator? Is it because of the consistency? While Kelly did not provide answers to this question, it does open the door to reasons why content creators and influencers are able to grow. Numerous factors contribute to a creator’s growth on their platform, but in the case of Kelly, her consistency in posting her devotions every weekday provides stability for the viewer who does not have stability in their life. The wisdom shared by Kelly and her husband answers questions a viewer may not have been able to ask anyone in their personal life. Seeing the love shared between Kelly and her husband showcases a stable Christian relationship for the individual who has not seen that or experienced that in their life. There are numerous reasons as to why certain creators grow on their platforms.

Though analyzing Kelly’s growth on both Instagram and YouTube has provided immense insight into the life of a Christian influencer, the biggest takeaway from Kelly’s response is the

importance of online boundaries. Though not often spoken about, the need for boundaries allows for safety for the influencers. With the online world becoming more and more intimate the larger it grows, there also grows the need for boundaries with the audience. This opened the door into exploring “parasocial relationships” with online creators.

Parasocial relationships, as defined by Surug Saleh Taher, are relationships that are one-sided and long-term. They are “intimate relationships an audience has with a media personality or celebrity as a result of frequent interactions with them via a mediated reality”.⁶ Taher continued in noting social media has made it easier for parasocial relationships to develop, as the creators opt to share intimate parts of their lives with their audience.⁷ In the case of Kelly, while parasocial relationships are inevitable, she chooses to keep a level of distance with her audience. This is likely due to being a mother and wanting to keep herself and her family safe. However, the idea of a parasocial relationship developing with creators has increased with the openness one chooses to share with social media. While it can be both a benefit and a consequence of obtaining a level of notoriety online, it aids in understanding how content creators, as well as churches, are able to grow their platform.

The responses from Kelly provided incredible insight into the why of becoming a content creator. Learning from Kelly allowed an increased understanding how sharing the Gospel can become commodified in a way that is God-honoring. While this is Kelly’s way of honoring God, it is not a universal form of spreading the Gospel. Kelly opts to develop devotionals with her husband and share them daily in order to raise up a generation of individuals equipped to live in this world but remain obedient to God. Kelly’s responses to the questions asked of her laid a base

⁶ Surug Saleh Taher, Tak Jie Chan, Izzal Asnira Zolkepli, and Mohamad Noor Salehuddin Sharipudin. *Mediating Role of Parasocial Relationships on Social Media Influencers’ Reputation Signals and Purchase Intention of Beauty Products*. (2022). (Romanian Journal of Communication & Public Relations 24 (3)), 48.

⁷ Taher, *Mediating Role*, 48.

through which the research for this study was completed. She uses social media and social networking sites in order to fulfill her calling of sharing the Gospel wherever there are people to share the Gospel to. Following the example of televangelists, travelling preachers, and megachurch pastors, having the ability to share biblical truths through an innovative means creates a new niche to be explored. To further explore the roles of content creation and sharing the Gospel digitally, it is important to take a look at the research previously completed on this topic.

Literature Review

To better understand the impact of social media content creators and churches on young adult Christians, this literature review analyzes research conducted on the young adult Christian demographic. Trisney Bocala-Wiedemann conducted a study about the usefulness of social media as a tool to evangelize to Christian youth. This study focused on young adults who were high school and college aged between 15 and 24 years old.⁸ The study focused specifically on students who identified as Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Christians, having reached out to high schools and colleges that were specifically of the SDA denomination.⁹ While this study aided in contextualizing how young adults respond to evangelization through social media, it was limited in its audience. By being limited to a Seventh Day Adventist context, it isolates those who are of a different denomination or those who self-identify as non-denominational Christians. Bocala-Wiedemann concluded that social media can be an effective tool for evangelizing, however with the constant change in the media landscape, it is difficult to effectively have this conclusion.¹⁰

⁸ Trisney J. Bocala-Wiedemann, *Social Media as a Tool for Evangelism Among Youth and Young Adults* (2022). (*Great Commission Research Journal* 14 (1)), 24.

⁹ Bocala-Wiedemann, *Social Media*, 24.

¹⁰ Bocala-Wiedemann, 29.

Artur Banaszak similarly investigated the effectiveness of social media on churches. In what ways have churches effectively utilized social media to bring awareness to the Gospel and to their church? How has televangelism impacted the methods of sharing the Gospel on social media? Focusing on “the necessity of the presence of the Gospel in the digital world, including social media”, Banaszak argued that as more and more individuals move into the online sphere with social media, there is a need to be met.¹¹ As evangelical Christians, there is an importance on being up to date on what is going on in the world, argued Banaszak.¹² By following the latest trends specific to community and groups, Christians are to, in a sense, infiltrate and spread the gospel using these methods. But how have churches followed this model?

Research completed by Andrew Errington was additionally analyzed and considered in compiling research for this study. Errington investigated “how social media might affect church life through particular individual usage” while also investigating “the ways it will tend to impact church life by virtue of its basic formation, its design and its configuration”.¹³ Through researching smaller churches and “individual Christian journeys”, Errington argued that social media was a means of social existence, an existence that is almost unavoidable.¹⁴ Examining the structure of Facebook, Errington noted that social media in its current form is a means to cultivate dependence. When shifting from a wall to a timeline, Facebook created an online identity for the user dating back to the inception of the user’s online Facebook profile, leading to an online identity that is perpetually existent.¹⁵ Errington’s argument was incredibly insightful in that it broke down the psychology of online social media users. Having an online identity outside

¹¹Artur Banaszak, *Evangelization Through Social Media – Opportunities and Threats to the Religious Life of an Individual and Community*. (2022). (Kościół i Prawo 11, no. 2), 46.

¹²Artur Banaszak, *Evangelization Through Social Media*, 51.

¹³ Andrew Errington. *Wakeful Communities and Digital Sociality: Social Media and the Life of Christian Communities*. (2015) (St Mark’s Review 233), 44.

¹⁴ Errington. *Wakeful Communities*, 44.

¹⁵ Errington, 49.

of a physical one can allow for a user to maintain a life separate from their own. This can, however, create dangers as many individuals have falsified information that led to disastrous results. For this study, however, Errington's breakdown creates a picture of the typical social media user: an individual whose dependence on their social identity has allowed for influencers, content creators, and churches to utilize the new mediums presented to them to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In a similar vein, Banaszak noted the importance of checking the ways in which the world has effectively spread a message considered important. He wrote, "This learning and understanding of the world as well as adapting to the mentality of each generation also consists in recognizing all those places where a person exists in order to get there with the Gospel message".¹⁶ In other words, follow the worldly methods to share the Gospel message to those who previously did not have a chance to hear it. According to the Banaszak argument, this form of social media and digital evangelization is akin to mission work. It is a means of bringing the Gospel message to any and everyone. However, is digital evangelization a useful method of mission work and evangelization? According to Banaszak, it is more than useful, it is necessary. Banaszak noted, "The functioning of a modern human being, both in the real world and in the virtual world, means that the Church, with its evangelical message, should be present in both realities".¹⁷

On the other hand, in highlighting a particular white evangelical couple on YouTube, Hannah Wilson-Black delves into Christian "influencer culture". Though Wilson-Black focuses on the sex and relational aspect of the evangelical couple, there is a particular bias against those who identify in this category. Specifically, Wilson-Black overgeneralizes the couple, stating,

¹⁶Banaszak, 51.

¹⁷ Banaszak, 51.

“They looked like any number of White, heterosexual couples with TikTok or Instagram accounts who share funny or intimate moments online, usually with a jokey caption superimposed over the video.”¹⁸ This article, however, provides insight into how influential the content creators can be, as Wilson-Black noted being drawn to the type of content they created, and the way it led Wilson-Black into a Christian view of sex, sexuality, relations, and marriage.¹⁹ Wilson-Black’s perspective provided information that immensely aided the research, as this author self-identifies as a Gen Z “progressive Christian” American, directly within the demographic this paper focuses on.²⁰ Interestingly, despite searching for journal articles and studies on Millennial and Gen Z American Christians and their relationship with social media content creators and influencers, the research is limited. More research has been conducted on churches and their use of social media, instead of the impact on social media creators. More research can be conducted on the relationship between young adult Christians and their relationship with Christian content creators.

Analysis

In his book *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World*, Dennis P. Hollinger explores the relationship between Christ and Culture. The breakdown Hollinger provides aids in contextualizing the research conducted in this study. When looking to Christian content creators as well as churches, it is important to understand their approach to the world as well as their approach to social media. Hollinger notes that the issue of Christ and culture effects what believers expect of society relative to Christian ethics.²¹ Whether conscious or

¹⁸ Hannah Wilson-Black. *Why Am I so Drawn to These Evangelical Couple Influencers?* (2023). (Christian Century 140 (3)), 72.

¹⁹ Wilson-Black, *Why Am I*, 74.

²⁰ Wilson-Black, 74.

²¹ Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good : Christian Ethics in a Complex World*. (2002) (Grand Rapids, MA: Baker Academic), eBook.

subconscious, each influencer and each church followed a set of Christian ethics when choosing to share online. This set of ethics could be a set of values established by a church that is listed on the church website, or this could be a set of unspoken rules an influencer has chosen to adhere to in order to effectively share content online. Hollinger notes, “Our understanding of faith and culture influences whether we think society can be transformed into the kingdom of God, whether it will always be a long way from God’s ideal, or whether it will be somewhere in between.”²² In other words, all believers and followers of Christ have a particular understanding of faith and the journey of a believer. As they have their own established understanding of faith, this leads to how they create content online. For a church, this could establish the way they choose to promote their church. For an individual creator, this could identify the topics they choose to speak on when sharing about the life of a believer.

Hollinger continues in exploring the second facet of the Christ-culture perspective: it effects a believer’s general stance on society.²³ Specifically, the perspective establishes whether a believer looks to run from, fight against, correct, or ignore the norms of that society.²⁴ How will an influencer’s personal views on Christ and the culture impact the way they choose to share the gospel message? The third facet established by Hollinger focuses how believers seek to invoke change.²⁵ Will their social media presence lead to change in the lives of their followers? Are they seeking to influence just their audience, or are they seeking to also influence and change their neighborhood, their society, their government? The last facet of the Christ-culture perspective pertains to how things drawn from culture and society have influenced how believers live and

²² Hollinger, *Choosing the Good*.

²³ Hollinger, *Choosing the Good*.

²⁴ Hollinger, *Choosing the Good*.

²⁵ Hollinger, *Choosing the Good*.

proclaim the Gospel.²⁶ These four facets of the Christ-culture perspective is the lens that the study of Christian content creators and churches will be viewed.

To further lay the framework of the study, is appropriate to establish a biblical basis through which the study was conducted. Romans 12:2 in its entirety reads:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.²⁷

The first section of the verse states to not be conformed to this world. To conform means to comply with rules, standards, or laws. The author of this verse, the Apostle Paul, commanded the church in Rome, which comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, not to comply with the rules, standards, or laws of the world.²⁸ Paul wrote this letter, “to introduce himself to the Roman community, to seek support and aid from it for his projected trip to Spain, to ask for prayers and perhaps intercession of the Roman Christians with their colleagues in Jerusalem, so that, when he goes there with the collection, he will be rightly welcomed”.²⁹ This section of Paul’s letter that this verse comes from focuses on a life of sacrifice. The previous verse is an appeal from Paul to the Roman church to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship”.³⁰ Paul urged the Roman church to oppose the status quo, to differ themselves from the society they were living in. With this understanding of this important piece of Scripture, there is an established framework through which the below study was conducted.

²⁶ Hollinger, *Choosing the Good*.

²⁷ Rom. 12:2 (ESV).

²⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*. (2014) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 1.

²⁹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer S.J., *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 33. (2008) (New Haven; London: Yale University Press), 1.

³⁰ Rom. 12:1 (ESV).

With the framework established, it is important to discuss the ways in which young adults utilize social media. According to research completed in Australia, 99 percent of teenagers aged 16 and 17 utilized some form of social networking.³¹ Young adults utilize social media to form friendships, maintain relationships with those who are near or far, to express themselves, and/or to discover new information and ideas.³² Youth and young adults with strong social wellbeing make up a strong number of individuals who follow content creators on social media sites, including Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.³³ Looking through the lens of a content creator, the young adult audience would relate to a creator's way of living. This would include manner of speech, education history, how they react to news both good and bad, and how they share the Gospel. The way in which influencers share the Gospel would also be noted. If an influencer shared the Gospel through their way of living, the young adult would follow that example. Similarly, if the content creator shared the Gospel through preaching and teaching, a young adult viewer or follower would do the same. Creating an environment that is easy to replicate is a way in which content creators are able to share the Gospel and, as a result, grow their platform.

Before the advent of the internet, television dominated the market for advertising, and sharing the Gospel was no different. The boom of televangelism in the 20th century displayed the ways in which preaching the Gospel could be done outside of the four walls of a church or chapel.³⁴ Televangelism, defined as evangelism through religious programs on television, was pioneered by notable figures such as Billy Graham and Oral Roberts.³⁵ Instead, utilizing the tools available to the world, televangelists in the United States adopted a new form of sharing the

³¹ Justin Healey. *Social Media and Young People*. (2017) (Thirroul, NSW: The Spinney Press), 16.

³² Healey. *Social Media*, 16.

³³ Healey. *Social Media*, 18.

³⁴ Stewart M. Hoover, and Lynn Schofield Clark. *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture*. (2002) (Columbia University Press), 1.

³⁵ *Televangelism*. (2017) (Britannica Digital Learning).

gospel. Gone were the days of Paul, when writing letters was the prominent way of sharing the message of Christ. Gone were the days of learning about Jesus Christ through Sunday school and Sunday sermons. Instead, individuals now had access to the Gospel through their televisions, and this created a new format for preaching, teaching, and discipleship. Televangelism is the foundation upon which modern churches have built their online platforms. The research into televangelism has brought about the ways churches, specifically megachurches, have utilized their online platforms.

What is a megachurch? Megachurches are typically large often Protestant churches with an average of approximately 2,000 weekly attendees.³⁶ Megachurches have successfully implemented social media tactics to promote their church. Jordan Morehouse and Adam Saffer's study on megachurches and their use of social media provided incredible insight into the church and social media. Their study quantified the types of interaction seen with the church and their audience, breaking the interactions into three engagement strategies: God-Congregant, Church-Congregant, and Intra-Congregational.³⁷ The God-Congregant engagement strategy focused on engagement between God and the congregants.³⁸ The Church-Congregant strategy highlighted the megachurches' use of symbols and terms to encourage engagement between the church and their congregation, while the Intra-Congregant strategy focused on information about church events and small groups in order to garner engagement between the church and their congregation.³⁹ The differentiation between the types of engagement of churches and their congregation provides a basis to look at how churches interact with their congregation.

³⁶ Jordan Morehouse, and Adam J. Saffer, *Promoting the Faith: Examining Megachurches' Audience-Centric Advertising Strategies on Social Media*. (2021) (Journal of Advertising 50, no. 4), 410.

³⁷ Morehouse, *Promoting the Faith*, 414.

³⁸ Morehouse, 414.

³⁹ Morehouse, 414.

To further understand the relationship between church and congregation, a case study was completed on 5 churches of various sizes within the Greater New York area. The churches examined include The Life Church – New York, Hillsong Church – NYC, The Brooklyn Tabernacle Church, Faith Church Yonkers, and Perfecting Faith Church. These five churches were chosen based on their various followings on their Instagram accounts. Ranging from approximately 370 followers (Faith Church Yonkers) to approximately 279,000 followers (Hillsong Church – NYC), the interactions on each account’s posts provided insight into the engagement found. These 5 churches were also chosen as their Instagram accounts follow a similar format to traditional megachurches, regardless of if they qualify as a megachurch based upon the definition previously established. The study observed the amount of interaction each church received based on the number of likes a post received, as well as the number of posts were associated with each category established by Morehouse’s study. For context, “likes”, first established in May 2010, are the amount of double-taps received on an Instagram post as a means to agree with or support the post.⁴⁰

In examining the last six posts each, up to April 26, 2023, a study was done comparing which posts received the most to the least interaction from followers. The posts were categorized based off the differentiation established by Morehouse and Saffer. To properly quantify the data collected from this case study, there was an established control, which was the approximate amount of Instagram followers across the 5 churches. This control number was 330,563 followers across the five church accounts, and the percentages collected was based off of this control number. There were 30 Instagram posts that were analyzed from this data collection, 6 posts from each of the 5 pages. The number of total “likes”, or people who chose to double-tap the post as a form of interaction, at time of collection over the 30 posts analyzed was 11,675. Of

⁴⁰ Errington, 45.

the 11,675 total likes, Hillsong Church – NYC had the most interaction, with 4,928 total likes at time of collection, while Faith Church Yonkers had the least interaction, with 361 total likes at time of collection. This was not surprising, as Hillsong Church – NYC had the most followers of the data collected and Faith Church Yonkers had the least.

Of the 11,675 total likes over the 30 posts from the 5 churches, the God-Congregation strategy of engagement was utilized the most. There were approximately 6,524 likes on posts that followed this strategy, with the most-liked post having approximately 3,600 likes, from Hillsong Church – NYC. The God-Congregant strategy of engagement also included the highest number of Instagram posts from this collection, with 11 total posts from the 5 churches. The Intra-Congregant strategy of engagement had the next most interaction, with approximately 2,809 likes over 9 total posts, and the Church-Congregant strategy included the least amount of interaction. Despite having more posts with this engagement, 10 posts in total, it had only approximately 2,342 likes. The Church-Congregant strategy of engagement included the Instagram post with the least amount of interaction, with one post only garnering 25 likes. Interestingly, Morehouse’s study found an opposite result, as Morehouse found the Church-Congregant strategy the most used by the churches observed in his study.⁴¹ For the purposes of this study, the focus will be on the results obtained from the 5 churches who’s data was collected.

So, what is the reasoning in collecting all of this data? Well, this information sheds light on what church members who are active on social media relate to and what they find to be eye-catching, captivating, and worth a like. While not an exhaustive amount of research, it does allow for the question of if Romans 12:2 is being shown through social media, and if believers are interacting. The most liked post from the data collected was in reference to Easter, a post

⁴¹ Morehouse, 418.

proclaiming “He is Risen”.⁴² This shows there is a thirst for individuals to not only learn more about God, but to see Him being proclaimed on social media. Instagram posts that included video of a worship set or a snippet from the Sunday sermon were most liked, particularly on the Instagram page for Perfecting Faith Church. Through this small sample study, it showcases there is a need on social media for individuals to interact with their church, interact with the Word of God, and interact with others in the faith online.

How are churches utilizing social media to propel the Gospel? From this case study, it is shown that many churches seek to promote their own church. The 5 churches studied and examined are each non-denominational churches, which accounts for the similarities in their approach in sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Within each church’s profile, there is an emphasis on visiting their respective church. The biographies listed atop each church’s profile contain a phrase that is meant to create a welcoming environment, or a statement explaining who they are as a church. Hillsong Church – NYC has a biography that reads, “WELCOME HOME”.⁴³ Perfecting Faith Church includes a biography that reads, “Where Ministry Means People!”⁴⁴ Both The Life Church New York and Faith Church Yonkers have biographies that detail who they are as a church. The Brooklyn Tabernacle Church alone lists service times as a means to bring people to their church. Despite being varied in their approaches, the 5 churches’ social media accounts include emphases on interaction and emphases on new individuals who may not have heard of the church before stumbling upon their profile. However, one glaring issue raised among the 5 churches studied is commercialization of their content.

While it is necessary in today’s digital age to promote one’s self online, churches have shifted their mindsets on what it means to spread the Gospel. Of the 30 Instagram posts studied,

⁴² Instagram, @hillsongnyc Post dated April 9, 2023.

⁴³ Instagram, @hillsongnyc.

⁴⁴ Instagram, @perfectingfaithchurch.

only 5 posts contained sermons, 2 contained Bible verses, and 3 contained worship. Only 1/3 of the content shared across the profiles had genuine interaction with the Word of God and with practices necessary for the faith walk. This number is alarming low, especially considering many individuals interaction with God is through these profiles. There has been a lack in sharing the Gospel and instead there is more emphasis on church growth. In this sense, Romans 12:2 is not fully being lived out. There is no urgency in non-conforming to the world; instead in its place is slight conformity to worldly ideals while living a life that follows unspoken Christian rules. When one makes the decision to follow Christ, there is a change that occurs in the life of that individual. The church is meant to be a reflection of that changed life, with others who have experienced the same transformation coming together to worship, celebrate, and praise Jesus Christ together.

The Instagram accounts of the 5 churches additionally had a harmonious theme throughout. Taking a look at the last 6 posts on the account of The Life Church New York, there is a specific color and aesthetic throughout. Using darker and more muted colors, with hints of brightness, there is a sense of calm and assurance of peace when looking upon it. On the other hand, the last 6 posts from the Faith Church Yonkers account has a recurring blue motif through each specific post. There does not seem to be a particular reasoning for this, however it provides cohesion. It lets the visitor of the page notice that there is a steadiness when observing the content from this church. The Brooklyn Tabernacle Church's Instagram feed is even less harmonious, with bright colors and dark colors intermixed. There is no noticeable aesthetic theme to the page, solely sharing information pertinent to the church. Perfecting Faith Church is akin to Faith Church in that there is a similar color scheme when taking the page at face value. With bright pinks and oranges, there is a brightness and a vivaciousness accounted for when

looking at the Instagram of this church. Lastly, the Instagram account for Hillsong Church – NYC obtains muted colors, and neutral tones. This account is similar to The Life Church New York in its colors.

Churches opting to create an online presence can also account for scrutiny in their methodologies. In opting to share sermon snippets, worship sets, or events in their church, individuals not associated with the church have the freedom to respond either positively or negatively. Increased exposure via social media can also account for increased accountability for church leaders, as was shown through numerous pastors and church leaders in American megachurches being ousted for shortcomings outside of the values of that church. Examples such as an Easter Sunday performance held at Transformation Church in Oklahoma was posted onto the church’s YouTube page, with comments varying from encouraging to critical. Through the open door of social media, any and all people have the ability to react through comments, and though this can lead to negative exposure, it aides in holding the leaders and churches accountable to their congregation and to Christ.

The purpose of this study is to determine how Christian social media content creators have carved a digital niche for themselves, and in researching, an additional question arose. What is a Christian social media content creator? To fully answer this question, it is best to define what a “social media content creator” is. Dubey, Srinivas, Gupta, Srivastava, and Sharma define a content creator, or influencer, as “People who have amassed a significant number of followers on social media and who are regarded as trustworthy and influential within one or more [specialized] markets”.⁴⁵ The definition of “significant number of followers” varies from creator to creator, and in the case of this study is broadened to those who have constant and frequent interaction with an audience that is not directly known by the creator. In other words, an

⁴⁵ Dubey, *Factors Affecting Influencer Marketing*, 1811.

influencer is someone who influences not just those whom they interact with in their day to day lives, but those whom they only interact with online in a way that is not personal.

Influencer marketing has risen among those with large social media followings. With influencer marketing, the creators are able to share a product and obtain a living outside of the typical American workday.⁴⁶ This is done through continuous uploading and publishing of content specifically for a brand, and in return the influencers build strong relationships with brands as well as increased interaction from their audience.⁴⁷ In the case of Christian influencers, however, how is influencer marketing being utilized? Though many Christian influencers are able to obtain sponsorships from non-Christian brands, it is important to examine the Gospel as a brand. By utilizing the basis of social media marketing through the lens of the Gospel, the brand being promoted is faith in Christ. Christian content creators promote this brand through numerous forms. Some utilize preaching to promote the gospel, while others allow their lives to preach for them. Some create art while others utilize long, blog-style posts on Instagram in order to promote the gospel. While there are numerous ways to share the gospel, is there one way that is most effective? Are the influencers promoting a church? Are they promoting a Christian lifestyle? Are they promoting the Gospel? When looking to Romans 12:2, in which ways are influencers influencing the world for Christ? How are they not conforming to the things of the world?

Referencing Kelly, who noted she fell into content creation by accident, her content falls into the category of faith-based lifestyle that is not overtly “preachy”. But why does her style of content creation and sharing the gospel work? This goes back to the idea of authenticity. While a traditional celebrity has a lifestyle considered to be unattainable or otherworldly by the average

⁴⁶ Dubey, 1812.

⁴⁷ Dubey, 1812.

consumer, a social media creator has a lifestyle that is deemed relatable for a working person.⁴⁸ Authenticity is defined as a fluctuating set of affective relations between individuals, audiences, and commodities.⁴⁹ In other words, to be authentic is to be able to relate to an array of individuals as defined by that individual. Kelly's ability to relate to her audience of young adults, as well as to share a lifestyle considered appropriate by the standards of young evangelical Christians in the United States allows her to continue to grow her audience. Not only that, but in sharing her daily YouTube videos that seek to inspire, teach, and build up her audience, Kelly has effectively utilized the digitization of the Gospel to her advantage. While Kelly fits into the mold set up by Wilson-Black, she is able to differentiate herself through her podcast, Instagram account, and YouTube channel. Wilson-Black noted that Christian evangelical content creators are speaking on faith and relationships when their secular and liberal Protestant counterparts are not.⁵⁰ Kelly exemplifies this statement through speaking on topics ranging from marriage and dating to holiness and obedience. The question remains, how does Kelly's social media presence impact young adults?

The target audience for Kelly is primarily young adults, as she noted in her email. Being between the ages of 18-35, Kelly is directly within her target demographic. Kelly opts to provide straightforward truths on the topics of holiness and sex. She, as well as her husband, discuss issues of waiting on God, saving oneself for marriage, living a life that is pleasing to God, dealing with disappointment, and many other topics. Through her YouTube channel and Instagram account, Kelly chooses to share a life that is not profane and that seeks to glorify God through her speech and actions. In not being profane, this means that Kelly chooses not to utilize curse words or speech that is derogatory, negative, or condescending. Instead, as she noted in her

⁴⁸ Nouri, *The Power of Influence*, 13.

⁴⁹ Nouri, 13.

⁵⁰ Wilson-Black, 74.

email responses, her tone is that of a friend or mentor guiding their friend or mentee through life with the Word of God as the foundation.

However, how does Kelly's social media accounts compare with those of churches? Looking at Kelly and Daisy's social media accounts as well as the accounts of the 5 churches in the case study, it is interesting to note the similarities. As Kelly and Daisy's Instagram and YouTube accounts are personal, they share information about themselves. This includes their family lives, work lives, and, in Kelly's case, her child and husband. They have promoted themselves as believers who seek to share the Gospel through their lives, in Kelly's case, and through exhortation, in Daisy's case. While Kelly focuses on the lifestyle aspect, and Daisy's focus is specifically in the medical field, both women have utilized their gifts in order to bring people closer to Christ. On the other hand, the churches observed in this study have followed a model of inviting people to church more often than sharing about Christ. Based upon the study completed by Morehouse, the churches seek to bring people to church to hear the Gospel rather than sharing this online.⁵¹ Churches have utilized the social space to promote rather than to preach. This provides a conundrum, as an additional arises. Is sharing about their church sufficient to share the gospel? There is an argument to be made that it is not enough.

To share the Gospel of Christ is to utilize Scripture to tell others of the Good News of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To let the world know that the way to Heaven is solely through Jesus Christ, and Him alone. Sharing about church events and the life of each church is important, however more importantly is to tell others about Christ. To go and make disciples in all the nations, as Jesus Christ said.⁵² It is clear there is an audience who thirsts for God, as the most-liked post of those observed in this study was about the resurrected Christ. With an

⁵¹ Morehouse, 415.

⁵² Mt. 28:9 (ESV)

audience hungry to know more about God through the means of social media, is the responsibility of the church to truly spread the Gospel. It is also the responsibility of the church and church administrators to create an environment through their platforms that assists in community growth, increased prayer lives, and teaching the next generation how to build up the church.

Conclusion

Social media has become a tool to spread a particular message based upon a shared interest. Through the means of social media, many individuals have chosen different routes to arrive at the same goal: sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to as many people as possible. Whether through personal Instagram and YouTube accounts, to church accounts that function in similar ways, the goal remains the same. However, the initial question when researching was how Romans 12:2 has been shown in the lives of those who share content via social media. Social media influencers have found a market in which they can share themselves and their faith, to both believers and non-believers.

Initially, the study was to view how young adults have been influenced by social media content creators, and how churches have been influenced by these creators. The research conducted by other scholars shows the way in which social media is an effective method of spreading news, and the rise of content creators have created digital communities of individuals who look to creators in order to answer questions. The digital communities have elevated certain individuals due to the distance social media has provided while also allowing for relationships to develop with these social media influencers. By being considered authentic and relatable, the words said by these influencers hold an incredible amount of weight. The example of Kelly showcases how young adults have clung to the idea of an influencer, a person to look up to,

relate to, and to create relationships with through the means of the internet. For young adults who are in contexts without other believers, those who do not have large groups of friends, or those who are seeking wisdom from someone they do not know, having an influencer who is rooted in the Gospel of Christ is refreshing and is necessary. The needs of online community groups are met through the implementation of social media influencers, and that is a key takeaway from the research completed.

The use of social media to interact with individuals has also been often utilized by churches. Through promoting themselves, churches throughout the United States and around the world have been given the unique opportunity to share their church and invite others to church without physically seeing them. Churches are able to promote their serve teams, their events, and their pastoral staff through the medium of social media. In posting their Sunday sermons on Sundays, having church services livestreamed, and posting snippets of the sermons on their various social media accounts, churches have the ability to further grow the Kingdom of God. It is interesting the way in which different methods of engagement have impacted and influenced the types of people who arrive to their church. Whether for growth of their church, increased weekly engagement for their congregation, or for both, the means of social media has created an important area of mission work to be covered.

Banaszak said it best when he said, “Today, people are also present in the digital world, and they are the active users of social media. Therefore, it is clear that the Gospel message should also be present there”.⁵³ There is an immense responsibility by both social media creators and churches to properly utilize social media to share the Gospel. Because social media is a prevalent means of interaction throughout the world, it is important that the Gospel be shared there as well. It is not enough to boost themselves or their brand. Instead, they are to follow the

⁵³ Banaszak, 52.

great command set forth by Jesus Christ to go out and make disciples. They are to not be conformed to the patterns of the world. Instead, both creators and churches are to be intentionally seeking to further the Kingdom of Heaven. Ultimately, the Gospel is most important. To know Christ and to make Him known is the reason we as believers are placed on this earth, and the hope is this study has showcased that.

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