

PRAISING ON THE NET

*A Study of Hillsong, Elevation Worship, & Bethel Music's Social Media Content and
Comments*

By

Martrell Harris

Media and Communication, M.S.

Middle Tennessee State University
December, 2021

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Matthew Taylor, Chair

Dr. Jennifer Woodard

Dr. Kenneth Blake

Dedication

I would first like to dedicate this body of work to Jesus, my Lord and Savior. There is no possible way I would have been able to complete this rigorous program at record speed without your leading and guidance. I've literally been carried with unrelenting grace to this milestone, thank you! Second, I'd like to dedicate this to my late father, Keith Harris-Tyler who I pray I make proud with each step forward that I take. To my remarkable mother, Kelly Arnwine, my sister Charity, my Uncle Ron and my illustrious grandparents, Ronny & Joann Latham, without you all, there would be no me. While I could never repay any of you, it is my hope that my life is a testament to your massive contribution to my life. To my tribe, my support system (you know who you are), thank you. This is to you, for your nights of pushing me into the greatness that I didn't always see in the moment. Thank you for every prayer, every call, every text, and every check-in, they were necessary and appreciated. Lastly, to the worship community, the future is so bright for what we have been called to produce. We echo the sound of Heaven in the Earth and it is because of what we do that many will come to know Jesus and have an experience-an encounter, that will transform their lives forever. To my future, this is your ticket to SOAR. Spread your wings, we're taking off!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to acknowledge some amazing people that I must attribute my success of this program to. Thank you to Beverly Keel for encouraging me to enroll in this program from the beginning. To my thesis committee, Dr. Taylor, Dr. Woodard, and Dr. Blake, thank you for helping me matriculate through this entire process. All three of you were my first graduate school professors. You were selected with careful consideration and I couldn't have chosen a better committee. To Dr. Katie Foss, being your graduate teacher's assistant has been more light in my life than you'll ever realize. Thank you for answering all my questions and always offering the very best recommendations to see this thesis through to completion.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is centered on the impact of social media and digital marketing for three popular worship bands – Hillsong, Elevation Worship, and Bethel Music- affiliated with renown mega churches. It details how these worship bands have risen to the pinnacle of the Christian music industry with chart-topping hits and millions of devoted followers using spirituality, lyrics, and melodies to capture large audiences. This study will couple the popularity of these bands with the success of the mega churches they are affiliated with that attract the attention of millions of people. Mega churches such as the ones these bands are affiliated with have often been criticized for making large profits in the name of God. Many mega churches, which is defined as a church with 2,000 members and some churches are reported to have brought in \$143 million in revenue. (Schmidt, 2019)

Social media in its true instant gratification fashion has enabled audiences to respond or react to content immediately. This capability gives the audiences a platform for sharing their opinions directly with the content creators and can potentially impact what content gets created, posted, or discarded.

For centuries, organized religion has been a staple, or one could even say a pillar in cultures all over the world. Currently, the world's largest religion is Christianity. Established in 313 A.D., Christianity has been around for quite some time. Shortly after its establishment it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. (*The Roman Empire: in the First Century. The Roman Empire. Early Christians*)

Over time the religion has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar empire, bringing in an estimated \$378 billion annually in the United States alone. (Zauzmer, *Study: Religion contributes more to the U.S. economy than Facebook, Google and Apple combined* 2019)

This article examines how Christian churches have continuously adapted and evolved to remain relevant in an ever-changing society. Currently the Christian faith boast over 2 billion followers. (Hackett & McClendon, *World's largest religion by population is still Christianity* 2020)

Content is king and what types of content worship bands release can impact their fan growth and loyalty. This study explores audience responses to the content worship bands post on Instagram based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory. This qualitative study also draws conclusions about uses and gratifications commenters derive from engaging with worship bands on Instagram. This study is composed of an examination of comments on Instagram to compile data to see how worship band fans respond to different types of posts. After review, the comments, they were organized into categories to better present the findings. What was discovered is that emoji usage has key meanings in the religious subculture of Christianity. It is also noted that worship band audiences find deeper meaning in the lyrics in some of the bands' most popular songs. As far as content, it is curated to be aesthetically and sonically appealing to the listener. With production combined with the strong Christian values, it is no question that these three worship bands, Elevation Worship, Hillsong, and Bethel Music have built Christian music empires that will likely be around for generations to come. The photos below showcase members of the bands studied in this paper.



Hillsong Worship Band at Hillsong Church (Figure 1)



Elevation Worship Band (Figure 2)



Bethel Music Band (Figure 3)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Growth in Technology	4
Growth in Music.....	7
Literature Review.....	11
Theoretical Framework	19
Method Section.....	19
Methodology.....	20
Content Categories.....	22
How Research Was Conducted.....	23
Results.....	24
Conclusion.....	44
References.....	46

LIST OF TABLES

Table One.....	30
Table Two.....	37
Table Three	40

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure One.....	v
Figure Two.....	v
Figure Three.....	v
Figure Four.....	33
Figure Five.....	36
Figure Six.....	42

LIST OF SYMBOLS, ABBREVIATIONS, AND TERMS

Mega Church- A church with 2,000 members or more

Evangelical Movement- Period in the eighteenth century started by “The Great Awakening”.

Growth Mindset- In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work

Fixed Mindset- People believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits.

Worship Music- Christian or faith-based genre of music

Subculture- A cultural group within a larger culture, often having beliefs or interests

🔥- In the Christian subculture, this typically means favorable or well liked

🙌- In the Christian subculture, this typically means worship. A popular expression of worship is for people to lift their hands.

👏- This symbol stands for applause

❤️- This symbol stands for love

Introduction

This article journeys into the world of ministry with a focus on the organized religion of Westernized Christianity in the modern evangelical American church. Many ministries, especially large ones, have very similar characteristics to corporations. They also have astonishing business models that produce thousands of parishioners and often millions of dollars. (Beaumont et al. ,2011) This model of church is much different from the traditional church model your grandma knew growing up. The religious beliefs have, for the most part stayed intact, but the mindset of church leaders has changed substantially. This thesis analyzes the social media content marketing of worship bands and their fans responses, focusing particularly on Instagram.

The Christian faith has been one that is relentless and ever changing. More specific, this paper focuses on evangelical Protestantism. The evangelical movement can be traced to “The Great Awakening”- a movement dating to the early 1700s. (History.com, 2021) More recent, Charismatic Christianity is linked to the Pentecostal movement that began in the U.S. around the start of the 20th century. The event that marked this movement was the Azusa Street Revival. (Pope-Levison, 2019) Hillsong Church, the creator of Hillsong, the band has been considered by some as a softer form of Pentecostalism and a part of the evangelical movement. (Marti, 2017)

From evolving in theology to technology, change is one of the pillars that keeps this religion current for every generation. While often change is celebrated, it doesn't make changing the infrastructure easy and it does not eliminate the traditional patterns that often exist in the leadership of thousands of churches around the world. The church has always been met with challenges from the days of Jesus (who Christians believe is the Messiah) until this present moment. The 2020 health crisis (COVID-19) unexpectedly shifted the way ministries function. Depending on how leaders perceive the situation, this could be either a challenge or an opportunity.

Many churches have been forced to wrestle with these areas to ensure the continuation of their ministries. Technological innovation has become the standard; without technology, it's nearly impossible to be seen or heard. Music is cliché to most churches, but there is an increasing demand for great music on a more professional and even entertainment level. In my professional experience of working in the marketing arena of church as well as being a worship leader, I've discovered an enhanced demand on the area of music. There is a level of expectation from both leadership and the parishioners for grade A quality in the music presentation. One of the key factors to consider is that people have several options to choose from both in-person and online to worship; therefore, you want to provide a more excellent musical contribution to the service.

In addition, any church not applying proper marketing and public relations techniques are running the risk of being a church that once was. This constitutes having a rigorous marketing strategy. For many church leaders some paid, some strictly

volunteer, these areas are extremely sensitive, and every ministry will be different based on multiple factors.

1. Professional worship bands became popular several years ago as the rise of Christian media rapidly increased. With television, radio, and other mediums the music was no longer just a part of the religious service experience but became marketable to sell to the masses. Uniquely, several churches began to package their Sunday worship experience and create extensions of their ministries specifically tied to music. (Carlan, 2019) This study analyzes data that has shaped the attention to this specific kind of music. Church leaders, media specialists, music business professionals, emerging bands, and fans will find the information in this thesis useful as this phenomenon is broken down with extensive research coupled with ever-evolving changes in the music industry. It will be imperative to understand the overall function of music in the church and its historic presence leading up to the modern music fans adore today. Music in the church is sacred and plays a major role in the way those who follow the Christian faith worship. Music and religion date back centuries to ancient African rituals, early Catholicism, and Protestant faith gatherings. Often worship was centered around music. The early church had traditional songs called *hymns* that they would sing as a congregation. Webster's defines a hymn as a song or ode in praise or honor of God, a deity, a nation, etc. (Websters, 2021). These would be the songs that unified those who would gather for a corporate worship experience. Hymns are generally sacred songs among a denomination or in some cases even a religion

that is passed down generation to generation. It is common that hymns or popular songs in the church have an emotional trigger that can cause feelings of joy, remembrance or reverence. Emotions by religious followers can range from tears to smiles and a little bit of everything in between.

2. Another aspect that should be taken into consideration is how music communicates beyond the ear and speaks to the soul of humans. From ancient Africa to the coasts of North America and around the world, music is built into the rhythm and DNA of humans. As this study explores popular worship bands who write, record, and perform Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), it is probable that the same emotions are triggered in modern church culture as that of hymns to the historic church audience. CCM music has experienced explosive growth in the last two decades and is now expanding further beyond the walls of the church to include ticketed events, tours, merchandise and more. (Carlan 2019) This is a far cry from where it began several years ago as only a part of Christian conferences, services, and other religious gatherings.

Growth in Technology

The level of technology in modern westernized churches is comparable to that of major concert venues. This area presents several new challenges in one, especially to those of a fixed mindset. In a fixed mindset, people believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. They spend their time documenting

their intelligence or talent instead of developing them. They also believe that talent alone creates success—without effort.” (Dweck, 2015)

One of the new challenges involves accepting that increasing the quality of a church’s music ministry requires skilled professionals and major monetary investments. Pastors and leaders must be willing to completely turn over the reins of this area to the technology experts, some of whom may be unfamiliar faces who provide outsourced talent, equipment, and knowledge. However, before that step occurs, leaders must let go of their ideologies of what church was and embrace where it’s going in an effort to reach current and future generations.

As the director of digital marketing & promotions for a mega church, there are unwritten rules of thumb that I’ve learned that impact the overall aesthetic and experience that the congregation has. These major details will also affect content and how it appeals to both in-person and digital audiences. Audio and visual equipment are now the eyes and ears of a church’s congregation. In most churches, weekly services will provide much of the content to be shared. Having the necessary equipment to capture it well is imperative. The quality of content is more important than the volume of content a ministry produces. The clarity of your audio and quality of your video will be the determining factor for those viewing from home, whether they continue to watch or not. Proper lighting is equally important to ensure your broadcast is appealing to an ever-growing list of options for the viewer at home. People have the option to worship with any church they choose, especially when they’re viewing in an online format. The question leaders must reckon with is, “What would make someone tune into this

service?” It’s the same question every movie producer and writer must ask when filming a movie. What would make someone want to spend money and time to watch your film over the other 15 films showing at the exact same time in a theatre next door? It can be challenging to resist getting frustrated when answering these questions and, instead, learn from mistakes and from others to improve the product that is being offered.

Social media also play a huge role on the reach of a church beyond its local assembly. While some churches have made a conscious effort to build a social media presence for the last few years, others have not. Social media can target those who may find interest in a particular church based on their online behaviors, personal interest, economic status, education level, family structure, age and so much more. This concept of reaching people is called target marketing.

Churches are forever recruiting simply due to people eventually passing away. This means a healthy church must incorporate programing tailored to a younger demographic. If it’s the churches plan to reach younger audience having a consistent social media presence on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are necessary. Like any industry, social media content is the new business card. Many want to sample you online before ever stepping foot into your building. In a virtual space, it is possible that the decision to watch a service online is made simply by the content a church distributes before the live stream even begins. Several churches have resorted to hiring social media managers to enhance their social media presence. What does this have to do with popular worship music in the church setting though?

Growth in Music

Traditionally the corporate worship experience in church is derived from what is known as a hymnal. Most major denominations in the Christian faith have one. (Wallace et al., *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song* 2016) Hymns are generally slow to moderate tempo coupled with rich and meaningful lyrics for Christian rituals. But what happens when the congregation desires a more contemporary experience? The truth is, it is becoming more common to see churches where the music portion resembles a concert-like experience.

Several years ago, a new genre of Christian music was introduced to weekly worship experiences called “Praise & Worship.” This music is generally highly energetic, and, in some churches, it eventually replaced the traditional hymns and congregational singing that most were accustomed to. As expected, many were not fans of this change because of their fixed mindset of what was possible and what was “right.” Fast forward to now; lighting, effects, props and more are being used to enhance the praise and worship experience and engage the congregants utilizing multiple senses. This is a testament to how innovation-minded Christianity evolves to appeal to the next generation. Religious change can be difficult to navigate because people hold traditions, rituals and the sacred dear to them. The establishment of this style left many unsettled but has caused ministries with a growth mindset to soar. Dweck, defines the growth mindset by stating, “In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the

starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment.” (Dweck, 2015)

Multi-culturalism has since become more popular in the evangelical community. It is defined as cultural pluralism or diversity as within a society, organization, or an educational institution. (Merriam Websters, 2021) It is common within this industry to hear churches referred to by their predominate race. In effort to change that pattern, many churches are beginning to embrace multiple cultures and ethnicities. While the entire effort hasn't been perfected, music being a dominate trait for churches, has made for a great start. I've explored these types of churches first-hand as a singer. It can be a delicate dance on creating a sound that multiple ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds can identify with. How can you fuse the acoustic guitar sounds of Contemporary Christian Music with the soulful sounds of Black Gospel and even the rhythmic beats of Latino music? Believe it or not, it's happening. Each band studied in this paper have fused different sounds and assembled voices with various stylistic approaches to create each band's sound.

The growth mindset of Christian musicians, singers and songwriters working to blend music flavors from around the world together has created what many consider a beautiful collective sound. It takes people who are willing to first admit that there's a problem with people of the same faith divided because of culture, skin color or simply preferences. Pastors and music directors are tasked with creating an atmosphere and church culture where people from all nationalities can feel comfortable to engage in the worship experience and find a reflection of themselves within that same experience.

Music is powerful and easily can become what a church is known for. One popular church, which is analyzed in this study is *Elevation Church*, who is most widely known for its worship band *Elevation Worship*. Elevation was birthed from a progressive leader and prolific thinker, Pastor Steven Furtick. He and the church's worship band have made intentional efforts to face the barriers in Christian music head on and use their influence to make a change. Elevation Worship has 15 albums and music that has been translated into multiple languages around the world. Their chart-topping songs have become universal anthems that churches around the world sing every week (Elevation Worship, *Album Archives*).

This study specifically targets how audiences respond to music on social media. The churches in this study have had to fine tune their digital marketing strategies to spread their message without compromising their mission and this has become a subject matter that has been previously studied by researchers such as Alin Valentin Angheluta, Andreea Strâmbu-Dima & Razvan Zaharia. Similar to their findings, author Robbie G. H. Goh wrote in his book, *Postsecular Cities: Space, Theory and Practice*, about the marketing and message of the church. This is no different for how popular churches are promoting their worship bands.

Specific churches have spent a great deal of time and money to see their worship bands succeed in the marketplace. For example, the leaders of a church studied in this thesis, Elevation Church have a career page on their website where they actively hire for marketing positions (*Elevation Church Job Openings Archive*, 2021). By hiring the best in marketing, music, and personnel in the business, these churches show they understand

the digital footprint of the music is equally as important as the music itself. How the music is packaged from audio visual production, pristine vocals, skilled musicians or even wardrobe can influence how the music is translated to each listener. The research for this thesis attempts to uncover how fans connect with the music strictly from the band's robust social media presence.

It is imperative to understand that much like any sub-group of society that there is also a sub-culture. There are expressions, phrases and even emojis that hold a particular meaning that may only be understood by those of the sub-group of people. However, it is very possible for those outside of the sub-group of people to learn the language and process their meanings. The unique part of the Christian religion is that beneath the surface, there are sub-groups within the larger sub-group. These are often referred to as denominations. Simply put, these are groups of people who believe in the Bible but have different interpretations of the holy book. This affects how they live out their lives, how they worship, and how they interpret God. For example, the *Church of Christ* denomination regards the use of mechanical instruments during worship services to be unbiblical and inconsistent with early church practice and belief, while the *Pentecostal* denomination usually can be found with a full band.

The charismatic movement has often been referred to as the "prosperity gospel" and they have been accused of promoting Jesus as a genie that grants your every wish if you only believe and often give. While that accusation isn't completely true for every church, this area of Christianity has experienced a significant decline in the U.S. over the last few years. (In U.S., decline of Christianity continues at Rapid Pace 2020)

Literature Review

The ringing question that has been studied for a while has been, is marketing appropriate for churches and is it watering down the message and the original intent of the church? What makes this more intriguing is how some churches, like the ones in this study are creating and developing very lucrative bands. According to Peter Reimann, all change creates anxiety. (Reimann, 2017)

This study provides insight to help answer that question. Reimann also notes how the church has had to be introduced to a new language of terms like online, digital, and virtual. It takes a deep dive into the impact beneath the surface that marketing has had on the institution of churches. His argument is that the church is still trying to catch up digitally but is developing in some sense, especially online worship. (Reimann, 2017) According to his study, marketing is something churches will need to adopt to remain relevant in the new age.

Similarly, MC van der Merwe, reveals that there are several competing factors that are contributing to the decline of young adult attendance in addition to a digital marketing approach. Merwe argues that everything including but not limited to marketing, music, and even the church layout are all determining factors to young adults' interest in attending specific churches. In his study, a quantitative approach was used by testing the opinions of 200 church service attendees of different denominations. He found that certain elements in the church may be useful in attracting young adults. It was also found that music is a strong determinant of whether young

adults attend church services. This, coupled with the layout and design of the church and with the signs and symbols used in the church all have significant impact. (Merwe et al., 2013)

If churches are still behind digitally, including but not limited to, online services, robust social media strategies and the like, as mentioned in Reimann's study, it further suggests why young adults aren't as engaged as they once were as children. Worship music plays a major role in the overall strategy of attracting a younger audience. Music with sometimes catchy beats, chords or phrases can be the trigger that attracts the targeted demographic.

Similar to Merwe, the Angheluta et al are in support of churches using marketing strategies to further their message. The author's research is composed of basic information on marketing and the application of those marketing principles in church. The research also details the history of the church and how marketing could be perceived by religious leaders and followers in a negative way. They conclude that marketing does not contradict religious core values for either the church or the clergy. (Angheluta et al., 1970)

Thomas J. Wagner explores Hillsong Church London and how music plays a significant role in the church's marketing strategy. He argues that the music ties to the church's message using various media formats and encapsulates it in a production that church congregants and supporters rave about. He also studies the constructs of the Hillsong brand as it has become a global phenomenon in the Christian world and in the music industry. (Wagner, 2013)

Social media have transformed how churches and worship bands distribute content and grow their following. In a study conducted by Young Joo-Lee, he explores the opportunities that are available for churches that fully adopt Facebook as an influential platform for their congregation and the world. By conducting a study examining data from the 2012 National Congregation Study, he concludes that how congregants interact with nonreligious activities, including social and political, will increase a church's following on Facebook or cause the opposite effect. It is important to note, as this study focuses primarily on Instagram that Facebook is the owner of the Instagram platform. The size of the congregation and staff resources can impact a church's presence on *Facebook*. Traditions and clergy and urban location also can be used to explain *Facebook* visibility. Lee summarizes his findings by saying that community outreach, social marketing activities and resources are the main contributors to a church's *Facebook* growth. (Lee, 2017)

Similarly, in a study conducted by Peris Muchuki, he used an online survey in Nairobi, Kenya of PCEA Evergreen Church where he surveyed members, non-members, and staff. Data was collected by means of a questionnaire that each participant administered themselves. By use of multistage sampling, respondents were recruited for this quantitative study. Each member or non-member of the church was required to fill in the questionnaire. Muchuki, used a church growth index generated from each questionnaire to identify the effect of social media marketing on churches using Pearson's correlation and multiple linear regression. The study determined that social media marketing brought growth or improvement to the church. Other areas that

registered notable growth were church in-reach, brand visibility, revenue, and communication as well as member/customer relationships. The study also revealed that other areas seem to have lagged despite adoption and use of internet and social media for a long time and that the rate of internet usage was still quite low with 46.3% of members surveyed agreeing that they had not fully utilized the internet. (Muchuki, 2017)

However, Muchuki's findings show the membership believed it was probable that social media had the ability to increase church membership as well as spiritual growth (which is an important metric for most churches) and the church's revenue (Muchuki, 2017)

Ashbaugh explores in her study how Contemporary Christian Music has had a major effect on church worship music. This study examines the history of music in the church and how new technology and a mega entertainment industry has impacted the Sunday worship experience. It delves into the appropriateness of loud music and sacred worship, as this has been a debated argument for many years. (Ashbaugh, 2015)

Churches can use this information to curate content and online experiences that this audience may engage with on a regular basis. However, every church has not adopted social media to share its message or its ministry. The next article examines how churches have adopted social media in reaction to the 2020-21 pandemic. In a both quantitative and qualitative study conducted by, Mariam Animante, Harry Akussah, and Noah Darko-Adjei a questionnaire was administered from a combined 152 respondents from The Evangelistic Ministry, North Legon, and The Makers House Chapel Intl'. In

addition to that, two pastors and their deputies and IT personnel were interviewed. The authors found that church leaders and members had the basic ability to access and engage on the church's social media channels. They also determined that the members and leaders found the implemented social media platforms useful. (Animante, M. A., Akussah, H., & Darko-Adjei, N. 2021) It is important to note this study was conducted outside of the U.S. as many comparable studies haven't been done within the United States given the cultural, technological, and economic differences between churches located within the United States vs those churches abroad.

Similarly, Kitara Runtuwene (2019), has also studied the art of church growth. The study examines how promotional strategies work to help churches grow. It helps guide how promotional resources better positions churches to communicate with their audiences and possibly broaden them. The author conducted the study with 300 respondents from Gereja Masehi Injili di Minahasa (GMIM), Gereja Bethany Indonesia and Gereja Tiberias Indonesia. Using quantitative research methods, the study reveals that advertising, personal selling and sales promotion significantly influence the church growth. Meanwhile, public relations and direct marketing are insignificantly influencing the church growth. (Runtuwene et al., 2018) Churches may find themselves focusing on the wrong things that will drive growth and this study will explore whether music could possibly be the solution that they are looking for.

How people interact on social media has evolved and changed over the last few years. Zabrodskaja explores how people use emojis to communicate, especially on social

media platforms. Her studies show culture, language, and non-verbal communication are the core of emojis. Her study also references emojis as a language. (Zabrodskaia, 2019) For this study emoji responses will weigh equally as comments.

Despite the insights these studies provide, a gap found is what types of social media content contribute to the success of popular worship bands who are affiliated with churches. Success in this study will be defined by followers, engagement, and overall popularity. The study seeks to fill that gap by investigating what role social media content plays for worship bands attached to the fastest growing churches in America, if any at all. By primarily conducting a qualitative content review of social media channels, specifically the comment sections, the goal is to find a pattern or similarity of content that is keeping band audiences not only engaged and entertained but also causing them to have a spiritually uplifting experience.

Much like the survey Muchuki conducted, in the article titled, *The Religious Facebook Experience*, the authors, Pamela Jo Brubaker and Michael M. Haigh, use an online survey method, particularly recruiting individuals who access faith-based content. Using a series of *Facebook* ads, they were able to determine that there were four primary motivations for accessing religious *Facebook* content: ministering, spiritual enlightenment, religious information, and entertainment.

In addition to identifying the uses and gratifications received from engaging with faith-based Facebook content, this research reveals how the frequency of Facebook use and the intensity of Facebook uses for religious purposes predict motivations for accessing this social networking site for faith-based purposes. The data collected shows

those who frequently use Facebook for posting, liking, commenting, and sharing faith-based content and who are more religious are more likely to become more of an evangelist with the Gospel message. The affiliation with like-minded individuals afforded by this medium provides faith-based users with supportive content and communities that motivate the use of Facebook for obtaining spiritual guidance, for accessing religious resources, and for relaxing and being entertained. (Pamela Jo Brubaker, 2017)

In relation to data, a newly found partnership featured in the *New York Times* between Facebook and churches was published by Elizabeth Dias. She discusses the partnership specifically with Hillsong Atlanta (Pastor Sam Collier) and Facebook. Hillsong agreed to partner with Facebook and stream exclusively through their platform. They are also tracking data to see how the platform can be beneficial for churches globally. This is incredibly important in the development of how social media and ministry coexist to make an impact on the followers of ministries who have and will partner in the future. (Dias 2021)

Uses and Gratifications is a theory that has been used by scholars to determine why audiences seek out certain types of media to satisfy their needs. One example is Dr. Alamgir Hossain, whose study applied the theory to his research on social media use by conducting a multiple mediator analysis on Facebook. This theory has been a great way to identify patterns of active media consumers and it has been used since the early 1940s. Scholars like Hossain, have studied social media while applying the Uses & Gratifications theory and this study sought to apply the theory to Instagram users who are fans of these worship bands. What makes this study unique is that it allows the

researcher to apply historic theory to modern day media consumption by worship band fans in 2021. Specifically, this theory will be applied to how they comment and what they're saying, which will indicate based on categories what may be satisfying their needs. As Brubaker stated, the more engaged the religious audience is, the more they become evangelist or in social media terms, "sharers" of the content. Whiting and Williams discuss early studies that first, had a very similar methodological approach whereby statements about media functions were elicited from the respondents in an essentially open-ended way. Second, the studies they reviewed shared a qualitative approach in their attempt to group gratification statements into labeled categories, largely ignoring the distribution of their frequency in the population. Third, they did not attempt to explore the links between the gratifications thus detected and the psychological or sociological origins of the needs that were so satisfied. Some of the studies reviewed were, Herzog (1942) on quiz programs and the gratifications derived from listening to soap operas, Suchman (1942) on the motives for getting interested in serious music on radio, Wolfe and Fiske (1949) on the development of children's interest in comics, and Berelson (1949) on the functions of newspaper reading (Whiting and Williams, 2013). Scholars have considered Uses & Gratifications theory in relation to Instagram and Facebook, like the research examining how the theory applies to Baby Boomers using the platforms. (Sheldon, Antony, & Ware, 2021) However, this study will take it a step further by applying the same theory to Instagram specifically for worship bands.

Theoretical Framework

This study will focus on **Uses and Gratifications Theory**. This theory suggests that audiences choose certain media to satisfy their needs and goals. Uses and Gratifications Theory is a relationship between media, audiences and social systems. It also suggests that possible effects are cognitive, affective or behavioral. (Communication Theory, 2018)

Worship bands' social media content is highly driven by their beliefs and needs of audience members. This media is also filtered to appeal to that audience and normally it attempts to present a message that will change or transform their beliefs, lifestyles, or feelings. This can be done through behind-the-scenes information, music, quotes, campaigns, etc.

Method Section

Research Questions:

1. What emotions are expressed by commenters with videos of live performances?
2. What emotions are expressed by commenters on behind-the-scenes/non music content posted by worship bands?
3. Are there terms used by commenters that are unique to this religious subculture?
4. Are particular emojis used by commenters that are unique to this religious subculture?
5. What types of social media content are people responding to most?

Methodology

For this study, a qualitative thematic content analysis method was used. Content analysis is a popular qualitative research method often used for similar studies. This type of study has been conducted before by Rens (2020). In his study he was interested in exploring the content of the language used by participants. He used themes regarding the gratifications he obtained. Rens interviewed 10 Black, South African participants for the study to find out what value they receive from finding and indulging in confession-based media texts. This type of media includes but is not limited to self-disclosed problems by a person seeking intervention from a professional. As a part of the uses and gratifications framework, he conducted a qualitative analysis of the transcripts to indicate what gratifications they received from confessional overtones. (Rens, 2020) This approach was closely related to the same thematic content analysis method used by Braun and Clarke. They describe it as a method to identify, analyze and report patterns within data. This method is best for the research conducted in this study as it attempts to explore patterns of commenters using themed content categories. (Rens, 2020)

More specifically, a directed approach will be the guide to steer the categories of content that will be analyzed. This methodology is appropriate as the main objective for this study is actual social media content that has been posted.

Using the content analysis method, three church worship bands' content were analyzed.

- Hillsong- Hillsong Church
- Elevation Worship- Elevation Church
- Bethel Music- Bethel Church

These three churches are all charismatic ministries with over 10,000 members. Each of their pastors, Steven Furtick (Elevation Church), Brian Houston (Hillsong) and Bill Johnson (Bethel) also uniquely have an interest in music whether producing, writing or singing. Steven Furtick is an American Pastor who founded Elevation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina and has expanded the church to become a global ministry with multiple campuses and campuses throughout the world. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in communication from North Greenville University and a Master of Divinity from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. (Peoplepill.com, 2021) Pastor Brian Houston is the founder of Hillsong Church in Sydney, Australia. This ministry has grown to have multiple campuses around the world. Hillsong music is also widely known in the most modern churches around the world. Their music has been distributed in over 90 countries and translated into multiple languages. (Believers Portal, 2018) Pastor Bill Johnson is the Pastor of Bethel Church in Redding, California. He is known for his one-word mission statement, “revival,” and that is what has set him apart since becoming the Pastor in 1996. Known for their spontaneous type of worship, his church has created anthems that are sung in churches around the world. (Bill Johnson Ministries 2021)

These churches are all rapidly growing and have a robust social media presence. What makes this study different is that the comments section on Instagram specifically will be analyzed to see what the people have to say about the top performing posts. Instagram is the particular social media platform of choice because of its more visual appeal and intent. In addition, Instagram is the most popular platform for churches to release new content and it appeals to a youthful demographic. This doesn't mean that older generations are not on the platform but many of the charismatic churches tend to market to Millennial & Gen-Z generations to foster future church growth and engagement. For this study, engagement is defined by likes, shares, and comments. (*Instagram: Age distribution of global Audiences, 2021*) According to Pew Research Center, Millennials are considered those born 1981-1996 and Gen Z is defined as those born in 1997 and onward. (Dimock 2019)

The following content categories will outline the types of content that have been analyzed in the study. These categories were identified from the author's professional experience of the types of content popular churches such as those of this study post regularly.

Content Categories

- Music Performances
- Lyrics
- Quotes
- Behind the Scenes

- Non-Musical Content

From these content categories, comments will be interpreted to see how the content makes the audience feel. The study will conduct a thorough analysis of emotions and reactions to the content posted. This will reveal the demands of the audience and speak to the growth of their social media audiences and congregation sizes.

How Research Was Conducted

For this study, a sample from the first 30 comments of the top 12 performing posts, with the most comments for 2021 was analyzed on each band's Instagram profile. An online Instagram profile analyzer was used to pull the top performing posts based on comments, and, from there, the research was conducted to determine the responses to the research questions. (<https://inflact.com/tools/profile-analyzer/>)

This study aims to explore emotional and spiritual trends in the responses of a faith-based audience to the content posted by the three worship bands being analyzed. Before the study was conducted a few categories mentioned earlier were developed to help sort the information retrieved from the research. However, the study is open to new themes emerging based on the results uncovered. The aforementioned content categories were determined by the researcher as simply a baseline but not conclusive. The researcher analyzed the first 30 comments and sorted them into subcategories that

will help to determine the emotions and reactions to the specific types of content. Specifically, the study reveals whether the audience conveys happiness, sadness, joy, or pain. Do audience members feel inspired and uplifted or are they prompted to share their personal stories or testimonies? It should be noted that this research and the period examined were conducted in 2021, during a the global COVID-19 pandemic. The reader of this study should have a better understanding of how church worship bands determine what content they share and how it resonates with their audiences.

Results

This study suggests that music is a major part of the worship experience. Without it, it is nearly impossible to engage thousands of people corporately into an experience with God. As the introduction states, music has been the centerpiece of the charismatic worship experience culturally in the church for decades. From hymns to modern styles, music has been the glue that has held the church together. Music allows every person to have their unique experience with the song and more importantly with God whether it's a song they've learned at church or one they may worship to on their own.

The expressions of worship may vary. This usually depends on the church and their individual cultures. For this study, all the churches that were analyzed are a part of the charismatic movement. This gives each of their audiences a similar demographic. While these churches are made up mostly of the Caucasian race, another word that is

trending is “multiculturalism.” This is the idea of churches serving a congregation of mixed races, cultures, and ethnicities. The generation gap of these congregations can also be wide but usually these churches usually market toward younger adults to more middle-aged adult males and females. The following demographics were available for public knowledge:

Elevation Church - Membership is 79% white and 21% non-white. They have an average weekly attendance of 11,719 as of 2012. (Charlotte Contributor, 2017) (Huff Post, 2017)

Hillsong Church – Headquartered in Sydney, Australia with campuses in 30 countries on six continents. They have an average global weekly attendance of 150,000. (Hillsong Church, 2021)

Bethel Church - 45% of weekly attendees under 25 years of age with more than half of those as minors. They have an average weekly attendance of 6000. (Pierce 2019)

Each of these bands attempt to diversify their content by posting both male and female performances but what becomes noticeable is that the American bands, Bethel Music and Elevation Worship are beginning to incorporate African Americans, particularly males. While this may seem like a minor detail, that isn’t just diversifying their content but it’s also shifting and evolving their sound. Hillsong, the Australian based band, hasn’t made this change yet. However, they are bringing diversity about in a different way by their worldwide campuses that target multiple ethnicities, most recently opening their first African American led campus in Atlanta, Georgia- Hillsong

Atlanta. While the worship experience at each campus is very much branded with the Hillsong look and feel which is modern and contemporary, they take it a step further in each city to specifically tailor each campus for the community in which it resides.

The sound of the music not only affects the content, but who performs the music has the possibility to expand the demographic. It's important to understand the audience for these bands are still largely Caucasian based but with new faces, styles and flavors being introduced, it's giving the songs longer shelf life. For example, Hillsong now has several versions of *What A Beautiful Name*, which was a hit song in its original release. However, the song has been translated into multiple languages and music styles. This factor becomes important to the analysis of the comments because with the song taking on a new identity, the comments take on a shift as well. For example, *What A Beautiful Name* in Spanish, garners more comments in Spanish. It's possible this could also affect Hillsong's Latino following, though that was not analyzed in this particular study.

Because the comment section tells a story not about the artist, performer, or the band but about the consumer, it must be understood that the stories the fans are telling are often connected to their emotions. Emotions, while varying, weigh heavy on how the song is portrayed and even sometimes can call into question the relevancy of the music. Why does this matter? Because the average consumer of music isn't searching for a pitch perfect melody, but they are searching for a feeling. Music can take people on a personal journey but it's powerful enough to give everyone a shared experience.

In Rens study, the research shows that most people who enjoyed the self-disclosed content likely wouldn't subject themselves to it. Similarly, the comments that were analyzed in this study never indicated that someone would want to perform the music themselves though they thoroughly connected to it. As previously stated, the comment section is the area where the thoughts of the listener can be heard. While it's clear that people around the world are singing the songs, it is also possible that their biggest fans are lovers of the worship experience but not necessarily 'performers' of it.

In the study Brubaker conducted, he stated, the more engaged the religious audience is, the more they become evangelists or, in social media terms, "sharers" of the content. This study reveals this to be true in terms of how the religious content- specifically, the music - has become shareable content. It is safe to consider tagging as a form of sharing content. The music is engaging and from the performances to the lyrics, it has reached a place in the fans that prompt them to share it with those whom they love and who are also fans.

As mentioned in the methodology, selection of the worship bands chosen for this study was based on a few things. One consideration was the pastors' having a unique or special interest in the music industry. It should be noted that churches usually invest in the area that its leader has a strong interest in. For example, if a pastor is mission centered, usually that church will do a lot of philanthropic initiatives locally and sometimes even globally. In this case, these pastors have a direct interest in the music business. As mentioned earlier, sub- categories would be identified to aid in sorting the types of responses given from the posts that were analyzed.

Final categories for comment types are as follows:

- Emojis
- Lyrics
- Tags
- Amens
- Comments
- Questions
- Call to Action (CTA)- these are responses to the call to action from the content creator-in this case the worship band.

The results suggest that contemporary Christian music has a strong fanbase, just as strong as the churches themselves. This is a key indicator that music still holds the power to bring people together, especially in the religious community as it always has. From the sacred hymns of the old church to the contemporary pop sounds fans enjoy today, the message is still strong and needed. The responses to the posts show there is a need for this music and that while to some it may just be another genre or another song, for the fans of this music, it's a lifeline. The responses also suggest that the many people who make up the audience of this genre of music have had personal encounters with God and that they have a story of where these songs found them in life.

Some examples from the research include:

successimamun (Hillsong)

I have looked for this exact video on her YouTube can't seem to find it. Please if anybody can do send me the link to the full video 🙏🙏🙏🙏

doubleportion (Hillsong)

This song will forever minister, love the bridge 🙏🔥

sah.far.jesus.1372 (Hillsong)

AMEN YES SAY WE AMEN AMEN I TRUST YOU LORD THANK YOU JESUS THANK YOU
HOLY SPIRIT REMOVE MY BROTHER 'S BANK HEAVY DEBT CREDIT CARDS IN MIGHTY
JESUS HOLY NAME AMEN AMEN AMEN AMEN BREAK HIS BANK DEBT CHAINS AMEN
NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE IN YOUR GRACE MERCY....SHOW HIM YOUR MERCY GRACE
ABBA FATHER EL SHADAI ADONAI SHALOOM AMEN I TRUST YOUR HOLY WORDS
🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏

shifu luho (Elevation)

Goosebumps 🙏🙏🙏🔥🔥

elizabeth_jimenez0281 (Elevation)

I love it this song a lot! 🙏🙏🙏🙏🔥🔥🔥

mamidahnashi (Elevation)

God is using you guys. You are a blessing, your songs 🙏🙏🙏

rafaxavi. (Bethel)

If 0:59 seconds is addictive, imagine the complete song 🔥🔥

joejda (Bethel)

more of this dude. pls.

hillelsanchez (Bethel)

Need this video on YouTube 🙏🔥

The following table shows the results from Hillsong's twelve most commented posts. The table has been organized by date, number of comments, type of content and the response types.

Table 1

Hillsong Research Results

Date	# Of Comments	Type of Content	Response Types
May 18 th	696	Performance Lyric Video (What A Beautiful Name)	Tags, Amen, Comments, Questions, Lyrics
June 15 th	492	Performance Video (What A Beautiful Name)	Amen, Lyrics, Emojis, Comments, Tags
May 28 th	450	Performance Video (What A Beautiful Name)	Amen, Lyrics, Emojis, Comments, Tags
May 20 th	381	Performance Video Song Release Video	Emojis, Comments, Tags, Questions, Amen

July 11th	352	Performance Lyric Video	Comments, Amen, Emojis, Tags, Lyrics
August 3rd	319	Performance Lyric Video	Comments, Amen, Emojis, Tags, Lyrics
August 5 th	317	Live Performance Video (another church)	Comments, Emojis, Tags
June 12th	279	Live Performance Video	Lyrics, Emojis, Tags, Comments, Amen
June 6th	275	Performance Lyric Video	Emojis, Comments, Tags, Amen
July 28 th	218	Performance Lyric Video	Amen, Comments, Emojis, Tags
July 16th	218	Performance Lyric Video	Amen, Comments, Emojis, Lyrics, Tags
August 26 th	215	Call to Action Photo	CTA, Emojis, Comments

The results are clear that music performance videos perform well on the Hillsong Instagram account with 11 out of the 12 most commented posts being performance videos. After analyzing each video, 7 of those videos contain lyrics, making them lyric videos. As a part of the worship experience in person in many evangelical churches, the lyrics are on big screens to encourage and promote the congregation to sing along. Therefore, it is plausible that Hillsong's audience is accustomed to this training and the band has adapted its social media content to be reflective of that same experience in

person. Other possibilities are Hillsong wants to ensure that the hearing impaired can easily consume the content as well as promoting the learning of the lyrics for those who may have never heard the song before.

Several comments including these convey that people know the lyrics of the songs and that the message is resonating with their audience. User [@jyders](#) says, “Make the videos longer. At least 60secs,” while user [@doctorkanayo](#) compliments the vocalist and adds the lyrics that are meaningful to her. She states, “Tone 🥰❤️🙌 ‘what a beautiful NAME it is...the NAME of Jesus””

It’s imperative to note that Hillsong posted a video of another church singing a cover of their song What a Beautiful Name and it was a top-performing post. This showcases another ministry while also showing the power of the messaging that has gone far beyond just the Hillsong brand. Other churches are resonating with the same message and it’s having equal impact.

As mentioned in the literature review, the emojis tell a story and for this study emojis count as comments as they speak to the subculture of the Christian genre. The fire emoji was most commonly used to convey that something is really good or that the person enjoyed it. One user said, “Where can I hear the full song in her version? It's amazing 🔥🔥” This particular comment was on a lyric video of a pianist singing Hillsong’s hit song “What A Beautiful Name” hence the mentioning of “her” version in the comment. The emojis convey a story or a narrative that the song is having a positive effect on the listener.

Pastor Brian Houston serves as executive producer for Hillsong Worship. Hillsong Worship has written, recorded, and released major chart-topping songs since 1992 and continues to produce hit songs today that are sung around the group. Houston is an Australian native who founded Hillsong Church and now has grown into over 28 countries including several campuses in the United States. This speaks to the global audience that Hillsong has attracted with the music being one of the main driving forces.

What A Beautiful Name prevailed as the most commented on post but what's interesting is that the top three commented posts are all about the song *What a Beautiful Name*. Based on these results, the song is one that their audience loves. It could be the lyrics, the presentation, or even the people who are performing. The responses for the most commented post include, tags, amens, emojis, comments, questions and lyrics. For example, one comment had a combination of a few elements in the aforementioned categories. A fan named @mrs_tashakay tagged, asked a question, and made a positive comment about the video posted, she stated:

"@victoryboyd do you have a full version of this? It is mesmerising. 🌻."



Hillsong Worship Band at Hillsong Church (Figure 4)

Pastor Steven Furtick is globally known for his empowering messages of hope but what many do not know is that he is a singer, songwriter, and musician. He is the founder of Elevation worship, a world-renown Christian band that has transcended many boundaries in the Christian music industry which many have not been able to achieve. Because of their music and supporting production elements, the Elevation Worship Sunday experience can be described as more of a concert. By watching their live services, it's common to hear them sing their own songs, which is a de facto promotion of those songs. Because of this concert feel, Elevation Worship has weaved its way into becoming a major attraction for parishioners. Boasting 13 campuses, each campus has a weekly concert look and feel! The songs they write and produce, often have become anthems in the modern church culture. Furtick is co-writer of the hit song, *The Blessing* which he wrote with Contemporary Christian Music giants, Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes. This song, released in 2020, has become an explosive hit, as the highest charting faith-based hit on digital song sales in over four years. (Asker, 2020) The

song has also been covered by other popular artists and translated into different languages.

The strength of this hit song is written all over their Instagram account. Many of their Instagram posts include content that refer to *The Blessing*. Showcasing the song and seeing the audience's response regardless of how many times they heard it tells a story. It's the social story of an audience that supports the content but further than that, allows the content creator to know whether their intended message has come across appropriately. Another popular song they released more recently is "Jireh" which was on a collaboration with another popular Christian band, Maverick City Music. As mentioned before, the study shows a large volume of emoji usage. One comment by [@holardoyen](#) was simply, "🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥" which is a sign that the song and the presentation of it was good. Instagram user, [tdowie](#) tagged [@rugged4christ](#) with this message of encouragement, "let this be your anthem in the days and weeks to come 🙏❤️"

Examining Elevation Worship's top 12 performing posts reveals that their content is a mixed blend of merchandise advertisements, Tour announcements, Contests, Performances, and even a Happy Birthday post. The audiences' responses vary for each post. The results are categorized by the date of each post, number of comments, post content, and the types of audience responses. The post is organized by most engaged post.



Elevation Worship Band at Elevation Church (Figure 5)

The table below details the results of Elevation Worship’s twelve most commented posts. The data is organized by date, number of comments, types of content and response types.

Table 2***Elevation Worship Research Results***

Date	# Of Comments	Type of Content	Response Types
June 24 th	6685	Merch Ad w/Call to Action	CTA, Tags, Lyrics, Emojis
July 27th	2414	Merch Contest	Emoji, Comment
August 25 th	1286	Merch Ad w/Call to Action	Emoji, Comment
August 14th	1158	Video Release Announcement	Tags, Comment, Emojis, Lyrics
July 8th	1139	Tour Announcement Graphic	CTA, Comments, Questions, Tags, Emojis,
August 24th	1111	Performance/Lyric Video	CTA, Comments, Lyrics, Tags, Emoji,
July 12th	1055	Music Video (Jireh)	CTA, Lyrics, Emojis, Comment, Tags, Amen
September 16th	891	Question/Contest Post	CTA, Comments, Emojis
July 8 th	702	Tour Announcement Video	CTA, Comments, Emojis, Tags, Questions
July 23rd	638	Happy Birthday (Tiffany) Elevation Member	CTA, Comments, Emojis
July 15th	622	Personality Tour Announcement	CTA, Emojis, Comments

July 7 th	563	Performance	Comments, Lyrics, Emojis,
----------------------	-----	-------------	---------------------------

The results show their most engaging post to be a merchandise advertisement that is coupled with a call to action. The audience responded by responding to the call to action by responding to the prompt by Elevation which was, "Wanna win some free OCB merch?? Comment your fav song from "Old Church Basement" 📌 for a chance to win!" Fans like [@giorgia_cagiano](#) responded by saying, "It's hard to decide one song but maybe Wait on You ❤️" However, the research also revealed she used the heart emoji to convey her love for the entire record and the indecisiveness implies there were too many good songs to only choose one. Another fan [@josloe](#) responded by simply stating his favorite song, "Million little miracles!"

The goal of this post was accomplished different ways. Some commented using the titles of the song. Others used emojis and tagged their friends. If a content creator such as Elevation Worship puts out a call to action, it is implied that they are seeking a very specific response from their fans. In this case, it was to sell merchandise. Elevation understands their audience by combining a call to action with the merchandise advertisement, but they seem to also use their fans love for the music to their advantage by causing the audience to do an evaluation of their favorite song which also provides data of which songs are resonating with their audience the most. The goal

would be to get people talking on the post. The more interaction the post receives, the more visibility the algorithm gives to the post. That basically means, more people will see the post, the more people who view the post, the probability of sales conversion increases. It is probable that they attached a call to action to spike comments.

Elevation, like most popular bands have very familiar faces that people connect to the bands brand. Tiffany Hudson, a worship leader at Elevation is one of those faces for Elevation Worship. On her birthday, Elevation made a post non-music related and the fans responded! Comments like, “Happy birthday from Minnesota. Love what you do to celebrate the Word of the Lord. 🙏🎂” by @mglamonica9 and “Happy belated birthday tiffany!! you have an amazing voice & I look up to you so much, God loves you! I hope you had an amazing birthday❤️” by @maaliisadora are two examples of the many posts that were made to celebrate what some view as their worship leader hero. This exemplified that while people love the music of Elevation worship, they also love the people as well.

The results also show a variation of different types of posts, much different than that of Hillsong. While Hillsong certainly has merchandise, the research conducted for this study reveals their audience has a lesser response- though still very significant response to merchandise compared to their music videos. Variables such as when the songs were released, the prompts in their posts and whether Instagram is their main platform to sell merchandise could all be factors as to why their response to merchandise is lesser than that of Elevation Worship.

The following table displays the results of Bethel Music’s twelve most commented posts. It is organized by date, number of comments, type of content, and response types.

Table 3

Bethel Music Research Results

Date	# Of Comments	Type of Content	Response Types
September 8 th	693	Live Performance Video for Single Announcement	Comments, Tags, Lyrics
June 2nd	507	Give Away Video Promotion	Emojis, Questions, Tags,
September 1st	470	Album Artwork Cover Release	Emojis, Comments,
August 30th	383	Album Artwork Cover Teaser	Emojis, Comments, Tags
August 31st	377	Album Artwork Cover Teaser Video	Emojis, Tags, Comments,
September 15 th	284	Track Release Call to Action Motion Graphic	CTA, Emojis, Comments
June 29th	246	Tour Announcement Graphic	Comments, Tags, Emojis

June 24th	232	Live Performance Video with Lyric Caption	Emojis, Comments, Questions, Tags, Amen
September 20 th	482	Live Performance Release Video	Comments, Emojis, Tags
August 19th	160	Pray for Afghanistan	Comments, Emojis
July 17th	159	New Bethel Artist Announcement	Comments, Emojis
September 15th	149	Second Single Date Announcement	Comments, Emojis, Tags

Bethel Church, in Redding California is an extremely charismatic church led by Pastor Bill Johnson, who is known for his teaching of the supernatural. The definition of supernatural is, of, relating to, or being above or beyond what is natural; unexplainable by natural law or phenomena; abnormal. of, pertaining to, characteristic of, or attributed to God or a deity of a superlative degree; preternatural. (Dictionary.com, 2021) This inspires their music greatly by creating this spontaneous type of musical vibe in both their writing and their performance. His contribution to the musical flavor and message of the band doesn't necessarily come from his musical talents, even though his son is the founder of Bethel Music. Instead, it comes from his teachings on how to worship God. As a professional who works in the religious space, it is expected that, in the church, the pastor has great influence over the congregation and how congregation

members interpret God. The pastor usually has the greatest influence on how people think. It is clear that Pastor Bill Johnson has imprinted his style on the musical flavor of Bethel Music.



Bethel Music Band at Bethel Church (Figure 6)

The results show that their top performing post is a live performance video of a new single. The audience responded with comments, tags and lyrics. One comment by [@withoverflowinghope](#) stated, “Hurry up already! The world needs this album!!! It’s just so good!!!❤️” This comment conveys excitement with the use of text and the heart emoji. The trend showed that the band’s audience gets most excited about new music, hence their volume of announcement posts. Their announcements for new music outperformed all other posts for 2021. On the contrary, Hillsong’s audience received a much larger response from music already released. What is also new in Bethel’s results

is that they had a prayer graphic rank in their top commented posts. Could this possibly be due to their heavy belief in the supernatural?

On August 19th, this non typical post from Bethel was released that had nothing to do with their music. It was a prayer graphic for Afghanistan. Their call in this post was to rally their fans to pray for Afghanistan. A comment for this post by @nibevers offered a prayer in the comments by saying, “Prayers for God's Protection 🙏...safe passage & for the evil people, plans to be destroyed 🙏.” Another comment from @mahaguirguis said, “We pray for divine encounters, for protection for new mercies each& every day, for Your peace& justice”

Their fanbase has an excitement for the music and comments using emojis, tags, questions and more were readily apparent. But what wasn't discovered in the results was the use of song lyrics in the comments. While Bethel's fans are very much consumers of new music, they aren't regurgitators of it, at least not often. Some may argue that maybe the lyrics aren't meaningful enough for the fans to use in their comments. However, that may not be the case.

The uses & gratifications theory certainly applies as the study has revealed the deeper meaning of this music for the fans. The comments show the feelings and emotions this music activates. While the music is great, the presentations are stellar, the true meaning of this music is much more. This music is tied to this audiences' faith in God. These songs declare their personal beliefs, so it makes it easier for them to

resonate with the music. According to the Bible, which is the Holy Book for Christians, faith is defined as, the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1 (*Bible gateway passage: Hebrews 11:1 - king James Version*)

The lyrics of these songs boast faith in a God that none of these people have ever met but they feel they've had an experience with. This is what makes the music sacred, this is what drives the feeling of hope, peace, joy and love.

Uses and gratifications theory expresses what the consumers obtain after their encounter with media content. The results suggest these fans obtain much more than a song. They obtain a feeling that there is better ahead, and it reinforces their faith. It stirs excitement that causes them to share and comment. It causes them to rehearse the lyrics in their response. It leads them to always want more.

Conclusion

This study allows the researcher to see that worship fans, though in the same genre and even a part of similar types of ministries, all respond to different types of content. It is possible to conclude that Elevation Worship band has a more loyal following than the other based solely on the number of comments. In whatever regard, these bands have built a substantial name for themselves in the Christian Music industry. They are also all connected to wildly successful churches led by extremely well-known pastors.

What this study doesn't conclude and can be built upon is, how exactly the content creators of these worship bands decide which content should and shouldn't be posted. Is it based on engagement or it is based on other reasons? Other researchers could

interview the creators of the content and ask those questions to further give reason to why certain content is selected over the other.

Another topic for discovery would be, what percentage of the church's growth is based on the music. By having a discussion with the marketing strategist, one could find out how much of the strategy is dependent upon the music. They could also uncover the revenue the ministries make from these professional worship bands.

The worship band subculture is one that researchers must continue to study as bands evolve and new ones emerge. As technology shifts, so do the fans. New emojis could evoke new meanings. New trends can shift how a fan responds to the music. Music often speaks to the current events of the world, as we- the human race- have new experiences both personal and together, it is possible that new hits will spark a deeper or even richer response from the fans who love this music best. Based on the research, the results indicate and conclude that the music clearly has generated engagement with the bands, involvement with fellow fans, enthusiasm for buying merchandise, and a successful execution of marketing for each band.

REFERENCES

- Whiting, A. and Williams, D. (2013), "Why people use social media: a uses and gratifications approach", *Qualitative Market Research*, Vol. 16 No. 4, pp. 362-369. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-06-2013-0041>
- Angheluta, A., Strâmbu-Dima, A., & Zaharia, R. (1970, January 01). Alin Valentin Angheluta, Andreea Strâmbu-Dima & Razvan Zaharia, Church Marketing - Concept and Utility - PhilPapers. Retrieved from <https://philpapers.org/rec/ANGCM>
- Animante, M., Akussah, H., & Darko-Adjei, N. (n.d.). EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTION TOWARDS THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CHURCH ACTIVITIES AMONG CHARISMATIC CHURCHES IN GHANA. Retrieved from <https://ajoeijournals.org/sys/index.php/ajoei/article/view/176>
- Ashbaugh, J. E. (2015). The relationship between the christian music industry and church worship music. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/honors/501/>
- Asker, J. (2020, April 01). All-star collab 'the blessing: Live' debuts on Christian charts: 'we pray this song will bring peace'. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/chart-beat/9348296/the-blessing-live-debuts-christian-charts/>
- B. (2018, December 09). Biography of Brian Houston. Retrieved from <https://believersportal.com/biography-brian-houston/>
- Beaumont, J., & Baker, C. (2011). Chapter 3- Market Theory, Market Theology: The Business of the Church. In *Postsecular cities: Space, theory and practice*. Continuum.
- Bible gateway passage: Hebrews 11:1 - king James Version. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+11%3A1&version=KJV>
- Birch, R. (2019, November 5). *Secrets to Launching Multi-Site Campuses* [Podcast]. Unseminary.
- Carlan, M. (2019). *An Examination of Contemporary Christian Music Success Within Mainstream Rock and Country Billboard Charts* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Lubin School of Business.
- Dias, E. (2021, July 25). Facebook's next target: The religious experience. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/25/us/facebook-church.html>

- Dimock, M. (2021, May 29). Defining generations: Where millennials end and generation Z begins. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>
- Elevation Church is increasingly diverse. (2017, October 21). Retrieved from <https://www.charlotteobserver.com › article179932471>
- Elevation Church Job openings archive. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://elevationchurch.org/jobs/openings/>
- Fact sheet: Church. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://hillsong.com/fact-sheet/>
- Growth mindset - definition of what it is? (2014). Retrieved from <https://www.renaissance.com/edwards/growth-mindset/>
- Hackett, C., & McClendon, D. (2020, May 31). World's largest religion by population is still Christianity. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>
- History.com Editors. (2018, March 07). Great awakening. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.history.com/topics/british-history/great-awakening>
- Hossain, A. (2019, February 12). Effects of uses and gratifications on social media use: The Facebook case with multiple mediator analysis. Retrieved from <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/PRR-07-2018-0023/full/html>
- In Mass Communication, P. (2018, December 11). Uses and gratification theory. Retrieved from <https://www.communicationtheory.org/uses-and-gratification-theory/>
- In Mass Communication, P. (2018, December 11). Uses and gratification theory. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.communicationtheory.org/uses-and-gratification-theory/>
- In U.S., decline of Christianity continues at Rapid Pace. (2020, June 09). Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>
- Johnson, B. (n.d.). Bjm.org. Retrieved from <https://bjm.org/about/>
- Lee, Y. (2017, November 02). Is your church "liked" on Facebook? Social media use of Christian congregations in the United States. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/nml.21291>

- Marti, G. (2017, December 12). The Global Phenomenon of Hillsong Church: An Initial Assessment. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://academic.oup.com/socrel/article-abstract/78/4/377/4731531?redirectedFrom=fulltext>
- Merwe, M., Grobler, A., Strasheim, A., & Orton, L. (n.d.). Getting young adults back to church: A marketing approach. Retrieved from <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/hts/article/view/87852>
- Muchuki, P. (1970, January 01). The Effects of Social Media Marketing On Churches: A Case Study of PCEA Evergreen Church, Nairobi. Retrieved from <http://erepo.usiu.ac.ke/handle/11732/3290;jsessionid=B0F33552D39E1C6C9E33D6AE644B53F8>
- Multiculturalism. (n.d.). Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/multiculturalism>
- Pamela Jo Brubaker, M. (n.d.). The Religious Facebook Experience: Uses and Gratifications of Faith-Based Content - Pamela Jo Brubaker, Michel M. Haigh, 2017. Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305117703723>
- Pastor elevates himself in a nice big house? (2017, December 07). Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/elevation-church-pastor-steve-furtick-hidden-home_n_4157096
- Peoplepill.com. (n.d.). About Steven Furtick: American minister (1980-): Biography, facts, career, wiki, life. Retrieved from <https://peoplepill.com/people/steven-furtick>
- Pierce, A. (2019, May 13). The really big business of Bethel Church, part 1: Show us the money! Retrieved from <https://anewscafe.com/2019/05/13/redding/the-really-big-business-of-bethel-church-part-1-show-us-the-money/#:~:text=Just%20how%20big%3F,half%20of%20those%20are%20minors.%20>
- Pope-Levison, P. (2019, December 27). Azusa Street Revival (1906-1909) • Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/azusa-street-revival-1906-1909/>
- Profile analyzer. (n.d.). Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://inflat.com/tools/profile-analyzer/>
- Published by Statista Research Department, & 2, A. (2021, August 02). Instagram: Age distribution of global Audiences 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/325587/instagram-global-age-group/>

- Reimann, P. (2017, March). *Uncharted territories": The challenges of digitalization and social media for church and society* Citation metadata. Gale Academic OneFile.
- Rens, S. E. (2020, November 25). Public Self-Disclosure and Self-Improvement in South African Media: Exploring Audience Perceptions. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02500167.2020.1848893>
- The roman empire: In the first century. The Roman Empire. early Christians. (n.d.). Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/christians.html>
- Runtuwene, K., Lopian, S., & Pandowo, M. (n.d.). CHURCH MARKETING: THE EFFECT OF PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES ON CHURCH GROWTH IN MANADO. Retrieved from <https://ejournal.unsrat.ac.id/index.php/emba/article/view/20219>
- Schmidt, A. (2019, October 18). Here's how much money these megachurches bring in across the US. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.foxbusiness.com/money/how-much-money-megachurches-make>
- Sheldon, P., Antony, M., & Ware, L. (2021, April 02). Baby boomers' use of Facebook and Instagram: Uses and gratifications theory and contextual age indicators. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2405844021007738>
- Study: Religion contributes more to the U.S. economy than facebook, Google and Apple combined. (n.d.). Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://zambianeye.com/study-religion-contributes-more-to-the-u-s-economy-than-facebook-google-and-apple-combined/>
- Supernatural definition & meaning. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/supernatural>
- Wagner, T. J. (n.d.). *HEARING THE HILLSONG SOUND: MUSIC, MARKETING, MEANING AND BRANDED SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AT A TRANSNATIONAL MEGACHURC* [Scholarly project]. Retrieved from <https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/ws/files/19680902/2014wagnertphd.pdf>
- Zabrodskaia, A. (2019). *The emoji Revolution: How technology is shaping the future of communication*. Cambridge University Press.

[PDF]. (2013). Whiting, A. and Williams, D. (2013), "Why people use social media: a uses and gratifications approach", *Qualitative Market Research*, Vol. 16 No. 4, pp. 362-369. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-06-2013-0041>