

Social Media and Megachurches

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Abstract. This paper contributes to the understanding of social media strategy by examining how, Hillsong, a megachurch, is using social media. Whilst there, is a growing body of research on megachurches, and on the use of social media by not-for-profit organisations, no prior studies have examined the use of social media in megachurches. The study uses a content analysis of Hillsong's social media platforms on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, to demonstrate the distributed model of social media presence adopted by Hillsong, and relates this to the various purposes for which Hillsong uses social media. Discussion and conclusions evaluate this approach to social media strategy.

Keywords: Megachurch · Internet · Social media · Engagement · Online communities

1 Introduction

Social media has emerged as an important medium for communication, and specifically, for organizations communicating with their customers [1]. A particular strength of social media is the opportunity it provides to engage in a two-way conversation [2]. Also, organisations have viewed social media as a means of protecting their corporate or brand reputation [3], increasing customer engagement [4] or increasing online sales [5]. But most research into social media tends to focus on its impact, on, for instance, customer engagement, satisfaction or relationships [6–8] and there is an absence of studies on social media strategy. Furthermore, although there is a growing body of research on the use of social media by not-for-profit organisations e.g. [9, 10], most of this research is concerned with commercial organisations. Given their focus on growth and community building, megachurches offer an interesting and different context in which to explore the use of social media. A megachurch is an evangelical Christian assembly with more than 2000 attendees, who meet in a large arena for teaching and worship. Such churches have succeeded in attracting young, professional and highly educated individuals who are typically 'digital natives', and therefore for whom use of the internet and engagement with others of like mind through social media is integral to their way of life. On the other hand, although there have been some prior studies on the megachurch phenomena [11] and some analysis of their use of the internet [12] there have been no previous studies on the way in which these churches are using social media.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of how social media can be used to grow and support engagement in large scattered communities. It seeks to do this by conducting a case study analysis of the way in which Hillsong, a megachurch, uses social media in pursuit of its mission.

2 Literature Review

Megachurches have a significant role in rebuilding interest and engagement with the Christian religion. The phenomenon is worldwide, with several megachurches having venues in several cities, and some in several countries. Whilst megachurches are not a new phenomenon, an early example being the Methodist church which was founded in the 19th century [13], the current model of a megachurch dates from the latter part of the twentieth century when church leaders began to understand the potential of new media and technologies. Notwithstanding the importance of church buildings, many megachurches are classed as being a “digital ministry”. Megachurches are branded, and since many of the churches are global, they need to manage a global brand, and hence must attend to their digital presence, reputation and identity.

A significant quantity of research has been carried out on megachurches. Some of this research analyses the factors that affect the development and success of megachurches. For example, Martin et al. [14] studied 12 megachurches to understand their characteristics, while Karnes et al. [15] assessed the demographic and economic factors that explain the development of the megachurch movement. Other researchers have examined the way in which megachurches use the internet and websites. For example, Kim [16] studied Korean megachurches exploitation of the internet and their use of websites to support religious practice. Hackett [17] found that church leaders in three megachurches in Africa used websites to bolster their image, and to legitimise their authority. Sturgill’s [18] research on UK-based megachurches is the only study to examine megachurch websites from the perspective of marketing and branding.

A few studies focus specifically on Hillsong. Connell [12] explained how the church had changed religious practices and civic, social institutions while creating social capital using modern technology. More recently, Klaver [19] conducted an ethnographic study in New York and Amsterdam to profile the transformation of sermon and preaching practices, when they are reproduced across time and place. Importantly, whilst there is considerable interest in the megachurch model, there has been limited previous research into the use of the Internet in megachurches and none on the way in which megachurches use social media.

The small, but growing body of research into the use of social media in not-for-profit organizations offers some useful insights and emerging theoretical frameworks. Some of these studies focus on the messages sent by the organisation [9] or on how they engage stakeholders [20]. Nah and Saxton [10] suggest that there are four factors that affect the adoption and use of social media by not-for-profit organisations: strategy, capacity, governance and environment, whilst Lovejoy and Saxton [9] develop a classification of the purposes for which microblogging is used that includes information, community, and action.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Case Study – Hillsong Church

This research takes a single case study approach to the investigation of the use of social media by megachurches. According to Rowley [21], case studies are suitable for generating answers to ‘how’ questions; in this study the aim is to understand how megachurches use social media. Hillsong has been chosen as a case study, because it is a global church that has fully embraced a digital ministry and makes significant use of social media to communicate with members, build communities, and to promote the church and its merchandise and events. Starting in a rented hall in 1983 in Australia, Hillsong is now the most successful branded community church with three Australian campuses and twenty-four other locations around the globe in cities such as London, Kiev, Cape Town, Paris, Stockholm, Moscow and New York. The weekly attendance is around 34,083 worshippers.

3.2 Content Analysis of Hillsong’s Social Media Presence

In order to explore how Hillsong uses social media, a content analysis of Hillsong UK’s social media presences was conducted. The purpose of this analysis was two-fold: to profile the extent and nature of Hillsong’s social media presence; and, to explore the purposes for which Hillsong and its community groups used the various social media channels. The content analysis focused on the four social media channels used by Hillsong, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Social media presences were identified through Hillsong’s websites, supplemented by Google searches. In addition to these ‘official’ social media presences, there are also mentions of Hillsong, or, for example, its music, in various other social media presences; these were not included in this study.

Analysis of each of the social media presences identified involved first establishing on which social media platforms the various leaders, churches and communities had a presence. Then for each presence the person posting on the site and the uses and were noted. Persons posting were classified as leaders (L) or members (M). The coding frame for the uses was developed inductively, based initially on inspection of two of the social media presences. This process identified five uses: sales (S), promotion (P), events (E), giving (G), and two-way communication (2C).

4 Findings

Hillsong UK has a number of social media presences, associated both with the church as a whole and individual community groups. In addition, the purposes for which the various different platforms are used differs between groups.

Facebook. Facebook is primarily used to support daily media-based worship. For example, the profile page is used to promote and communicate events, post multimedia files, music releases, music videos and campaign summaries. Hillsong uses Facebook

to target particular communities or groups, in respect of, for instance, the sales of conference tickets. Also, the page allows community members to share the Hillsong Facebook page on their individual Facebook page. Community members can also post events and upload photos into albums, and share and advertise upcoming events. Also, music videos can be shared and liked, while pictures of recent events communicate a sense of a lively and interesting community. Five church leaders use Facebook to initiate two-way communication, promote events, charity fundraising, and sales. For example, the lead pastor of the church uses Facebook for promoting events and conferences and books. The emphasis is on one-way communication and promotion rather than on communication with members and community building. All church communities based in the five UK locations have a profile page that is used for promotion, communication, sales, and marketing. Visitors are able to like the page and share on their profile, comment, subscribe to new events, and buy tickets. Only three of the communities, family, wildlife, and sisterhood use Facebook for community building and for the promotion of events and publishing photos of past events. Some communities, such as the music community are closed groups.

Twitter. Twitter is used for communicating and advertising events and new products and services such as new music albums, outreach activities, fundraising and recent developments. Spiritual messages are posted to encourage users in their faith, to build social relationships and to stay connected to the church. On the other hand, compared to facebook, Twitter posting are mainly from Hillsong leaders, with very few postings from members of the community. All the five leaders of the church had a Twitter presence and used it variously for promotion, sales of events and regular communication with church members, globally. For example, the senior pastor, Brian Huston, uses Twitter for spreading Christian religious messages and promotion of his new published books, whilst his wife, Bobbie Huston, uses the page mainly to update the sisterhood community and for promoting events and the London pastor, Gary Clarke, uses Twitter for the promotion of new music albums and for spreading new biblical messages. As far as the church communities in the UK, Twitter is mainly used for posting events and for promotion of music albums. Only the London church, @HillsongLondon, uses Twitter to its full potential, including promotion, sales, fundraising, events and album sales. The remaining four church communities only use their profile page for promotion and communication from leaders. Amongst the UK communities, only the Kids community has a profile page, which is used mainly for promotion.

Instagram. Hillsong uses Instagram for updating its community members and others interested in Hillsong music and events. There are many comments from members on the photos that are posted on Instagram, and, in addition, these photos are shared on Hillsong member's individual social media platforms. However, all leaders, and the churches in the five locations use Instagram for promotion and sales. Posting is administered by community members who are allowed to post high definition photos; this helps the church to build its image. Amongst the communities, only Kids community has an Instagram profile page, which is used for promotion.

YouTube. Hillsong London's YouTube channel broadcasts music videos, past events and conferences and sermons from the lead pastors and musicians, as well as educational Bible courses such as the Alpha course. Anyone can view the videos, comment and share them on their profile pages. Text messages from interested people can also be seen. None of the other UK churches, nor any of the communities have a YouTube presence. Only the main lead pastor, Brian Huston, has a YouTube channel, which he uses to promote gospel music and sermons on a weekly basis.

5 Discussion, Conclusions and Further Research

This study shows that Hillsong has social media presences across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Facebook is the most used social media platform, whilst YouTube is only used by the church leader, Brian Huston, and by the Central London church. Analysis of who posts on these social media presences, shows that both leaders and members post on most of the Facebook sites, and that there is evidence of two-way communication. On Instagram, there are also postings from leaders and members, but less two-way communication. However, on Twitter, the posting is mainly from church leaders, with no evidence of two-way communication. Some of the Hillsong communities, such as Family, also have Facebook presences, but many others do not. Kids does not have a Facebook presence, but does have a presence on Twitter and Instagram. Hillsong's uses of social media can be classified as sales, promotion, events, and giving. All of these uses are evident in the Facebook presences of the churches in the various locations, and, with the exception of events, are in evidence on the church leaders websites. Communities only use Facebook for events and promotion. The emphasis on sales and promotion is consistent with some earlier studies [5]. Contrary to expectations, Hillsong does not appear to be making full use of the capacity of social media to build member engagement and relationships [4, 7, 8]. There is some two-way communication in some social media presences, but, interestingly, as in [20] not in Twitter, nor in the Hillsong communities.

The overriding sense is that the social media presence of Hillsong is complex, being scattered across platforms, and having several groups on some platforms. It would appear that social media page 'owners' such as church leaders, both international, and local church, are using their Facebook pages and other social media presences to communicate their messages to Hillsong members, and that each is doing this in a way that is consistent with their personality and role. In other words, if Hillsong has a social media strategy it is distributed and emergent, rather than directed and specified.

This paper reports on an early stage of a larger project. The next stages will:

- (1) Extend the content analysis of the Hillsong social media presences to other groups, and develop a more sophisticated classification for the types of use of social media.
- (2) Contribute to understanding of the extent to which there are shared objectives and strategies regarding social media use, through interviews with key stakeholders in the church.

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