

The Bride, Millennial Identity, and Instagram:  
A Case Study of Hillsong Australia's Instagram Account

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### Abstract

Identity has become an incessant focus for millennials. They ascribe ever-growing significance to identity anchored in an accepting community that elevates their perception. Subsequently, identity is increasingly significant for brand and consumer relationships. Successful brands understand this and incorporate a pervasive sense of their unique identity into their brand, visually and otherwise. This case study of Hillsong Church hopes to help churches understand the importance of visuals in communicating identity. Hillsong Australia's Instagram is examined using the Saussure model of visual semiotic theory to understand how they present their church identity in relation to millennial identity. The two most dominant visual themes on their account are promotion and entertainment (respectively). Lesser themes are as follows; the Houston family, congregants, text-based visuals, holidays, landscapes, and a small "miscellaneous" category. Using these results, this thesis analyzes Christian scripture to better understand theological ramifications of social media practice. Working off this foundation, this thesis offers practical advice for local churches seeking to improve social media engagement and more accurately reflect their congregation.

*Keywords:* Instagram, Hillsong, semiotics, millennials, church, identity

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Social media's advent broadened postmodern horizons, shifting communications and re-molding the traditional concept of community. Now platforms such as Instagram are integral to daily living, as essential as clothing to digital natives. As of 2017, approximately 30% of users' online time is spent using social media platforms (Asano, 2017, 1). Small church families once cut off from one another are now networked with Christians from diverse, intensely distinctive walks of life, gaining fresh insight regarding God's being. Users can now stumble across the gospel in their daily 11 hours of social media consumption, glimpsing church family life (Fottrell, 2018, p. 1). The Church can reach strangers across the world, or isolated neighbors behind closed doors.

In the past, the Church accepted new communication technologies for the sake of proselytization, including the printing press, radio, and television (Lee, 2017). Technology in the Church's custody "shape[d] the identity they present[ed] to the public," and continues to do so (Lee, 2017, para. 4). Technology nurtured Church community, relaying "information and religious messages since their inception" (Lee, 2017, para. 4). Observations such as this has led religious researchers to assert that "communication is the fundamental work of the church" (Lee, 2017, para. 4). Yet now, the Church struggles to adopt social media, the forerunner of post-modern communication technology and vital touchpoint for an entire generation, millennials. This recant in technology adaptation, or inability to do so, indicates a shift in either the Church or media, if not both.

Most local churches claim to refrain from establishing a consistent, engaging social media presence because they lack resources. While certain assets are undeniably helpful, this case study will demonstrate that local churches can create engaging social media without a wealth of means by analyzing how well-resourced churches create content and supplement gospel community using social media. In doing this, local churches can learn to accurately reflect their church community, ideally one where congregants—specifically millennials—can anchor their personal identity. Identity has proven invaluable to millennials. Their behavior demonstrates a desire for outside communities, such as church brands, to help inform their personal identity. Generation Y fervently searches for community, even going so far as to pursue “social media and virtual entertainment activities as a venue (and replacement) for interpersonal interaction” (Hoffman, 2017, p. 141). Social media inherently is a tool for connecting. It is capable of forging unwavering church and congregation relationships, ideal for optimally positioning brand community and a chance for consumers to manipulate their perceived identity for the better. Compared to other brands, the Church has a unique opportunity to market a remarkable community that, if aligned to scripture, “[breaks] bread in their homes and [eats] together with glad and sincere hearts,” a community of commitment as long as it aligns to scripture (Acts 2:46, New International Version).

For the sake of these churches, this thesis will examine Hillsong Church in Australia, analyzing its Instagram account through the lens of semiotics before analyzing the theological ramifications and underpinnings of Hillsong’s social media. This case study will attempt to treat Instagram holistically, acknowledging ways in which specific uses of social media may affect other facets of a consumers’ life. Oftentimes analyses of

social media focus exclusively on best practice. Few social media studies contextualize social media in kingdom life and doctrine. Consequently, this case study will examine both theological and practical ramifications of social media use for the benefit of local churches.

### **Defining Effective Social Media Presence**

For this thesis, the definition of “effective” social media presence will be two-fold. Effective social media presence means having high engagement levels and accurately reflecting that specific congregation. These high engagement levels typically stem from dialogic approaches to posts. By “accurately reflecting,” the researcher means that the church community is truthfully mirrored in its unique identity through visuals on social media, rather than manipulating said visuals to present an identity not sincerely their own. Because this case study will be examined from a Western-Christian perspective, effective social media presence which “accurately reflects” will also be defined as one that honors scripture, properly presenting Christian identity and metanarrative. This case study will investigate the visual promotion of identity consistent with scripture.

### **Megachurches**

Megachurches have a history of explosive growth “under a specific leader known for their charismatic leadership” (Hughes, 2013, p. 7). Hillsong is no exception. The Houston family specifically is ingrained in the lifeblood of that church. Megachurches possess uniquely flexible infrastructure, “aided by the fact that most of these churches had loose denominational ties and those denominations did not exert control over them” (Hughes, 2013, p. 7). Most megachurches focus on their attendants rather than on

converting those beyond their walls, dwelling on more “lifelong transformation through discipleship” than “instant transformation” (Hughes, 2013, p. 7). Megachurches have also moved away from explicitly supernatural facets of Christianity (such as speaking in tongues), instead accentuating traditionally “rational and stable expressions of faith” (Hughes, 2013, p. 7). Megachurches are also known as seeker churches since they target “religious refugees,” those who either have not been church members or were church members but chose not to align themselves with that church or religion (Hughes, 2013, p. 8). Some come with no religious affiliation at all.

In catering to this target, megachurches usually “downplay denominational affiliation and traditional religious services,” opting for a more modern atmosphere (Ruhr & Daniels, 2012, p. 8). Statistically speaking, megachurches offer more services than other churches, providing a diverse and broad range of programs, while also “drawing new members in by charging a low price to experience the religious product” (Ruhr & Daniels, 2012, p. 16). While staying attentive to consumer needs can help garner followers, it can also bring more “negative aspects such as the over emphasis on individualism, unquestioning certainty and superficiality,” rendering unified community difficult (Hughes, 2013, p. 9).

### **Semiotics Theory**

Semiotics grapple with the intricate relationship between signs and how their “meanings are made” (Chandler, 2002, p. 2). These signs and symbols can consist of typography, acts, speech, visuals, structure, or forms of media (Jewitt, 2009, p. 14). Essentially, whatever people interpret to be a symbol, something signifying something else, it is a sign (Chandler, 2002, p. 13). Consequently, there are several ways the

researcher could study semiotics in Hillsong Australia's Instagram account—through brand semiotics and structural semiotics, for example. However, since Hillsong Australia's visual posts are presumed to be the first interaction between brand and consumer, the researcher chose to analyze the visual elements of the account's posts. The researcher did this by using visual semiotics following the Saussure model. This better permits the researcher to study the first, subconscious reactions a user has to the visual elements of church Instagram posts. The researcher chose the Saussure model of semiotics because it “has particular application to brand management theory,” lending itself to a better understanding Hillsong Australia's brand positioning and perception (Oswald, 2012, p. 9). Adopting the Saussure model and focusing solely on visual semiotics means the researcher will not study captions included with the visual elements of Instagram posts. This could prove disadvantageous, since the researcher will miss words and phrases that may leave an impact on the user, even if seen only for a moment. The researcher may incorrectly interpret the brand's given meaning to that visual, along with whatever meaning the user perceives, since captions can alter the meaning of the visuals they are paired with.

Semiotic theory does not isolate signs from their environment and analyze them free-standing. Instead, it runs under “the assumption that social media are never neutral physical and electronic products and processes, but historically developed social, cultural and semiotic constructs imbued with social values and norms” (Poulsen et. al., 2018, p. 596). Meaning behind a sign exclusively contains human notions about that sign, not the true thing itself (Chandler, 2002, p. 17). These signs “only make sense in relation to other signs” (Chandler, 2002, p. 18); even their worth “is determined by the relationships



between other signs within the system as a whole” (Chandler, 2002, p. 20). Signs inherently are pervious to the influence of surrounding culture. The contextualization of visual signs is both necessary under proper semiotic theory and forwards this study, which will be conducted in the context of millennial mannerisms as an “extended cultural milieu” (Holbrook, 2015). Beyond cultural influence, signs in the context of brands (like Hillsong) are also vulnerable to influences that begin “upstream with the interface of economics, culture, and consumption” (Oswald, 2012, p. 77).

It is important to note that semiotics currently does not have set “widely accepted theoretical assumptions,” and can be nebulous (Chandler, 2002, p. 4). Along with that, meanings ascribed to symbols may also be personal to the recipient, so outliers are common phenomena (Oswald, 2012, p. 55).

### **Hillsong as a Brand**

Hillsong Church has 21 different locations worldwide, spanning from Sao Paulo, to Kiev, to Australia, Hillsong’s flagship church (“Collected,” n.d.). This thesis will mainly focus on Hillsong’s Australian location and will briefly touch on other locations only as needed, mainly for comparison and deeper understanding of Hillsong as a brand. Hillsong exploded into a global brand within the past decade, treating it as a localized one would be unjust and would not provide firm footing for objective research and analysis (“Collected,” n.d.).

Hillsong Church mainly targets 20 to 25-year-old seekers in the greater Sydney area. Hillsong programs, including Hillsong Young and Free, Hillsong Worship, Hillsong United, and Hillsong Chapel, are tailored to fulfill millennial wants as evidenced by branding for each individual program. Hillsong United—one of Hillsong’s more globally

recognized programs—grew out of Hillsong’s youth group as “a hobby” for young adults (O’Brien, 2015, p. 2). This program has prompted much of Hillsong’s growth as a brand.

Hillsong Church’s flagship campus rests in the suburbs of Sydney, Australia, and began in 1983 under the name Hills Christian Life Center (Riches & Wagner, 2017). Currently, it attracts roughly 23,000 churchgoers for weekly worship services (Wagner, 2014). The number of consistent churchgoers they have, even as Australia wanes in Christian tendencies (Hughes, 2017), indicates that Hillsong Australia is at least upholding their growth.

Hillsong Australia sermons are ritualistic and predictable, making improvisation rare (Klaver, 2015). This is partially because, as many corporate brands, they have spread their brand throughout, even going so far as “to branding service work,” or, as Manning calls it, “brandscaping” (Manning, 2010, p. 44). Hillsong has done this throughout their sermons and events. Even outside Australia, these gatherings “are usually held in theaters and clubs and resemble multi-media spectacles like rock concerts with the use of videos, lights, smoke effects, and the performance of hip pastors sharing a similar performative style” (Klaver, 2015, p. 5). Klaver argues that this media-oriented atmosphere moves sermon emphasis “from *hearing* the word to *seeing* the Word” (Klaver, 2015, p. 11). Their intent focus on the visual continues in the formation of their services. Hillsong volunteers greet congregants by the door with signs reading, in bold, “WELCOME HOME,” visually inviting participants into community and molding “the demeanor of personnel to encourage consumers to copperform a particular ambience” (Avidsson, 2011, p. 80). In Hillsong’s case, this “particular ambience” looks like close-knit community (Avidsson, 2011, p. 80).

Hillsong's brand is consistent in their global reach, demonstrable through their social media presence. Each of their global Instagram accounts are comparable in tone; their brick and mortar locations, along with services such as those described above, also contain similar elements. Within "every Hillsong worship space, banners with the words "Welcome Home" are displayed," a common phrase and sentiment throughout their social media (Klaver, 2015, p. 18). Fulfilling millennial desire to belong to a community and elevating their perceived identity underpins Hillsong's brand.

It is also important to note that Hillsong as a church itself broke ties with its old denomination, Australian Christian Churches, in September 2018, creating their own denomination (Jackson, 2018). This decision aligns with similar behaviors exhibited by millennials regarding identity, behaviors indicating millennials prefer to craft their own identities as they please.

### **Overview of Hillsong Instagram Branding**

Instagram is still a young phenomenon relative to other forms of communication. At the writing of this case study, it is barely two decades old (Lagorio-Chafkin, 2012). Even so, Hillsong has populated the platform with dozens of accounts. Hillsong's like-follower ratio on their Australia account is approximately 2%, calculated by averaging the likes on the last six posts, then dividing the average number of likes by the number of followers. Hillsong posts roughly two to three times per week. They do not appear to respond to comments left on their posts. Facebook incorporated a story feature into Instagram on August of 2018, "reflecting the company's belief that camera-based messaging represents the future of social interaction" (Newton, 2017, para. 3). Hillsong

rarely uses this story feature, though they have made use of the highlight feature, which permanently pins past “stories” onto the header of their account.

Both photographs and videos posted on Hillsong accounts are typically darker in exposure and high in color saturation. Pictures are a mix of wide and tight shots, oscillating between what is visually space between close friends and space kept between strangers. In terms of linguistics in their Instagram captions, Hillsong Australia largely uses first person plural pronouns to refer to both themselves as an entity and their congregation. Occasionally—when wishing their Instagram followers “Merry Christmas,” for example—the caption will contain language drawing a line between Hillsong Church as a brand and its congregation.

### **Millennial Identity**

Millennials (Hillsong’s target audience) present an enigmatic set of traits, possibly attributable to the pronounced impact of social media on their lives. As the first generation of digital natives, social media’s impact in the lives of millennials is profound. As observed by Huntley in her book, *The World According to Y: Inside the New Adult Generation*, this new form of technology “is their natural ally, a necessity rather than a luxury;” they are collectively adept in using it (Huntley, 2006, p. 2). The two are inextricable. Of the most popular social media platforms, millennials place most of their trust in Instagram (Shane-Simpson et. al., 2018). This increase in popularity may be attributed to the newly established millennial behavior of building and maintaining relationships through the sharing of visuals, a routine Instagram’s structure heartily lends itself to (Holschbach, 2015). Researchers Russman and Svensson argue this swing “towards visuals [...] transforms how we relate to each other and the world around us, as

well as how we perceive and construct our sense of self” (Russmann & Svensson, 2017, p. 1). Some of this transformation is demonstrated through the now highly ephemeral nature of these visuals. Instagram, for example, gives users the ability to post photos to their story. These photos disappear after a day, permitting users to cyclically replace them and daily remold their perceived identity through ephemeral images and themes (Holschbach, 2015).

At first glance, collective millennial behaviors can seem paradoxical. Criticism and idealism, for example, are both highly valued in their generation (Valentine & Stochetti, 2013). However, upon re-examination, observers may note that criticism is merely a fashionable manifestation of idealism for Generation Y, who is also marked by unusual optimism (Valentine & Stochetti, 2013). Arguably, this gives the appearance of hope without commitment, allowing millennials to identify as good people with less effort on their part.

Millennials mistrust brands unless they claim social responsibility, craving authenticity from both brands and their peers (Valentine & Stochetti, 2013). These traits feed into the millennial pursuit of extravagant individualism, a chase compelling them to create patchwork identities, picking over and borrowing from different stances rather than taking a traditional “side.” Perception is crucial to them, propelling millennials to attempt to control their image using brands, aligning themselves with brands they feel will elevate their perceived identity (Improving Insight, 2015). These behaviors manifest in purchases from brands like Nike, who clearly exhibit their logo on much of their wearable merchandise, which clearly demarcate the wearer as being part of their “tribe.” While humans have used “goods to embellish or extend their identities” and “identify with a

group” for generations, millennials are unique in that they are the first to plainly exhibit these mannerisms through social media (Oswald, 2012, p. 17).

Their predictable yet distinctive chase of unique identity contributes to fractures within their generation, potentially casing millennials to splinter into generational cohorts, as Debevec (2013) and his fellow researchers believe. They write that “significant differences between the YM [younger millennial] and OM [older millennial] groups may be predictive of the formation of a new cohort,” though they mostly contribute this splintering to critical life events (Debevec et. al., 2013, p. 48). Australian millennials specifically are described as “sheltered, but optimistic,” possessing “an overly inflated sense of expectancy to create impact and be rewarded” (Raising the Bar, 2017, p. 6). This unchallenged optimism can manifest in millennials alternating between contentment to discouragement in short spans of time.

### **Method**

Hillsong Australia’s Instagram account was studied using a qualitative method. The researcher first conducted a brief examination of Hillsong’s more popular accounts, such as Hillsong United and Hillsong Church, along with Hillsong accounts advertising specific locales. Accounts used erratically (approximately less than 20 times per year) were not considered, since they typically did not have enough posts to analyze and had no following to speak of. To offer local churches an analysis going beyond rudimentary best practice for social media (which is easily found online), the researcher chose an account that was at least successful in gathering a high number of followers. This permitted the researcher to spend more time analyzing themes in content and theological ramifications of best practice. After evaluating the predominant characteristics of these accounts, the

researcher determined which accounts exhibited brand traits characteristic of Hillsong while also containing a manageable number of posts for this case study (since it is normal to see Hillsong accounts containing at least 1,000 posts).

The researcher selected Hillsong Australia's account for this case study. This is because the account has posted consistently since 2016 and has 348 posts as of February 28, 2019. Hillsong Australia is also Hillsong's flagship church, where the brand first established their identity and successfully engaged their millennial audience.

Since there is little precedence for analyzation on Instagram, as "Previous research on social media (content) has mainly focused on text (written words) and the rather text-based social media platforms Twitter and Facebook" (Russman & Svensson, 2016, para. 1). Instagram contributes to the formation of perceived community and identity, partially through the "instant sharing of visual moments of the user's everyday life" (Russman & Svensson, 2016). Consequently, semiotic theory was chosen to better make sense of the visuals they symbolize, while acknowledging the context of said visuals.

The researchers first step was to collect Hillsong Australia's Instagram posts by saving the visual frame of each individual post on a Microsoft Word document. If the post was a video, the initial frame was the one used to determine the theme of said post. Each post was printed in black and white. The researcher collected posts up until February 28, 2019, printing those posts before cutting them out and examining each hard copy of each post for predominant themes. Themes were categorized using semiotic theory (specifically the aforementioned Saussure model), determined using only the visual element of the post and symbols within them. Captions were not included or

examined. Themes were determined using the main subject or subjects of the visual. If the visual was a video, the researcher used the opening frame of the post. The researcher sorted these posts into stacks, depending on their predominant theme. Because of the subjective, nebulous nature of semiotic theory, the researcher chose not to have other researchers group visual posts into themes, for the sake of consistency. The researcher completely re-grouped all posts three times in an attempt to maintain validity. Themes containing a significant number of posts were further divided into sub-themes for deeper analysis. Smaller themes were re-analyzed to determine if they could be grouped into larger themes.

Of the 348 frames analyzed, 12 did not fit an explicit theme. Some frames (specifically frames taken from video content) were either distorted beyond recognition or were completely blank. Other frames demonstrated no clear relevance to Hillsong's brand, nor did any of their visual symbols readily fit a theme. These were mainly unknown landscapes and mountain ranges, along with a shared post from the personal account of pastor Brian Houston containing an image from Google Earth.

### **Hillsong Case Study Results**

Hillsong Australia's Instagram account contained several themes, two of these were notably more predominant than the rest. The first theme consisted of promotion, the second consisted of entertainment. As a theme, promotion can be split into sub-themes of event promotion, product promotion, Hillsong Church and College promotion, and general "housekeeping" for Hillsong Australia's congregation. Entertainment can be divided into sub-themes of tight shots of the stage, far shots of the stage, and shots including the stage but focused on congregants. The term "entertainment" was chosen



because the visual elements of posts within this theme translate more readily as being images of entertainment than images of religious services. The term “entertainment” for this theme was not chosen to make a theological statement regarding Hillsong’s selected method of worship or the environment of their services.

### **Promotion**

Of the themes shown in Hillsong Australia’s feed, promotion was the most predominant, while the highest populated sub-theme was event promotion. This thesis found that event promotion accounted for over half of the overarching theme of promotion.

Most event promotion consists of pictures of the actual events (typically Sunday church services and conferences). Examples of these pictures include simple, modern graphics giving event information, guerilla marketing used to promote events (such as symbols relating to a Hillsong sermon series drawn on a beachy shore), pictures of congregants enjoying events, and pictures of guest speakers on stage. Pictures of the physical event are more infrequent, indicating that Hillsong is less concerned with sharing how events went and more concerned with drawing attention to the event before it occurs.

Graphics constitute a significant portion of event promotion. These graphics include sans-serif typography, connotating modern aesthetics (if treated visually and not linguistically), with the incorporation of a few sparing symbols (such as the cross). The repeated symbol of the cross connotes religiosity, chiefly evangelical Christianity.

The remaining sub-themes under promotion showed up infrequently in comparison to event promotion. These include product promotion and Hillsong Church

and College promotion. Occasionally, some cross-promotion was evident in the promotion of products. Hillsong Australia posted graphics encouraging the consumption and purchase of materials authored by the Houston family. The remainder of these products were directly tied to the Hillsong brand. Examples of these visuals include modern, minimal graphics and images of album art from Hillsong brand music. Hillsong Church and College promotion included visuals like clean, minimal graphics, aerial photographs of cities in which Hillsong has satellite campuses, and visuals incorporating Hillsong's mantras; "Welcome Home," and "A Place To Belong."

Throughout many of these graphics and church promotional materials, cityscapes are featured prominently. Cityscapes serve as a motif which brings fast-paced, cosmopolitan living to mind. Many of these shots are taken during the evening, making the city appear more sophisticated and lively, since the heightened contrast better displays city lights. Some of these shots also appear to be time-lapses, meaning what were once, say, headlights from individual cars, become streaks. This lends a significantly more modern, streamlined look to the shot.

### **Entertainment**

Within the theme of entertainment, the most dominant sub-theme was close shots of people on stage. These tight shots account for approximately 68% of the overarching entertainment theme. Hillsong Australia's heavy use of close-quarter shots of pastors and artists demonstrates a blur between "presence and absence" brought about by mobile technology and social media (Villi & Stocchetti, 2011, para. 35). By utilizing tighter shots, Hillsong blurs the distinction between "those who are physically and/or emotionally close from those who are not" (Villi & Stocchetti, 2011, para. 37). Users are

being visually forced into a feeling of emotional closeness by mimicking physical closeness to the visuals' subject. As written by Amaoka, people “within a group tend to maintain the distances between each other within a certain range that maximizes their degree of comfort. These distances reflect the type of their relationship” (Amaoka et. al., 2011, para. 1). Most shots do not widely differ in terms of composition, they mainly vary when it comes the subjects being captured.

Examples of these close shots include pictures of well-known worship leaders mid-song with hands uplifted, speakers caught in a humorous moment, artists backlit by spotlights and wreathed in smoke, along with pictures of guest speakers incorporated into graphics.

Dramatic, almost theatrical lighting is prominent shown in most shots. Many of these visuals display artists being spotlighted on stage, either as individuals or in groups, with the crowd darkened. This lighting brings concerts and dramas to mind, bringing connotations of performance into the viewers mind.

## **Discussion**

Instagram is dominated by visuals. Many of these visuals are intended to strengthen relationships via “The instant sharing [...] of the user’s everyday life,” which has contributed to the platform’s acceptance (Russman & Svensson, 2016, para. 2). This forced sense of intimacy via visuals has dulled the sensitivity of millennials users to traditional standards of privacy, meaning the Church must follow Hillsong’s lead in sharing increasingly more visuals, windows into the life of their congregational family.

The promotional streak running throughout Hillsong Australia’s Instagram account served several purposes. Practically speaking, these photographs of merchandise,

events, and album cover designs promote engagement with congregants and non-congregants. But the modern graphics also make the brand more attractive to millennials hoping to align themselves with brands that will somehow elevate their perceived identity.

As demonstrated through the entertainment theme dominant in Hillsong Australia's Instagram account, perceived proximity in visuals relays an abundance of information to the viewer. Their abundant use of tight-frame shots of artists and speakers pushes users into a feeling of closeness, planting them superficially into Hillsong Australia's Church community and into proximity that typically reflects distance kept between close friends, according to proxemics theory.

### **Foundational Theology: Reflecting the Bride**

This case study will now analyze Christian scripture to lay a foundation for practical social media application, focusing on scriptural presentation of church community, personal and local church identity, and the use of symbols in scripture and the history of the Christian Church.

John notes that Christ followers are marked by deep-set, God-given love for each other (John 13:35). Familial love of this depth firmly sets the Bride apart from the rest of humanity, who can only cling to their inborn selfishness (Freeze, 2017). In the New Testament, Christians went so far as to send finances to their peers, such as when Barnabas and Paul transported a collection fathered by Antioch for followers in Judea (Acts 11:27-30). Actions such as these throughout the New Testament also set expectations that separate congregations would be devoted to one another. Church family as it is meant to be—vibrant and committed—cannot help but be evangelistic. Their

ongoing behavior combined with the sharing of their individual testimonies (as prompted by scripture) creates a magnetic, bright community (Revelation 12:11). Social media is incapable of manufacturing such a congregation. It can only reflect the pre-existing.

Evangelism naturally flows from Christians, observable in the behavior of new converts such as Paul, who preached the gospel almost immediately after his conversion (Acts 9:19-20). God requires that His Church reaches out and “make[s] disciples of all nations,” demonstrating relentless generosity regardless of where they are in their spiritual maturity (Matthew 28:19). Scripture makes it clear that part of evangelism is done through simply reveling in ones’ Christian identity. As written in Matthew, Christians are “a town built on a hill [which] cannot be hidden,” something which does not need to ask for attention, but simply exists and is seen (Matthew 5:14). This illustration is pushed further a few verses later, where Christians are commanded to “let [their] light shine before others, that they may see [their] good deeds and glorify [their] Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). The language used in that verse indicates a passive action, indicating that followers only need to permit their God-given identity to naturally flow out of them, including traits gifted by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). This identity causes them to shine as brightly as stars “in a warped and crooked generation” (Philippians 2:15). Visually speaking, the difference between light and dark is painfully obvious, indicating that Christians, as “God’s special possession,” are easily picked out from the rest of the world (1 Peter 2:9). While Christians do not necessarily need to go out of their way to make their identity obvious, it is important to note that scripture calls the Church to share testimonies, described as powerful weapons in the Christian faith (Revelation 12:11).

The Bride is constituted of hundreds of local congregations. Scripture sets clear precedent that these localized churches are to encourage and uphold each other in unity (1 Peter 3:8), and that all Church members are to meet consistently for the sake of encouragement (Hebrews 10:24-25). Promptings such as these are especially evident in Acts and the Pauline letters. Paul urged Christians to “carry each other’s burdens” and support one another in any way possible (Galatians 6:2), “bearing with one another in love and pursuing unity whenever possible (Ephesians 4:2-3). Though friction between congregations is unavoidable, Paul treats separate congregations as part of what should be a devoted whole, as communities which should be “mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (Romans 1:11-12).

Scripture exhibits an intentional, pervasive use of symbols. Many of these symbols are used to describe the Church, such as when scripture refers to the Church as the Bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2; John 3:29; 2 Corinthians 11:2). Scripture presents the symbol of the Bride using deeply visual language, describing her as “arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright,” another symbol representing the “righteous acts of the saints” (Revelation 19:8). In Ephesians, the Bride is further described as “radiant,” and “without stain or wrinkles,” visually symbolizing her holy nature (Ephesians 5:27). Mentions of the Church (in this context, Israel specifically) as a Bride appear in the Old Testament as well (Isaiah 62:5). Traditionally, brides across cultures are dressed in such a way that they can easily be seen for who they are, purely by sight. While there is certainly more conceptual meaning underpinning this symbol, its’ profoundly visual nature—combined with its consistent use throughout scripture—demonstrates the importance of visuals and their underlying meaning within the Church. God used fire to visually separate Christ

followers when the Holy Spirit was sent to them (Acts 2:1-4), though this could have been done without any visuals whatsoever. God relayed clear directions regarding clothing for the Israelites throughout Leviticus and Deuteronomy, again, visually marking Israel as His own (Deuteronomy 22:12; Leviticus 19:28). One can further observe the importance of visual symbols in accepted Christian liturgy. Traditions such as baptism, anointment, and communion are all visual practices, indicating, respectively; new gospel identity, the empowering of God's spirit, and the sustaining salvation of Christ.

Scripture also established a tradition of appropriating cultural symbols. God Himself did this, ascribing truth to them by altering that symbols' visual appearance, something He did when He created the Abrahamic covenant. God used cultural symbols that, within that specific context, indicated a covenant by creating an aisle of animal carcass halves (Genesis 15:10). Traditionally, two people walked through this aisle to show they entered a covenant together. But God altered that symbol by walking through the "aisle" alone, shifting the meaning of that cultural symbol for the sake of sending a message to Abraham that God alone would fulfill both sides of the covenant, a foreshadowing of the gospel (Genesis 15:10-17). The cross itself originally carried no religious meaning. Initially, it stood for a tortuous death at the hands of the Roman empire. The Christian faith consistently uses what is secular, visually speaking, and modifies its appearance to present the gospel.

### **Acknowledging the Nature of Social Media**

Before delving into practical application, the researcher will clarify two concepts dealt with in the next section. The first involves the inevitable effect a lack of resources

will have on local churches, the second acknowledges the place of social media in the context of gospel life.

This thesis acknowledges that not all local churches are equipped to maintain a consistent social media presence that presents their church's community while engaging their target's perceived identity. Some researchers suggest that "denomination headquarters or councils can provide their member churches that lag behind in social media utilization with technical support" along with "training in communication technologies" (Lee, 2017, para. 42). Local churches without those resources can also turn to online resources for training and guidance in the world of social media. If these resources are unavailable, congregations may need to select methods of best practice and suggested application they will uphold, leaving the rest to (ideally) be implemented at a later time.

It should also be acknowledged that social media is exclusively supplementary. Platforms like Instagram should never be the primary generator of church community and identity, nor should congregants spend inordinate amounts of time there. Rather, social media accounts are mere reflections of congregations, and social media—in respect to individual time spent there—should be treated with caution. Churches must understand that "problems in [church] communities do not hinge upon lack of access to shared information about each other's lives" (Veenstra, 2014, para. 33). Rather, these problems stem from the fallen world the Bride calls her temporary home. Social media will not change that, but it can be an exceptional tool under the stewardship of a wise church. Arguably the Bride has an advantage in social media; scripture strips humanity of pretense and shows their true inner mechanics, including their wants and needs. As



demonstrated by this case study, effective social media accounts do not simply populate their account with high-quality visuals. Engaging accounts understand the cravings of their average user, whether they come to be numbed, for a sense of community, or to augment their perceived identity (Hoffman, 2017). The Church has an opportunity to reach people at their most vulnerable, in moments where the young search for identity and the lonely reach for community. Again, this should not be done exclusively through social media, which cannot fulfill man's desire for identity and community. As written by Rand (2009):

The popularity of social media seems to testify to the fact that many people miss what the church used to provide: a place to know others and be known, a place to weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh, a place to bear one another's burdens and share one another's joys—not just once a week or once a month or at Easter and Christmas, but daily. (para. 12)

Social media, as postulated by Rand, is tangible evidence that desire for community is going unfulfilled. Consequently, this thesis does not advocate that the use of these platforms is emphasized to the point of eclipsing time invested in tangible church relationships. Rather, it presents social media as a redeemable mission field, one enabling discipleship across oceans, providing back-door access into daily rituals, and nudging congregants to abandon shoddy, man-made identities for scriptural ones.

### **Practical Takeaway for the Local Church**

As demonstrated, God calls His followers to exercise uncompromising love and commit to fellowship. Extending this commandment into the landscape of social media

has may have several manifestations, including; prioritizing the congregation, perpetually gathering, sharing testimonies, and networking with other churches.

Scripture sets clear expectations for Christians to prioritize their love for God (Luke 14:26), along with their love for and devotion to His Bride (Romans 12:5). Living this commandment out in Instagram looks like churches prioritizing their congregation when producing visual content. Prioritizing the immediate congregation will continually vary from church to church because of factors including local culture, shared experiences, individual background, etc. When curating visual content, something as simple as color choice must be made with the congregation first in mind. The creator must continually ask themselves what visual symbols within that post will mean to congregants specifically, only thinking of outside viewers in terms of accessibility and staying “without fault in a warped and crooked generation” (Philippians 2:15).

Another manifestation of prioritizing the congregation on social media is offering multiple avenues of digital fellowship. Love within a congregation partially consists of social support, local churches should use social media to reach those habitually spending time there, such as millennials. Populating their digital environment with visuals of gospel community and identity serve as bright points of outreach in a landscape that, otherwise, is vapid and dark. Social media can also help congregations love those who sorely need their church’s support, yet are unable to physically be there (Freeze, 2017). This can be caused by something as simple as one’s schedule or as trying as a physical disability. Veenstra wrote that social media permits to the Bride to perpetually gather in situations such as these, stating that:

If church is the body of Christ gathered, then once again the church's doors are open day and night. 'When distances, disabilities, social anxieties or access to transportation make it challenging for believers to connect in person, social media presents a more accessible space. (Veenstra, 2014, para. 9)

Digital presence should never replace tangible, face-to-face fellowship, as established in the above foundational theology section. That being said, Veenstra demonstrates that social media (if properly wielded) could fill a need many congregations grapple with. Churches must establish a social media presence to better engage with their congregation, both the upcoming millennial generation and those who are physical separate from the congregation.

Few testimonies from Hillsong Australia are posted on their account, local churches would not be advised to follow Hillsong's example here. Sharing testimonies is part of healthy church life, fulfilling the desire of millennials to forge connections and find identity in community. One can observe bits of testimonies being shared by Instagram users, who daily participate in the "instant sharing of visual moments of the user's everyday life [which] has made the platform popular" (Russman & Svensson, 2016). Public figure, Christian, and comedian Chaz Smith placed a highlight entitled "HOPE" on his Instagram account. In it he shares the gospel with his followers via video, explaining that he found comfort in Christian scripture while going through a trying season (Smith, 2018). While this is a private account, Smith's choice inadvertently raises a challenge to local churches. Few churches share the gospel on their Instagram account, in some accounts even scripture rarely makes an appearance.

Hillsong lost an opportunity in the realm of testimony sharing, especially considering the Church is called to “undivided visible fellowship” (Newbigin, 2008, 72), and the fact that more than 130,000 people attend their Sunday services on a global scale (Hillsong Church Fact Sheet, n.d., para. 5). Millennials clearly ascribe weight to identity. Coupled with their desire to associate with brands that seemingly align their perceived identity with their desired identity, sharing congregant testimonies should be integral to church Instagram routines. Churches also should ensure their holistic identity as a local church is being shared in the form of doctrine and works of faith. As demonstrated in this case study, Hillsong Australia shared less than a dozen visuals which were explicitly and visually tied to doctrine (by this, the researcher mainly refers to scripture and typography-based visuals, bear in mind the researcher did not analyze captions). Scripture makes it clear that conversion comes from relationship. Both divine and earth-bound. While the Church cannot expect social media alone to convert, the Church also cannot expect community to flourish when they withhold their gospel identity in public accounts.

Along with visually presenting their unique identity as a congregation through testimonies, local churches should consider posting visual reminders of their place in the holistic Church. Individual congregations are called to support their fellow churches for the sake of the Bride, this can occur even through social media presence. One simple way of doing this is to share visuals of local churches networking with each other. This is easily be done by sharing pictures of events where local churches collaborate with each other, or of local church leaders meeting together. Visuals such as these remind the congregation that they do not solely belong to their specific church.

Beyond guiding the behavior and theology of congregants, visual signs of networking further encourage other local churches and leaders to network with that specific congregation. As church leadership member Matt Thompson stated, “Because of social media you know what they're [other local churches] up to and what they're thinking. And that develops things on the relational side” (Veenstra, 2014, para. 19). Hillsong Australia does this to an extent on their Instagram. Though these posts were not mentioned in the above analysis, Hillsong Australia shared a couple posts from outside pastors, particularly Bob Goff. These posts displayed his face clearly, visually tying outside leaders into Hillsong Australia’s Instagram account. A handful of posts containing the faces of outside spiritual leaders are on their account as well (all these posts fell under the “entertainment” theme). Most of these subjects could be described as evangelical brands with a global presence. These include leaders like Louie Giglio and Christian Caine. Hillsong Australia also shares visuals of Hillsong worship leaders, such as artists Brooke Ligertwood and Taya Gaukrodger. Hillsong Australia’s account shares visuals of other, more localized Hillsong church accounts (all fall under the “promotion” theme). Yet Hillsong has not posted many visuals of them networking with local church accounts (outside of their brand) on Instagram.

Social media is an excellent tool for outreach. While congregants should be the primary concern on church accounts, this does not mean churches should entirely ignore God’s command to disciple the lost, even if only on the social media landscape (Matthew 28). One of the first methods church accounts can use to visually proselytize is to decrease their use of visual “Christianese.” For example, many churches heavily use the cross, which congregations may want to include less often in social media accounts so as

not to exclude onlookers. As a seeker church, Hillsong Australia does this well. They appropriate visuals used in the secular, millennial world, and assign different meanings to them by, for example, presenting them alongside explicitly religious symbols. Visual gestures such as this can affect how readily newcomers will approach a local church's community.

Another practical mode of social media outreach for local churches is to modify their use of hashtags. Typically, church accounts only use hashtags pertaining to the niche their brand occupies. While restricting hashtag use to that brand's niche follows logically, and is traditional practice, populating tags that typically go unused by Christians could mean reaching people in need of gospel identity and community. This is partially because the church, unlike most brands, "primarily exists to minister to people, disciple people, fellowship with others, and evangelize the world. The church does not primarily exist to market itself" (Lim, 2017, para. 57). Hashtags largely exist for marketing purposes, meaning the church has more freedom to use hashtags creatively than other brands. Evangelism inherently calls for the Church to meet unreached people where they are. Relevant hashtags for individual posts can and should still be included with a few evangelistic ones, the ratio of evangelistic to relevant hashtags can even be shifted depending on the content of the post, and whether it is intended for congregants or outreach.

Evangelistic efforts can also be improved through the simple act of generosity, specifically in the formation of social media content. Hillsong Australia asks users to attend events and purchase merchandise notably more often than they offer content that meets wants or needs within their congregation. Depending on the church, that may look

like sharing more scripture, relaying portions of testimony, and starting discussions on gospel life. Social media gives opportunity to reach people in their daily routines. They should be reached for more than the sake of event promotion, as this case study demonstrates Hillsong Australia tends to do. As written by Lim (2017):

The church can contextualize and discuss the gospel on social media instead of just persuading people to attend church events. In Acts 17:22-34, Paul contextualized and discussed the gospel with the religious men of Athens by learning about their worship objects, adapting his approach, addressing the altar of their unknown god, and proclaiming his God. (para. 47)

Hillsong has been given a substantial platform with which to spread understanding of both gospel life and culture. Otherwise, as previously established, the Church cannot properly contextualize God-given community and identity. Doing so requires generosity—willingness to spend time understanding both target audience and culture, then taking care to relay the gospel.

Video content has grown increasingly popular among social media consumers, remaining more effective than still visuals. Local churches should incorporate as much video as possible into their accounts. This said, congregations should be wary of the video content they offer. Video content permitting viewers to use platforms—like Instagram—for numbing should be avoided (Hoffman, 2017). To do this, churches might consider posting mostly short videos, with occasionally longer videos, and include a clear call-to-action at the end of each video post. Doing so also adheres to best practice and gives viewers a clear next step that, ideally, draws them offline and into church

community. Use these videos to remind congregants and secular viewers what church community looks like, then let God augment their appetite.

Beyond the creation of content, churches should also be aware of their one-on-one interactions with users via social media, interactions which usually occur through direct messaging. When a user messages a church account, staff may should consider responding with a video instead of a traditional text. Video holds potential to indicate a deeper level of emotional vulnerability to the recipient (Villi & Stocchetti, 2011). By closing emotional and perceived distance between brand and user, video “surrogates physical distance with image-sharing as a form of synchronous gaze, which expresses the need for social proximity” (Villi & Stocchetti, 2011, para. 35). Video content is increasingly becoming the best option when promoting engagement, these video messages indicate some level of care for those who sent the message, reflecting the scriptural commandment that Christ followers be generous, including conversation (Proverbs 21:13). Consequently, it is recommended that whoever handles social media in a local church should be a congregant, ideally one equipped to spiritually lead. Otherwise, smooth transitions between social media community and tangible church community become increasingly difficult. Dispersing video of congregants and leadership throughout a church’s Instagram account is vital.

Regardless of the resources available to local churches (or a lack thereof), social media can easily be leveraged for community growth. Hillsong Australia perfectly demonstrates why visually aesthetic content cannot match accounts designed to engage using visual content containing strong, relevant concepts indicating cognizant generosity towards users. Social media is just that—social. If an account does not foster quality



conversation and strengthened relationships, it renders itself purposeless, at least to the Church. According to scripture, a church is meant to be a body of people committed to each other, united for a singular cause (Hebrews 10:24-25). Small churches can be encouraged by this. An array of resources and high-quality visual content are helpful. Indeed, many suggest that improving social media engagement requires high-quality content and multiple hours of preparing materials, but unnecessary in the formation of supplementary digital church community (Williams, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

Hillsong Australia's Instagram offers a fascinating glance into the Bride's perception of millennial identity and its own God-given one. This is not unusual for a church community, as identity is a permanent fixture within the Christian faith, though terminology for it has varied. In some senses, identity is the essence of faith. Faith, according to Christian scripture, means learning to recognize who God is and who oneself is, growing ever familiar and at ease with both identities. Humanity—secular and religious alike—cannot help but grapple with all the captivating, unknowable intricacies of identity. Visual manifestations of this wrestling are inevitable, just as unavoidably, meanings are inextricably tied to all visuals. Regardless of their intentionality or inaction in the world of symbols, churches are influenced by them. The God of Christian scripture deliberately and thoughtfully speaks to His Bride using rich, visual symbols. The Bride must consider her visual response.

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