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The Impact of Social Media on Young People and Christian Chaplains

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Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgments.....	i
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Statement of Purpose.....	2
Statement of Importance of the Problem.....	3
Statement of Position on the Problem.....	4
Limitations/Delimitations.....	6
Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework.....	7
Introduction.....	7
Literature Review.....	8
The Influence of Social Media on the World.....	9
Consumption of Social Media.....	10
The Relationship between Social Media and Addiction.....	12
How Social Media Affects Spiritual Formation.....	13
Conclusion.....	15
Chapter 3: Social Media, Spiritual Formation & Chaplaincy.....	15
Introduction.....	15
Defining Spiritual Growth and Recession.....	16
Social Media and Spiritual Growth.....	18
How Social Media is Currently Being Utilized in Religious Organizations.....	21
Social Media and Chaplaincy.....	23
Conclusion.....	27
Chapter 4: Results.....	27
The Overall Picture of Social Media and its Effects.....	27
How Religious Organizations Can Improve Current Social Media Practices.....	30
What Chaplains Can Do in Response to Social Media.....	33
Conclusion.....	34
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	34
Research Implications.....	34

Research Applications.....	36
Research Limitations.....	37
Further Research.....	39
Why the Chaplain?.....	41
Conclusion.....	42
Bibliography.....	44
Appendix I - Institutional Review Board Letter of Certification.....	48
Appendix II - Liberty University Rawlings School of Divinity Thesis Approval Sheet.....	49

Abstract

Social media is a ubiquitous form of technology in the modern world. It encompasses not only cell phone applications such as Facebook, but also gaming platforms and even the Internet itself. Social media has negative effects on not only psychological development but also on spiritual development. It has far-reaching influence, can be extremely addicting, and can dull spirituality. However, with the right training, social media can be used for beneficial psychological and spiritual development. There is research that social media largely amplifies the mindset users are already in. This can result in spiritual growth if that is the user's intent. Due to the varying nature of individual's perception of Internet content, this results in unsystematic outcomes.

Chaplains will frequently be exposed to social media in their ministry since they work with teenagers and young adults. Research indicates Internet use continues to grow with time, further exposing individuals to social media. Social media has been shown to affect individuals even outside of their respective platforms. Chaplains can teach those they minister to use social media responsibly in order to achieve spiritual growth. Researchers agree that chaplains should educate individuals on proper time allocation, and on proper ethical behavior. With proper training, social media can be used for spiritual formation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Social media is a very salient aspect of today's world. Nearly everyone has witnessed some form of the trend, from Facebook to Instagram. Research suggests the average person spends twenty-six hours a week online.¹ YouTube, TikTok and other social media applications even come pre-installed on smart televisions, further increasing access to the general population. However, there is a severe problem with social media: it is addictive and has been linked to negative side effects.² While social media is thought to be useful and perhaps pleasant for Internet discussions as it brings awareness to different topics and issues experienced in other areas far from where the user is, this has not been reality. Social media along with the Internet failed to create a global village where everyone discusses problems civilly but instead created different ideological factions who fight with one another.³ Since social media is addictive, there is an addiction cycle resulting in the desire to consume it more often.⁴ More time is spent on social media than could be spent working, learning or building physical relationships. Most importantly, time spent on social media could be allocated to spiritual growth. In addition to this, since social media propagates different viewpoints constantly, it presents a direct threat to spiritual formation. This is especially true for younger people, who may not yet have fully developed their beliefs. Younger people are defined broadly by the United Nations as anyone

¹ Kort Marley, *Navigating the Digital Sea: Gospel Guidance for Social Media* (Brenham, TX: Lucid Books, 2016).

² Meghan Wood, Hayden Center & Stacy C. Parenteau, "Social Media Addiction and Psychological Adjustment: Religiosity and Spirituality in the Age of Social Media," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 19, no. 9 (2016): 972-983.

³ Chris Martin, *Terms of Service: The Real Cost of Social Media* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2022), 45.

⁴ Vikram R. Bhargava & Manuel Velasquez. "Ethics of the Attention Economy: The Problem of Social Media Addiction," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (07, 2021): 321-59.

between the ages of fifteen to twenty-four, though there are varying definitions.⁵ Social media can cause syncretism at best, and cause a complete rejection of religion at worst. Social media can propagate falsehoods about religion, whether intentional or not. For example, one can find a plethora of online articles stating Christianity supports slavery, that Christianity is compatible with other religions or that Jesus is merely derived from pagan gods. Naturally, many of these articles claim complete opposite things, resulting in spiritual confusion. Jude 1:3 tells the Church to earnestly contend for the faith. In this case, it is necessary for the Church to respond to social media. It is necessary to learn how exactly it is impacting younger people and what can be done about it. One group of people that have to be prepared to deal with the effects of social media are chaplains. Specifically, there are chaplains in the church and in other religious organizations that frequently deal with younger people. Chaplains are responsible for fostering spiritual growth, and social media can present another obstacle for growth.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the effects of social media on the spiritual formation of younger people in the church and in religious organizations. Since chaplains are going to be interacting with young people (between the ages of fifteen to twenty-four) in religious environments, it is important chaplains impart helpful strategies to them so that way they can use social media in a Christ-honoring way. In addition to this, this thesis plans to see how chaplains can learn to use social media to foster spiritual growth with the younger generation. Utilizing social media allows chaplains to have their voice carried over across the web making it easily accessible to those who are unable to attend a faith-based organization. This would be a useful benefit for people who may be watching their content from a faraway place, or

⁵ United Nations, “Who Are the Youth?,” accessed December 10th, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>.

even those who are sick or have transportation issues. For the chaplain, this allows people who have never heard them speak before to obtain a first look into what the chaplain's work is all about and opens the door for opportunities of salvation. Along with this, chaplains are able to use social media as a dynamic resource to get unbelievers involved in church. For example, social media can allow chaplains to share event details such as a Halloween trunk or treat event at a church and would allow opportunities of personal interaction to occur. Many unbelievers would not go to a church or other religion organizations for reasons other than to celebrate a major holiday such as Christmas or events such as weddings. However, if chaplains used social media as a platform to reach out to unbelievers, it would be an appealing opportunity for those who would feel uncomfortable going to church normally. A result of this would be the number of people expanding in the church. More exposure to the Church, in this case through social media, allows chaplains more opportunities to share Christ with others.

Statement of Importance of the Problem

This is important because, as technology is always evolving, chaplains need to be informed to stay relevant in their workplace. Chaplains have to understand social media in order offer any salient advice on avoiding the negative aspects. Through the research contained below, it is clear chaplains have the ability to offer positive spiritual advice on social media platforms. It is important though for it to be done in a professional manner.

Using social media throughout chaplaincy is vital as it surpasses the barriers of not being able to speak to or hear the message from a chaplain in person. During COVID-19, many churches closed down and people were not able to hear spiritual messages unless they searched for it themselves. However, social media did not close down. This resulted in many receiving misinformation about Christianity and religion in general. This is the negative aspect of social

media which is impacting younger people who may not have a solid understanding of theology. The bright side is social media made the possibility to hear spiritual messages through the Internet which removed the barriers of COVID-19 and other governmental regulations. It has been shown social media platforms such as Facebook have been instrumental in the growth of churches (in this case, prophetic churches) in Africa.⁶ Social media also has potential for healthcare, as it was shown that digital media offered feelings of spiritual comfort during the pandemic.⁷ If social media did not exist during that time, people would have turned elsewhere for spiritual growth. If chaplains refused to use it, the same thing will occur. However, through the use of social media, many chaplains can help those they minister to improve their spiritual formation. It is vital that social media is not overlooked when it comes to chaplaincy as this is a tool that has transformed many lives.

Social media has a huge impact on spirituality every day, though it is typically not a positive one. Using social media to spread positive spiritual influences reassures people that there is hope in God and that they are not alone through whatever they are going through. Without chaplains utilizing social media, people will continue to use it anyway but will not receive many of the positive benefits available to them.

Statement of Position on the Problem

The impacts of social media are very severe, and it can take a toll on spiritual growth if it is not used in the proper manner. This is why it is so important for chaplains to raise awareness to the dangers of social media and to help younger people use it in the proper way. Since social

⁶ Mookgo Kgate. "Social media and religion: Missiological perspective on the link between Facebook and the emergence of prophetic churches in southern Africa" *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39, no. 1 (5 July 2018).

⁷ Papadopoulos Irena, Lazzarino Runa, Steve Wright, Logan Poppy Ellis, & Koulouglioti Christina. "Spiritual Support during COVID-19 in England: A Scoping Study of Online Sources." *Journal of Religion and Health* 60, no. 4 (08, 2021): 2209-2230.

media is not going away, chaplains need to make social media another tool for spiritual formation. It is worth noting that chaplains' use of social media should likely be limited to containing a professional profile; experts recommend against adding people they serve as "friends".⁸

Young people present a unique challenge with regards to social media as they see themselves as a digital resident.⁹ Technology even shapes their brain and thought patterns.¹⁰ Instead of merely using technology as a tool, they believe themselves to be residents of the online community. This has implications for spiritual growth, where they might find identity online instead of in a church. There is promise though that, despite the negative influences of social media, it can affect young people positively.

Social media has value for spirituality. Social media has been used successfully for evangelism.¹¹ Social media can produce spiritual inspiration and therefore growth. Research has shown social media usage has a significant positive impact on employees' relational energy and workplace spirituality.¹² Therefore, social media does not only have negative effects on the younger generation. Chaplains can clearly adapt to social media in order bring positive spiritual formation. Chaplains must keep in mind that different generations use different platforms. The

⁸ Mark Newitt, Martin Kerry, Julian Perkins & Louise Yaull, "Boundaries and Dual Relationships Within Chaplaincy Care: Reflections Following a Case Review," *Health & Social Care Chaplaincy* 11, no. 1 (2023): 24-39.

⁹ Bex Lewis, "Social Media, Peer Surveillance, Spiritual Formation, and Mission: Practising Christian Faith in a Surveilled Public Space," *Surveillance & Society* 16, no. 4 (2018): 517.

¹⁰ Nathan Hedt, "Missional Spirituality among Digital Natives: Technology, Spirituality and Mission in an Age of Social Media," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 47, no. 3 (December, 2013): 187-202.

¹¹ Allen Williams, *Social Media : A Tool For Discipleship*, Lynchburg, Va: Liberty University, 2023.

¹² Fei Zhou and Jian Mou, "Does Social Media Usage Evoke Employees' Spirituality? A Cross-Level Moderation Model of Inclusive Leadership," *Information Technology & People* 35, no. 4 (2022): 1383-1409.

younger generation prefer YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter (now known as X).¹³

Therefore, since the younger generation seek spirituality from different platforms, chaplains need to be there to provide the positive influence that they need.

Limitations/Delimitations

Social media has only been around for a few decades. There is limited research on the long-term effects of its' usage. In addition to this, research shows there is not one generally accepted way for social media to be used by professionals. It is important to point out that the impact of social media specifically on young people has limited information. Most articles and resources dedicated to the impact of social media do not have one age group in mind. Instead, they are general and usually do not have specific demographics in mind. Most general information can be applied to younger people, however.

It is necessary to define several terms for this research. The big term needed to be defined is spirituality, specifically discussing what is considered growth and recession. For research purposes, this data has to be quantifiable. This research will focus on two methods to quantify spiritual growth: knowledge of theology/religion and spiritual participation. Spiritual participation includes attending religious meetings, serving in a religious organization, praying, performing religious rituals such as Communion, reading religious works, or seeking religious counsel.

It is necessary to define what is meant by the term chaplaincy. Chaplains in this research are religious workers in churches, religious organizations or secular organizations whose goal is to provide spiritual growth for those they minister to. Since the goal of this research is to focus more on the effects of social media, there will be limited discussions on specific contexts of

¹³ Caleb J. Lines, *The Great Digital Commission: Embracing Social Media for Church Growth and Transformation* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021).

chaplaincy. The research is meant to help religious workers in varying contexts to use spiritual media effectively and to help others avoid the negative aspects of it.

Social media itself has to be defined as platforms that are always changing. Social media typically refers to platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter (now known as X), Snapchat, Instagram, Reddit, Pinterest and many others. However, the effects of social media are not merely limited to these traditional platforms. Social media also refers broadly to the Internet itself, as there are many platforms where people interact with each other such as online video games. Online gaming, while it is a different format than platforms like Facebook, should still be considered social media as there are peer-to-peer interactions.

Lastly, “young people” need to be defined. The United Nations defines young people as an age group between fifteen and twenty-four years old.¹⁴ This represent a diverse population with different social media backgrounds. The problem with this definition is it is mostly arbitrary. The United Nations merely notes this was their agreed upon definition. They consider anyone younger than fifteen to be a child. Logically, it could be argued that people younger than fifteen or older than twenty-four should be included in the definition of “young people”. However, for this research, using the definition from the United Nations is sufficient as a starting point, considering that research articles on the subject of social media may fail to identify their age groups when discussing usage.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework of Social Media

Introduction

Social media is a somewhat vague term that refers to a wide gamut of technology and programs that are available to the public. As a result of the seemingly endless amounts of

¹⁴ United Nations. “Who Are the Youth?” Accessed December 10th, 2023. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>.

applications that can be found on the Internet, defining social media in concrete terms has been somewhat divisive. Sonica Rautela and Adya Sharma in their article “Spirituality and Social Media: Connecting the Dots” quote a paper written by A. M. Kaplan and M. Haenlein, who defined social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundation of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”.¹⁵ The key here is that social media involves the creation and exchanging of information. As mentioned previously, it is first and foremost necessary to understand social media does not merely refer to traditional cell phone applications such as X or Facebook. It includes gaming websites such as World of Warcraft, online chatrooms such as Discord and even file distribution websites such as Dropbox, as all of these services include users interacting with content and other people. An oversimplified understanding of social media would arrive one at the conclusion that it is simply another term for the Internet, where most interactions would involve some type of rendezvous with user-generated content. With that in mind, the Internet can then be understood as a type of third place where a separate identity is formed which is disparate from the one found at home or in school.¹⁶ This unique identity found on social media is paramount, as it is what determines whether one will obtain any relevant spiritual growth.

Literature Review

Since it is clear that social media is identified as most Internet software, articles pertaining to the effects of Internet use as a whole are relevant to the discussion. This is a

¹⁵ Sonica Rautela & Adya Sharma, “Spirituality and Social Media: Connecting the Dots”, *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies (iJIM)* 13, no. 9 (2019): 81-98.

¹⁶ Karen-Marie Yust, “Digital Power: Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Children’s Spirituality”, *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 19, no. 2 (2014): 133-143.

necessary caveat as literature directly mentioning the effects of social media is somewhat scarce, while articles referencing the repercussions of Internet use abound. There is much that can be said regarding the pervasiveness of the Internet, consumption cycles of its content and the potential addiction it can enforce. All of this lays the ground work for the impact of social media on the subject in question: spiritual growth. Not only have peer-reviewed articles been consulted for the subject matter, but there is also an ample amount of books written by adroit Christians regarding their experiences with social media and how it has impacted their ministry's spirituality.

The Influence of Social Media on the World

First and foremost, before delving into any characteristics of social media, it is important to understand at the root that social media conveys strong influences. Even individuals who do not partake in social media often end up hearing about it. One form of influence that frequently makes its way into the news is so called social media "challenges". There are positive challenges such as Trastag challenge, and negative ones such as the Tide Pod Challenge.¹⁷ The Tide Pod Challenge in particular has made news headlines,¹⁸ showing the effects of social media often reach farther than just those who are using the Internet. Social media also becomes a breeding ground for misinformation, where one study by Alonso-López et al revealed that websites such as TikTok quickly disseminate information and make it hard to determine what is true.¹⁹ One example of this misinformation spilling over into the public sphere is the case of the Stanley drinking cups. This brand of drinkware received renewed media attention because the company

¹⁷ Taylor Thompson & Manar Basir, "Responding to Harmful Social Media Trends", *Communiqué* 51, no. 8 (June, 2023): 4-6.

¹⁸ Kathleen Joyce, "Teens Eating More Tide Pods Than Ever, Despite Efforts to Stop Trend", *Fox News*, January 26, 2018, accessed March 30, 2024.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

created a special Valentine’s Day version for 2024. However, social media users began claiming that the cup contained dangerous levels of lead. It is important to note this claim is false. There was so much misinformation being spread about the tumbler that Snopes published an article fact-checking this social media claim, citing erroneous claims made on social media.²⁰ Once again it is revealed that social media has tremendous influence on mainstream perception. Lastly, it is important to understand that sometimes mainstream culture and social media share an inverse of influence. One example is the MTV show “16 and Pregnant”. While this show is not social media, one article notes that the popularity of this program resulted in a surge of Internet interest in topics such as “abortion” and “birth control”.²¹ Sometimes alternate media forms lead others to search the Internet and social media for answers as this example shows, which can be a dangerous trend if such searches produce false information.

Consumption of Social Media

Social media not only influences the mainstream culture at large but is also currently experiencing extremely high consumption rates. Karen-Marie Yust, professor of Christian Education at Union Presbyterian Seminary, provides a succinct overview of digital consumption among young people.²² She notes that 90–95% of American teens use social media on a regular basis, 75% of 13–17-year-olds have a social networking site profile (with Facebook (68%) and X (22%) being the highest), 37% of teens (12–17 years) like to video chat (with higher numbers of girls (42%) than boys (33%)), one in four teens (27%) upload videos, and 13% live stream

²⁰ Jack Izzo, “Do Stanley Cups Contain Dangerous Levels of Lead?”, accessed February 24, 2024, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/stanley-cup-lead/>.

²¹ Melissa S. Kearney & Phillip B. Levine, “Media Influences on Social Outcomes: The Impact of MTV’s ‘16 and Pregnant’ on Teen Childbearing”, *The American Economic Review* 105, no. 12 (2015): 3597–3632.

²² Karen-Marie Yust, “Digital Power: Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Children’s Spirituality”, *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 19, no. 2 (2014): 133-143.

video.²³ It is clear that American children have a deep-seated fascination and desire to use social media. However, the same is true for children in other parts of the world. Yust also provided some statistics regarding European children, where instant messaging and video watching are common Internet activities by 62% and 76% of respondents respectively.²⁴ It is also very common for European children to post images (39%) and to post messages (31%) on social networking sites, while one in seven (16%) are also using filesharing websites.²⁵ Lastly, it is worth noting that almost one in three children (31%) has used a webcam at least once.²⁶

So far general Internet usage has been documented among the younger generation, but it does not include all of the social media usage. One aspect not mentioned thus far is gaming, a very popular pastime. This hobby is shared cross culturally and is not only present in the United States. One study of over 25,000 European Union children notes that over 83% of 9–16-year-olds enjoy playing games, while another study found 53% of Indian children identified gaming as their favorite online activity.²⁷ A 2009 Canadian study found that 80% of boys under twenty years old play online games (compared with 20% of girls in the same age group), and most play between 12 hours and 24 hours per week.²⁸ Lastly, a 2010 study released in the USA reported that children 11–14 years old on average spend the most time playing video games each day (85 minutes), but all children ages 8–18 on average spend more than an hour of daily gaming

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

activity.²⁹ The American study does not note an average online playtime (which is the actual social media consumption instead of merely gaming by itself), but it is certainly going to be congruent.

Such statistics explain that the average young person is consuming multiple forms of social media for multiple hours a day. The mere fact of utilizing social media this often begs the question of addiction. So far social media has only been discussed primarily from an observational standpoint. Since social media is a present, useful and readily available form of technology, it will naturally be utilized and enjoyed. However, this study is concerned with the effects it has on the younger generation. One negative consequence of social media to be discussed is addiction. It is necessary to understand the exact relationship between social media usage and addiction in order to understand the potential negative consequences it may have for spiritual growth.

The Relationship between Social Media and Addiction

Social media can be inferred to be addictive, given the fact that it was shown it is so often used. Traditionally, the definition of Internet addiction is “characterized by excessive or poorly controlled preoccupations, urges or behaviors regarding computer use and Internet access that lead to impairment or distress.”³⁰ However, Internet addiction is more complex than this. There are a variety of reasons that lead to one becoming addicted to the Internet. Young et al. break down Internet addiction into five subtypes: cybersexual addiction (addicted to pornography and other sexual content), cyber-relational addiction (becoming addicted to virtual

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Martha Shaw & Donald W. Black, "Internet Addiction: Definition, Assessment, Epidemiology and Clinical Management", *CNS Drugs* 22, no. 5 (05, 2008): 353-65.

relationships at the cost of real ones), net compulsions (online gambling or shopping addictions), information addiction (constantly searching for knowledge) and lastly computer addiction (essentially an online gaming addiction).³¹ Social media addiction can be the result of any of those highly enticing pastimes.

Social media addiction is clearly documented and there are many reasons one might become addicted. However, it is important to understand the negative effects of this addiction. First and foremost, social media addiction leads to a wide range of mental health issues. One study on Facebook use found that intrusion (thinking about social media when not using it) caused depression, anxiety, stress and even relationship dissatisfaction (when used to excessively monitor others activities).³² Facebook is not the only social media platform available, and the findings of the study will correlate with any related platform such as X. As a result, social media intrusion from any platform due to addiction negatively affects one's mental health. Given the inherent risks addiction poses to mental health, it is clear that such negative psyche will affect one's desire to learn and improve their spiritual formation.

How Social Media Affects Spiritual Formation

Spiritual content is common on social media, with 46% of Americans claiming to have seen religious content shared over the Internet.³³ Social media and spirituality have a complex relationship. Two studies previously found that those who read the Bible more frequently are less likely to use social networking sites, and highly religious individuals visit social media sites less

³¹ Ibid.

³² Meghan Wood, Hayden Center & Stacy C. Parenteau, "Social Media Addiction and Psychological Adjustment: Religiosity and Spirituality in the Age of Social Media," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 19, no. 9 (2016): 972-983.

³³ Janine Williams & Jayne Krisjanous, "Spreading the Word: Exploring Spiritual Consumption on Social Media," *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 40, no. 1 (2023): 124-135.

frequently.³⁴ Such findings imply social media usage and religious commitment are inversely proportional. However, Meghan Wood, Hayden Center & Stacy C. Parenteau found that social media usage only imparted the negative mental health side effects on those who lacked the self-efficacy component (being confident in their own abilities to solve problems) of spiritual wellbeing.³⁵ This means it is not necessarily true that social media usage results in negative spiritual wellbeing. However, it does mean that individuals who are religious need to have the correct mindset, or they risk suffering consequences. Ultimately, social media is an active agent in the spiritual formation process, and it has the power to change how users act and how they view themselves.³⁶

Social media presents the biggest roadblock to spirituality in the form of misinformation and disrespectful interactions. Firstly, passive scrolling (simply viewing posts instead of making them) has been shown to provide news knowledge and offline political participation.³⁷ Social media can therefore provide at least bare minimum knowledge on spirituality, but the danger is misinformation where the user does not attempt to research if what they are seeing and or posting is true. Will Marler and Eszter Hargittai found that participants in their study were less concerned about misinformation when it came to religion on social media when it is viewed as subjective and personal.³⁸ Secondly, social media, since discussions (especially about sensitive

³⁴ Meghan Wood, Hayden Center & Stacy C. Parenteau, "Social Media Addiction and Psychological Adjustment: Religiosity and Spirituality in the Age of Social Media," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 19, no. 9 (2016): 972-983.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ehsan Arzroomchilar. "Social Media and Religiosity: A (Post) Phenomenological Account," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 21, no. 63 (Winter, 2022): 96-112.

³⁷ Will Marler & Eszter Hargittai, "Doesn't Seem Like a Place to Interact, or Interact Well?": Motivations to Discuss (and Not) Science and Religion on Social Media," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 9 (2023).

³⁸ Ibid.

topics such as politics and religion) can devolve into disrespectful interactions, many users choose not to participate. Marler and Hargittai note that posts about religion, particularly when politics become enmeshed with them, become hostile and result in users becoming discouraged from participating in the discussion.³⁹ Given there are reasons users will refrain from interacting with perceived sensitive content (i.e., religion), limited educational insight and spiritual growth result. Despite the potential for spiritual growth, social media has many roadblocks such as addiction, misinformation and a potentially hostile environment that can be destructive for spirituality.

Conclusion

Social media is a massive phenomenon that is actively influencing not only American culture, but world culture. It not only has the power to negatively impact those that use it frequently, but it also has been shown to impact even those not directly using the software (i.e., dangerous Internet challenges making it into the news headlines and rapidly disseminated misinformation). Given the fact that social media can cause great harm, chaplains need to be prepared to deal with this form of technology in their ministries. Although much has been written so far on the negative affects social media can have on mental and spiritual wellbeing, there is hope for chaplaincy. As will be shown in the following chapter, social media has potential for spiritual formation when used the right way.

Chapter 3: Social Media, Spiritual Formation & Chaplaincy

Introduction

It is clear social media can have great detrimental outcomes on spiritual development. However, social media has the potential to achieve spiritual growth. Karen-Marie Yust is hopeful

³⁹ Ibid.

regarding the prospective for spiritual advancement, noting that imaginary nature of social media is conducive to sacred experiences.⁴⁰ This article referred to experiences that could be had in online 3D worlds such as in video games (e.g., World of Warcraft) or in applications such as Second Life. While social media platforms that utilize less senses such as X may be harder to achieve those sacred experiences, it is still surely possible to have them. In the case of X or Facebook, they would only be achievable by reading or watching other posts (as opposed to interacting with other users in real time with audio and video). One article by Timothy Hanchin notes the power of redemptive reading for spiritual formation, explaining that sacred reading has been neglected as a spiritual disciple.⁴¹ However, if it is possible to have spiritual experiences by reading sacred works such as the Bible or the Quran (an activity typically encouraged by both religions respectively), it would be possible to do the same thing by reading spiritual content in a digital form. In addition to this, during COVID-19, many turned to social media and the Internet in order to perform religious activities, clearly indicating that users feel some type of spiritual gain from online content.⁴² While there may be people coming to social media to have their spiritual needs met, that does not necessarily mean it is effective. In order to see if it is effective, it is necessary to define spiritual growth and recession.

Defining Spiritual Growth and Recession

In order to understand any potential benefits social media and the Internet may have for spiritual formation, it is necessary to quantify spiritual growth in some manner. While this is a

⁴⁰ Karen-Marie Yust, "Digital Power: Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Children's Spirituality," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 19, no. 2 (2014): 133-143.

⁴¹ Timothy Hanchin, "Read as You Believe: Redemptive Reading as Spiritual Pedagogy for Integrative Education," *Religious Education* 113, no. 4 (2018): 419-433.

⁴² Olanrewaju Tahir Aduragba, Alexandra Cristea, Pete Phillips, Jonas Kurlberg & Jialin Yu, "Religion and Spirituality on Social Media in the Aftermath of the Global Pandemic," *Cornell University* (2022): <https://arxiv.org/abs/2212.11121>

challenging task that has been attempted for many years, there are ways to determine when spirituality is heading in a positive direction. Spiritual growth is not as simple as a linear equation, where each day either adds or retracts one unit from a total “spiritual bank account”. It is a dynamic process that is culmination of many aspects of one’s life. One study by Paul Hoelsing and Edward Hogan attempted to provide an overview of methods used by Catholic seminaries to verify spiritual growth, where the study highlighted the inherent shortcomings in both self-reporting (someone describing their own spirituality) and observational (someone describing another’s spirituality) studies.⁴³ While the study showed the idea of mapping out spiritual growth may not be complete, it also explained that great progress has been made on the subject and that it is far from impossible to quantify. For the purpose of this research, studies utilizing both of these types of methods will be considered since the intention is merely to show that spiritual growth is possible, instead of trying to prove the best method to quantify such growth.

As stated in the beginning, this research will focus on two methods to quantify spiritual growth: knowledge of theology/religion and spiritual participation. Spiritual participation includes attending religious meetings, serving in a religious organization, praying, performing religious rituals such as Communion, reading religious works, or seeking religious counsel. Knowledge of theology is something that can be objectively measured with an evaluation of some kind, though for this type of research it is unnecessary. Instead, this study instead seeks to learn if social media can be a place where one acquires theological knowledge.

⁴³ Paul Hoelsing & Edward Hogan, “You Can’t Measure That...Can You?: How a Catholic Seminary Approaches the Question of Measuring Growth in Human and Spiritual Formation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 14, no. 2 (November 2021): 254–75.

The nature flipside of growth is recession. Recession in the terms of this study will be understood as a reversal of theological knowledge and spiritual participation. Reversal of knowledge is a difficult idea to define, as knowledge is not typically something that is lost. However, misinformation is the danger when it comes to reversal of theological knowledge, as it may convince one to abandon traditional spiritual ideas for more sensational ones. Religious misinformation on social media has been linked to radical extremism (such as users calling for jihad.⁴⁴) Radicalism, especially when it calls for violence or revenge, departs from proper Christian spiritual formation (i.e., 1 John 2:9-17). In addition to this, radicalism often calls users away from doing typically spiritual activities such as serving the poor or performing religious rituals such as Communion, in order to engage in online or sometimes in person battles with others. This recession is what is dangerous for spiritual growth. In addition to radicalism, stagnation is also a danger to spiritual growth as it can lead to recession. Since social media is addictive and can take up time that can be allocated to other activities, it can damage spiritual formation when it replaces religious activities.

Social Media and Spiritual Growth

Social media has large potential for spiritual growth. It has already been shown that social media was instrumental in growing prophetic churches in Africa (showing that social media can impact spiritual participation, which is one of the two previously mentioned components of spiritual formation).⁴⁵ Janine Williams and Jayne Krisjanous wrote a paramount article concerning what is in many ways foundational to understanding how social media can be

⁴⁴ Al-Zaman, Sayeed & Shiblee Noman. "A Dataset on Social Media Users' Engagement With Religious Misinformation." *Data in Brief* 49 (2023).

⁴⁵ Mookgo Kgatle. "Social media and religion: Missiological perspective on the link between Facebook and the emergence of prophetic churches in southern Africa" *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39, no. 1 (5 July 2018).

used for spiritual purposes.⁴⁶ Using Facebook, they conducted an experiment to understand how users interpret spiritual content.⁴⁷ First and foremost, they conclude spiritual inspiration (users desiring to grow spiritually) and affirmation (users feeling reassurance that others feel the same way as them) are possible with social media. They even note that users are able to experience spiritual influence relating to salvation, transcendence and normal everyday problems.⁴⁸ This is key part of measuring spiritual growth as determined in the previously. However, they note that, in order for users to gain some type of benefit from these spiritual messages, users have to view the authors of spiritual posts as authentic and have to seek to derive meaning from the content.⁴⁹ In their research, they break down users into categories, noting that two metrics are important for social media: high/low meaning (whether the user thinks deeply about the message or not) and high/low participation (whether the user comments or interacts with the post at all such as sharing it). They came up with six groups to label users in, where “Evangelists” were users who deeply considered the message and interacted with the message, while “Sceptics” received little from the message and in some ways viewed the spiritual content negatively. There is also a negative side of spiritual inspiration, which this study labels as “Dark Angels.”⁵⁰ This refers to users who post spiritual messages from a negative perspective. For example, Dark Angels might create a spiritual message that is meant to shame a target audience or to make a target audience feel guilty. Guilt is an awareness of having done something wrong, while shame is a sense of

⁴⁶ Janine Williams & Jayne Krisjanous, "Spreading the Word: Exploring Spiritual Consumption on Social Media," *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 40, no. 1 (2023): 124-135.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

falling short of the standards and ideals of oneself or others.⁵¹ The bottom line is that spiritual growth is possible on social media, though users have to want to be inspired. It can result in users gaining more theological knowledge, and it can encourage spiritual participation. However, such benefits may be hard to gain without the right mindset.

The topic of “Dark Angels” brings up the question of whether ostracism, or similar practices of shaming or confronting, are effective forms of spiritual growth. There are no doubt users who seek to instigate responses on a variety of subjects, and religion is naturally one of them. It is beneficial to know whether it could be useful or not, even if it might not be the most effective way. One study on ostracism (social shunning) found that it typically elicits abject misery, but it can cause individuals to attempt to reconnect with their community.⁵² Shunning is different than posting negative comments on Facebook, but it is similar in that users are trying to coerce others to change or else they will be shamed. However, the same study notes that reactions to shunning occur depending on one’s personality, and can result in some very negative side effects such as the person becoming antisocial and aggressive.⁵³ Since it is not very effective at promoting reconnection to the community (it is only one possible reaction), it is not a recommended tactic to use on social media.

Just as certain types of plants prefer specific conditions in order to grow, users have preferences for how they would like to encounter spiritual content. One would think based on the previous discussion on the “Dark Angels” that causing users to feel guilt or shame may hinder their desire to change. As was seen previously, users do not like engaging with overly political or

⁵¹ Jessica Yakeley, “Shame, culture and mental health,” *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry* 72, no. S1 (2018): 20-22.

⁵² Kipling D. Williams, “Ostracism,” *The Annual Review of Psychology* 58 (2007): 425-452.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

hostile content.⁵⁴ It is helpful to know how users prefer to interact with spiritual content. One research article found that posts that had greater cognitive content (for example, live broadcasts, video recordings, announcements, and devotionals) were perceived to contribute more to church attenders' spiritual formation than did posts with less cognitive content (humorous memes, photos, inspirational quotations, and external links).⁵⁵ Subsequently, social media can then impact spiritual formation in powerful ways. As technology continues to evolve, no longer are social media messages limited to simple text posts or the occasional image. With the ability to share podcasts and full-length sermons, there is real potential to reach younger generations, as this research shows.

How Social Media is Currently Being Utilized in Religious Organizations

While it has been shown social media has the power to impart theological knowledge and to impact religious behavior, it is worthwhile to investigate the current state of affairs in religious programs. Since younger generations prefer to use social media applications, they are likely present in religious organizations in some capacity, whether it is welcomed and encouraged or ignored. Allen Williams, a pastor at Christ Community Church (CCC) in Pinehurst, North Carolina, found that his church was vastly behind the times when it came to social media.⁵⁶ He noted that while the local community used multiple different platforms on social media, his church was not using these platforms as a way to provide spiritual growth.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Will Marler & Eszter Hargittai, "Doesn't Seem Like a Place to Interact, or Interact Well": Motivations to Discuss (and Not) Science and Religion on Social Media," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 9 (2023).

⁵⁵ David R. Dunaetz, Chelsea Heath, Raisa Recto, Danny Soria, & Stephanie J. Wilden, "What Should Churches Post on Facebook? An Exploratory Study of the Perceived Contribution of Facebook Posts to the Mission of Churches," *Christian Education Journal* 20 no. 1 (2023): 47-64.

⁵⁶ Allen Williams, *Social Media : A Tool For Discipleship*, Lynchburg, Va: Liberty University, 2023, 1-2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

However, he mentioned that while his youth ministry is eager to embrace social media and to become innovative, older people in his ministry have privacy concerns regarding social media and so are not as digital platforms.⁵⁸ Generational gaps such as these are not uncommon, and typically occur with many technological advancements. Williams' church highlights what is present in many churches throughout not only the United States, but also in the world.

Social media use between religious organizations varies, but an interesting correlation has been discovered. Young-Joo Lee, writer for *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, found that churches are more likely to adopt a social media platform (in this case, Facebook) if they are involved in political and social service activities.⁵⁹ In addition to this, the study found that organizations that have access to greater resources are more likely to use social media, as these organizations can often afford to have a staff member dedicated to maintaining their pages.⁶⁰ The study does believe there is hope for smaller congregations, as they believe denominational headquarters should offer training for their smaller congregations on how to adopt and use social media.⁶¹ Indeed, Angela Williams Gorrell found that churches often do not understand the connection between faith and media, and so they see no reason for its usage.⁶² It seems that churches often neglect to use social media not by choice, but by ignorance.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Lee, Young-Joo. "Is Your Church "Liked" On Facebook? Social Media Use of Christian Congregations in The United States." *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 28, no. 3 (2017): 383-398.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Angela Williams Gorrell, *Always on: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape, Theology for the Life of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 39.

One study comparing social media usage between Hillsong and the Church of England found that both use various social media platforms to engage their congregations.⁶³ Both church denominations use social media for three purposes: to provide information, to interact with the community, and to call for action.⁶⁴ However, while both denominations are using social media for the same purposes, there is some interesting deviations. For example, Hillsong uses social media for outreach, while researchers saw no such activity done by the Church of England.⁶⁵ Such a study shows that social media usage varies between denominations and even between countries. However, it is clear that churches from all over the world are beginning to recognize social media as an important form of communication, and are trying to discover how it can be used.

Social Media and Chaplaincy

Chaplains are not usually thought of in ecclesiastical settings, and are typically viewed as secular religious workers. However, as the world becomes more diversified, there is a greater need for chaplains. Chaplains are clergy who serve groups of people with different religious beliefs or no religious beliefs at all.⁶⁶ There is formal training for those that desire a position in a religious organization, but churches have a greater need than ever. While many pastors or ministers in a local church may not have an official title as chaplain, they still serve in many of the same capacities. Given that social media is so pervasive among youth as previously seen,⁶⁷

⁶³ Atish Sircar & Jennifer Rowley, “How Are U.K. Churches Using Social Media to Engage with Their Congregations?” *Journal of Public Affairs* 20, no. 1 (2019): e2029.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Naomi K. Paget and Janet R. McCormack, *The Work of the Chaplain* (Judson Press, 2006), iv.

⁶⁷ Karen-Marie Yust, “Digital Power: Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Children’s Spirituality”, *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 19, no. 2 (2014): 133-143.

chaplains should be prepared to handle social media in their youth programs, whether in an ecclesiastical setting or not. One study by Paul K. McClure found that Internet use is associated with increases in being religiously unaffiliated and decreases in religious exclusivism.⁶⁸ There is a greater need for chaplains more than ever, as social media used incorrectly can dull one's desire to be affiliated as only Christian.

Chaplains often bridge the hierarchical chasm between the clergy and the laity. In a study on hospital chaplains, Jennifer Mascaro et al. noted that chaplains reduced patient distress and bolstered resilience as they were able to fill the gap that doctors could not due to time restrictions of healthcare systems.⁶⁹ There is a parallel that can be made. In religious organizations, educators, pastors and officials often disseminate spiritual teachings to the masses, but only have so much allotted time to build relationships with their respective laity. Chaplains can help bridge this gap, providing more interactions with individuals and helping teach them proper spiritual lifestyle, as opposed to only intellectual truths. Any amount of educating users on proper social media usage could be lost being taught only at the pulpit, but will be reinforced with chaplains assisting their respective leaders. Interactions with chaplains tend to improve spiritual formation, as a study by Elena G. van Stee et al. noted that students who engaged with chaplains were more likely to integrate spirituality into daily life and were likely to experience

⁶⁸ Paul K. McClure, "Tinkering with Technology and Religion in the Digital Age: The Effects of Internet Use on Religious Belief, Behavior, and Belonging," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 3 (2017): 455-697.

⁶⁹ Jennifer S. Mascaro, Patricia K. Palmer, Madison Willson, Marcia J. Ash, Marianne P. Florian, Meha Srivastava, Anuja Sharma, Bria Jarrell, Elizabeth R. Walker, Deanna M. Kaplan, Roman Palitsky, Steven P. Cole, George H. Grant & Charles L. Raison, "The Language of Compassion: Hospital Chaplains' Compassion Capacity Reduces Patient Depression via Other-Oriented, Inclusive Language," *Mindfulness* 14 (2023): 2485-2498.

spiritual growth.⁷⁰ One challenge chaplains must keep in mind is modern society's desire for pluralism. Students in universities feel negatively regarding "Christian hegemony and white supremacy" and are looking for chaplains of different backgrounds.⁷¹ The challenge is for chaplains must stay true to their religious commitments, yet to never give off the impression that spirituality favors certain races or backgrounds. Therefore, chaplains are a good asset for churches looking to instill proper social media behavior to their congregations.

As seen previously, social media has potential to educate users on spirituality, given that the nature of the content shared is interesting or engaging, rather than persuasive or promotional.⁷² Social media is also able to provide "positive inspiration" to users, however, the user has to be in the right state of mind.⁷³ Chaplains are essential for this mindset. However, chaplains need to be trained properly. In an article written by Michał Wyrostkiewicz, Joanna Sosnowska, & Aneta Wójciszyn-Wasil describing the use of Catholic social media influencers in today's world, the authors write that it is impossible for such influencers to be leaders without not only a religious education, but also a media education.⁷⁴ Chaplains must dedicate themselves to learning social media platforms and on mastering healthy media habits.

⁷⁰ Elena G. van Stee, Taylor Paige Winfield, Wendy Cadge, John Schmalzbauer, Tiffany Steinwert, Shelly Rambo, Elizabeth Clifford, "Assessing Student Engagement With Campus Chaplains: A Pilot Study From a Residential Liberal Arts College," *Journal of College and Character* 22, no. 3 (2021): 215-238.

⁷¹ Tiffany L. Steinwert, "Responding to Campus Crisis: Equipping College Chaplains Through Theological Education," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 32, no. 1 (2022): 19-25.

⁷² Sonica Rautela & Adya Sharma, "Spirituality and Social Media: Connecting the Dots", *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies (iJIM)* 13, no. 9 (2019): 81-98.

⁷³ Janine Williams & Jayne Krisjanous, "Spreading the Word: Exploring Spiritual Consumption on Social Media," *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 40, no. 1 (2023): 124-135.

⁷⁴ Michał Wyrostkiewicz, Joanna Sosnowska, & Aneta Wójciszyn-Wasil. "The Catholic Influencer as a Challenge for Spiritual Leadership in the Age of Social Media," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 21, no. 61 (Spring, 2022): 81-96.

It is important to conclude with what research suggests chaplains should be teaching younger generations on social media. One mindset that is important is that social media exists to bolster real-world connections.⁷⁵ Social media is a useful tool both for education and for building relationships, but it cannot replace their physical counterparts. As a result, chaplains need to teach users to place limits on their screen time, and to have more meaningful experiences in person. Another lesson that is important for chaplains to learn is that the relationship between social media and real life are complex and multi-faceted. Nathan Roberts, writer of the book *Surface Tensions: Searching for Sacred Connection in a Media-Saturated World*, states that social media creates a sort of digital space where people are present and absent at the same time, noting an experience where his experiences with a potential girlfriend seemed to blur between physical and digital spaces.⁷⁶ This is important for chaplains because people who grew up with social media, as Roberts did, view social media in a similar light. Social media is not just a place one logs on and off from; it shapes a part of their identity, as they have a digital self and a physical self. It is therefore important for chaplains to try and grasp this type of connection with social and digital media. In some ways, it is impossible for younger people to not interact with it in some way (even if it only involves texting). Chaplains have to understand the younger generation's mindset if they want any hopes of impacting their behavior. Lastly, chaplains need to teach the younger generation to post positive interactions. Douglas S. Bursch states that social media expands humanity's opportunity to connect with the entire world, but typically used for divisiveness and hostility.⁷⁷ Chaplains need to encourage users, no matter what platform they are

⁷⁵ Chris Martin, *Terms of Service: The Real Cost of Social Media* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2022), 197.

⁷⁶ Nathan Roberts, *Surface Tensions: Searching for Sacred Connection in a Media-Saturated World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2022), Chapter 6.

⁷⁷ Douglas S. Bursch, *Posting Peace: Why Social Media Divides Us and What We Can Do About It* (Westmont, IL: IVP, 2021), 188.

on, to let the light of Christ shine through their online interactions.⁷⁸ While social media might be used for lascivious or nefarious activities, users have the power to post positive messages. Chaplains have to encourage users to always do the right thing, instead of being held captive to unbridled passion. Social media backfires if what is displayed is not what the Church claims to be.⁷⁹ Chaplains should encourage users to be as authentic as humanly possible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social media presents a new frontier for chaplains in their respective fields. Far from only being a negative influence on spirituality, social media has the power to educate on theological knowledge and to impact religious behavior. However, such benefits will not come without the aid of chaplains and other religious workers. Chaplains have been shown to bolster spiritual growth when they minister effectively.⁸⁰ While pluralism presents a challenge for chaplains in the modern world, it is possible to overcome it with proper training. It rests with chaplains to teach users how to properly use social media as it is not possible for leaders to do it alone. Teaching users to prioritize physical interactions and to act in a manner honoring to Christ are essential if chaplains want social media to not dull spiritual formation.

Chapter 4: Results

The Overall Picture of Social Media and its Effects

After examining various books and articles on the effects of social media and Internet usage, it is abundantly clear that this field of study is an extremely complex topic with differing

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Caleb J. Lines, *The Great Digital Commission: Embracing Social Media for Church Growth and Transformation* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021).

⁸⁰ Elena G. van Stee, Taylor Paige Winfield, Wendy Cadge, John Schmalzbauer, Tiffany Steinwert, Shelly Rambo, Elizabeth Clifford, "Assessing Student Engagement With Campus Chaplains: A Pilot Study From a Residential Liberal Arts College," *Journal of College and Character* 22, no. 3 (2021): 215-238.

opinions. While there were no researchers that outright denied the negative effects of social media (nor even on the popular level are individuals claiming social media is a sinless utopia), individuals will have disparate experiences because of how large the Internet is. Users can use social media solely to connect with friends and family, such as by playing cooperative video games together. On the other hand, users can delve deep into clandestine pages on Reddit or 4chan that show illegal and disturbing content such as child pornography or pages promoting violence or suicide. It is precisely this mixed bag that makes research somewhat difficult as users do not all use social media the same way nor do they use the same platforms. In many ways, a user can freely construct the social media environment they want for themselves, choosing what they would like to participate in.

It is a given at this point that social media can be incredibly minacious. It has tenacious influence, crippling addictive qualities, and can even dull spirituality. It has been previously noted that social media seems to not be an ideal medium for discussing religion, as it can often propagate misinformation and violence towards others.⁸¹ These are salient conclusions, as they do show social media should not be the only place someone is receiving spirituality. No matter how noble one's intentions are, social media contains harmful mental and spiritual content that will likely be encountered. One needs to be exceedingly diligent to redact their social media feed to only contain positive spiritual influences, instead of negative ones. The same can be true for friends and family, who may themselves sometimes post inappropriate or negative content. It is unavoidable to encounter negative influences, and so users need to be trained to avoid the

⁸¹ Will Marler & Eszter Hargittai, "Doesn't Seem Like a Place to Interact, or Interact Well": Motivations to Discuss (and Not) Science and Religion on Social Media," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 9 (2023).

harmful effects. Proper training not only results in better spiritual formation, but often times better mental health as well.

Nearly every study documented in this research discussed at least some challenging aspects of social media, yet none reached the conclusion that it needs to be avoided entirely. Avoiding it completely is of course impossible in a technologically driven world (as was seen with the research on social media challenges, where it received significant discussion outside of social media).⁸² However, even if it was possible to avoid it, researchers are not encouraging this outcome. Even a basic Google search on whether social media should be banned brings up articles discussing the pros and cons of it. Social media can clearly cause negative mental health, as has been documented. However, despite all of the negativity surrounding the Internet, individuals constantly call others to examine their social media habits and urge others to study social media more closely so it can be improved upon.⁸³ In today's world, Social Media may sometimes be viewed as the next enemy of children and younger individuals, similar to the Dungeons & Dragons controversy of the 1980s. However, research shows there is hope for the future.

As has been discussed previously, social media's benefits lie in its large open-ended nature. Just as in real life, users are free to choose what platforms they wish to use, which content creators they want to follow, which people they want to friend on Facebook, and what videos they want to watch. Users have the free will to choose the content they want to consume, which can be useful for spiritual growth. Research noted that users have to seek to improve their

⁸² Kathleen Joyce, "Teens Eating More Tide Pods Than Ever, Despite Efforts to Stop Trend", *Fox News*, January 26, 2018, accessed March 30, 2024.

⁸³ Matt Haig, "I Used to Think Social Media Was a Force for Good. Now the Evidence Says I Was Wrong," *The Guardian*, September 6, 2017, accessed March 30, 2024.

spiritual formation for religious content to be effective.⁸⁴ For users who do seek religious growth and to make their social media interactions dedicated to that goal, spiritual formation will improve. In particular, social media can be useful for providing religious education that individuals may not have access to it. YouTubers such as InspiringPhilosophy and Capturing Christianity provide intellectual and scholarly research into key religious issues such as the inspiration of the Bible and discuss evidence for believing in the Christian faith. These particular YouTubers represent some of the best-case scenarios for religious education online, as they utilize journal articles and scholarly works and always cite their sources. Not only do these YouTubers encourage high intellectual standards and eschew misinformation, they also encourage viewers to pray and live a Christ-honoring life. Since they impart knowledge of theology and urge spiritual participation, they show social media can improve spiritual formation. While these YouTubers are not immensely popular (they have under one million subscribers), their presence in online Christian communities continues to grow. Research has shown that users prefer online content with higher cognitive content.⁸⁵ If more YouTubers and online content creators follow the path of InspiringPhilosophy and Capturing Christianity, social media could be a great place for spiritual formation.

How Religious Organizations Can Improve Current Social Media Practices

It has already been discussed that social media can positively contribute to spiritual formation. Best-case scenarios for social media content do exist as previously discussed. However, the reality is that most users are not using social media in the best-case scenario. Users

⁸⁴ Janine Williams & Jayne Krisjanous, "Spreading the Word: Exploring Spiritual Consumption on Social Media," *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 40, no. 1 (2023): 124-135.

⁸⁵ David R. Dunaetz, Chelsea Heath, Raisa Recto, Danny Soria, & Stephanie J. Wilden, "What Should Churches Post on Facebook? An Exploratory Study of the Perceived Contribution of Facebook Posts to the Mission of Churches," *Christian Education Journal* 20 no. 1 (2023): 47-64.

are either not experiencing religious content at all (only 46% of Americans reported seeing religious content online)⁸⁶, or users may be experiencing content harmful to spirituality such as misinformation or creators who post anti-religious content. There is clearly room for growth for religious organizations in the area of social media. The biggest issue religious organizations have is not necessarily the rejection of social media, but in not knowing how to effectively use it. One study found that around 84% of churches have a Facebook and a website.⁸⁷ This is a step in the right direction although that still leaves almost one fifth of churches without any online presence. Those that do have an online presence often have a dearth of information, where churches may not post their messages or information about their events. It is common for churches to be behind the times with regards to social media as older individuals may not know how to navigate it. The same study found that in 2010 only 47% had Facebook accounts, so there has been growth in the adoption of social media.⁸⁸ Often fellow church members may notice the digital deficit and may seek ways to fix it.⁸⁹

Churches such as Hillsong and the Church of England use social media to provide information, to interact with the community, and to call for action.⁹⁰ They share digitized sermons, dispense articles to explain their views and what they are doing, and provide ways to build one's spiritual formation (such as setting up a wedding ceremony or a baptism). These

⁸⁶ Janine Williams & Jayne Krisjanous, "Spreading the Word: Exploring Spiritual Consumption on Social Media," *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 40, no. 1 (2023): 124-135.

⁸⁷ Jardine Malado, "Most Churches Have Facebook Pages But Few Use Twitter, Survey Finds," *The Christian Times*, January 11, 2018, accessed March 30, 2024.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Allen Williams, *Social Media : A Tool For Discipleship*, Lynchburg, Va: Liberty University, 2023, 1-2.

⁹⁰ Atish Sircar & Jennifer Rowley, "How Are U.K. Churches Using Social Media to Engage with Their Congregations?" *Journal of Public Affairs* 20, no. 1 (2019): e2029.

organizations give the opportunity for involvement and high cognitive content that users reported seeking.⁹¹ From a purely systematic and logistical standpoint, all churches should offer at least a website that details what services they offer and how to interact with it. The education needed to build a website is not nearly as high as it once was, with websites such as Facebook or WordPress making it a fairly simple process. Many of these websites are also completely free, meaning the ability for religious organizations to start their presence on social media is easier than ever before. The only way for religious organizations to grow in the area of social media is to recognize its importance in modern society and to seek to learn how to use it. Just as Allen Williams brought it to the attention of his church that better social media practices were needed, members of religious organizations that know how to navigate the digital atmosphere need to do the same.⁹² This will help change the culture surrounding the Internet.

Churches can improve current social media practices by having a presence on Facebook, X and other platforms. It is important not only to be visible on these sites, but for churches to be active on it. Churches need to post messages often, and these messages need to be intellectually stimulating. This can be difficult as not all religious organizations can afford recording equipment to capture all of their messages. However, this may be an area where organizations may want to revise their budgets in order to start recording their sermons, seeing as users are increasing desiring more religious content digitally after COVID-19.⁹³ Even if religious organizations cannot post their own videos, they can at least explore other options such as

⁹¹ David R. Dunaetz, Chelsea Heath, Raisa Recto, Danny Soria, & Stephanie J. Wilden, "What Should Churches Post on Facebook? An Exploratory Study of the Perceived Contribution of Facebook Posts to the Mission of Churches," *Christian Education Journal* 20 no. 1 (2023): 47-64.

⁹² Allen Williams, *Social Media : A Tool For Discipleship*, Lynchburg, Va: Liberty University, 2023, 1-2.

⁹³ Olanrewaju Tahir Aduragba, Alexandra Cristea, Pete Phillips, Jonas Kurlberg & Jialin Yu, "Religion and Spirituality on Social Media in the Aftermath of the Global Pandemic," *Cornell University* (2022): <https://arxiv.org/abs/2212.11121>

sharing videos from sister churches or maybe even podcasts. Religious organizations have to be proactive for there to be any hope of change.

What Chaplains Can Do in Response to Social Media

Chaplains have their own role to play in the adoption of better social media practices. Interactions with chaplains have been shown to provide spiritual growth to students they interact with.⁹⁴ This means they are often essential on an individual level for change. While religious organizations may teach others to practice healthy social media habits, those truths may not become embedded in the congregation. Chaplains and ministry leaders are needed to bridge the gap between the laity and the teaching class.

Chaplains are essential in a multicultural world as the Church is frequently going to encounter other religions. Social media is no exception to this truth, as the ability to communicate wirelessly brings many cultures together. Chaplains are needed more than ever to help individuals with different religious backgrounds or no religious background find the light of Jesus. Chaplains can assist religious organizations with sharing their faith on social media in the correct manner. Instead of mocking and degrading those with different cultures or religious views on social media, chaplains can educate churches on how to avoid giving off sectarian messages. As previously stated, social media backfires on the Church if it depicts itself other than the manner it claims to be.⁹⁵ Chaplains should encourage the Church to not compromise on the Christian message, but also to avoid creating unneeded barriers. Chaplains must teach not only religious organizations but individuals as well to properly display the love of Jesus online.

⁹⁴ Elena G. van Stee, Taylor Paige Winfield, Wendy Cadge, John Schmalzbauer, Tiffany Steinwert, Shelly Rambo, Elizabeth Clifford, "Assessing Student Engagement With Campus Chaplains: A Pilot Study From a Residential Liberal Arts College," *Journal of College and Character* 22, no. 3 (2021): 215-238.

⁹⁵ Caleb J. Lines, *The Great Digital Commission: Embracing Social Media for Church Growth and Transformation* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021).

Social media should always depict the Church as Jesus Himself is depicted in the Gospels: loving and nonjudgmental yet firm in His views (John 8:1-11).

Conclusion

Social media presents unique and sometimes contradictory conclusions. On one hand it has the potential to destroy not only one's mental health but their spiritual formation as well. However, there are clear benefits that can be had with the proper training. While religious organizations have long ways to go regarding their adoption of social media, it can be accomplished with education and a willingness to adapt. Chaplains have the ability to act as the lynchpin in regards to social media. If chaplains are able to teach those in their care to utilize social media in a Christ-honoring way, it will not hinder their spiritual formation. While more research needs to be done in this area due to the relatively new arrival of social media in world history, it is at least clear that it can improve one's knowledge of theology and their spiritual participation.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Research Implications

This research has clear implications for ministry, although they extend ever further beyond that. Perhaps the most ignominious discovery of social media is that it affects everyone, even individuals who do not use it. As the Tide Pod social challenge demonstrated, social media has the power to impact families, local communities and even mainstream culture.⁹⁶ Typical use of it such as browsing on Facebook or X may not adversely affect families anymore than reading the local newspaper would, but misuse of it can cause widespread trauma and emotional distress. This means it is imperative for all communities to teach the importance of proper social media

⁹⁶ Kathleen Joyce, "Teens Eating More Tide Pods Than Ever, Despite Efforts to Stop Trend", *Fox News*, January 26, 2018, accessed March 30, 2024.

usage. It is important to educate others to know that social media should not be used as a tool of gossip or as a way of inciting violence over the internet. However, the real issue is not that most individuals are unaware that these things are wrong; it is that there are people in the world who intend to do and encourage nefarious activities in secret. It is for this reason some seek to use social media to incite violence or to encourage others to help themselves. As a result, local communities need to educate others regarding the dangers of social media and to avoid inappropriate websites, similar to how parents have always advised children from avoiding unsavory physical places. It is important to note that parents have the ability to restrict access to social media to ensure children are not perpetuating harmful practices. Such a task is not an easy one, given there will always be those who seek to do bad things. However, this is where there is room for respective government agencies need to get involved to ensure social media does not become a tool of outlaws and brigands. While it may currently be impossible to prevent negative information on social media (unless governments were to subject all online publications prior to posting, similarly to news outlets), it is simply important to be aware of the negative effects of social media and to create action plans as necessary in order to better local communities. It has been shown that continued ignorance of social media will not make the inherent risks dissipate.

The implications for ministry are clear. Chaplains and other religious workers need to steer those in their care away from harmful social media content and discourage the overuse of such applications. There is clear need for ministry leaders to be understanding of the inner workings of social media so they are not unaware of how to deal with problems that arise in that realm of life. In order for religious workers to offer relevant information to contemporary problems, they must stay contemporary or risk their influence becoming increasingly diminished in a modern, evolving world.

Research Applications

The research has clear applications for all religious organizations involved in ministry with not only young people, but all types of individuals. Since research shows social media can improve spiritual formation,⁹⁷ ministries should make it a top priority to have a social media presence. It should be made a priority to educate believers on harmful spiritual content, and to encourage the posting of positive faith content. It is essential for churches to make social media content instead of merely telling others to avoid it, or else there exists nothing to replace the negative content. Since research shows social media is used by a large portion of the population and is not going to go away, positive faith content is needed.

This research also has applications for chaplains, seeing as they are often in the front lines of ministries worldwide. Being that chaplains have been shown to help students integrate more spiritual practices into their daily lives,⁹⁸ they are going to be essential to help believers follow proper social media practices. For churches that do not have ministers who serve in the capacity of a chaplain, they should strongly consider training someone to take up residence in that position. Chaplains have value outside of traditional religious organizations in that they will often interact with large amounts of individuals in the secular world. In this case, chaplains are able to help bridge the teachings of religious organizations with mainstream culture. It can be that through their work, local communities will see the spiritual benefits of social media.

Lastly, the most practical application of the research on social media is that individuals should watch how much time they spend on it. Being that it is addictive and can result in poorer

⁹⁷ Janine Williams & Jayne Krisjanous, "Spreading the Word: Exploring Spiritual Consumption on Social Media," *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 40, no. 1 (2023): 124-135.

⁹⁸ Elena G. van Stee, Taylor Paige Winfield, Wendy Cadge, John Schmalzbauer, Tiffany Steinwert, Shelly Rambo, Elizabeth Clifford, "Assessing Student Engagement With Campus Chaplains: A Pilot Study From a Residential Liberal Arts College," *Journal of College and Character* 22, no. 3 (2021): 215-238.

mental health, it should be used with intention instead of aimlessly. Large amounts of social media usage can take time away from family, community, or spiritual education. It is essential to have a balance, as with all things.

Research Limitations

The most limiting factor of this research is the scarcity of information in regards to young people. While there was ample research on social media and various related topics, few of these articles focused specifically on one age group. For example, Janine Williams and Jayne Krisjanous' article on spiritual consumption over social media contained interviewees from a wide variety of ages (from 23 to 58).⁹⁹ While it is reasonable to assume most research on social media applies to people regardless of age, this may not be the case. As youth people are still developing physically, mentally and spiritually, it could be that social media affects them differently than other age groups. While it was beyond the scope of this research to investigate social media usage for infants, toddlers and young children (individuals below the age of 15), perhaps social media would affect this group differently as well. It is clear that while many have endeavored to investigate the effects social media is having on the world, it is still far from fully understood.

Another deficiency in this research is in the measuring of spiritual formation in regard to social media. While it is clear that social media can improve spiritual formation by providing more theological information and encouraging others to perform religious duties more, spirituality as a whole is more complex than mere intellectual knowledge of the divine and sacramental duty. Measuring spirituality, while not the primary intent of this research, is a complex and debated issue in itself. Perhaps the most detailed look at measuring spiritual

⁹⁹ Janine Williams & Jayne Krisjanous, "Spreading the Word: Exploring Spiritual Consumption on Social Media," *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 40, no. 1 (2023): 124-135.

formation featured in this research was the article by Paul Hoelsing and Edward Hogan, who wrote extensively on the issues regarding measuring spirituality.¹⁰⁰ While their article was useful for determining methods for evaluating spiritual growth, they themselves recognized much more research is needed in this area. A large portion of the argument that social media can positively affect spiritual formation rested on defining it in a very general sense, which can limit real-world applications. The definition of spiritual formation in this research neglected any aspect of relationship, which is often viewed as an essential component of spiritual formation. More research needs to be done on the exact relationship between one's personal connection to God and how this affects their growth.

Lastly, this research on social media, while it touched on many different applications available (Facebook, X, online gaming, Skype, etc.), did not specify any one type of usage. Online gaming, while certainly a form of social media, may affect spirituality different than merely reading posts on Facebook. Mediums that employ more senses are bound to affect spirituality in disparate ways, though more research needs to be done to confirm this. Additionally, this research did not investigate all forms of social media. Certain websites such as Reddit or 4chan are widely used social media platforms, but were discussed sparingly if at all. Websites like Reddit are known for their polarizing communities, where different subreddits make up completely different backgrounds of people. Some subreddits are wholesome and dedicated to particular video games series (e.g., the Legend of Zelda games), while others promote illegal activities. While both Facebook and Reddit are primarily websites where text is the main way to communicate, the communities that use these platforms are vastly different from

¹⁰⁰ Paul Hoelsing & Edward Hogan, "You Can't Measure That...Can You?: How a Catholic Seminary Approaches the Question of Measuring Growth in Human and Spiritual Formation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 14, no. 2 (November 2021): 254–75.

each other and this would likely affect one's spiritual formation. Someone raised on Reddit compared to someone ingratiated with Facebook (even if these individuals attempt to use the platform in a spiritually healthy way), will likely have different spiritual journeys. More research needs to be done to confirm this for sure.

Further Research

One aspect of research that should be further investigated in the future is long-term social media usage. In the medical world, long-term studies are used to determine how certain products or services affect people years down the road. Such studies are mostly lacking for social media, given how relatively new the technology is in terms of global history. It would be interesting to compare generations who lived without social media at all, generations who grew up without social media but began to use it later in life, and those who used social media since they were born. This would be difficult, given that social media is vastly becoming a normal reality in everyone's life, even for those who are older and may not have much experience with it. Long-term studies are also notoriously difficult, as they rely on self-reporting and sometimes interviewees drop out if they lose interest. However, it could be beneficial to see how exactly it is shaping the world. While this form of long-term study might be difficult, it is possible to perform a long-term study on social media intake. For example, a study could compare someone who goes on social media for hours a day for a decade with someone who only goes on social media for a few hours a week. This study might not yield much data beyond stating the basics effects of addiction and negative mental health, but maybe it could reveal some deep psychological difference.

Another aspect of research that should be investigated is the psychology behind one's digital self compared to their physical, real-life self. Nathan Roberts touched on this briefly in his

book, as some other researchers did, but it could be explored further.¹⁰¹ What can further complicate this research is that a user may adapt multiple different identities with the different websites that they visit. However, this research might not yield many interesting results. Maybe researchers would discover the digital self to just be another persona one adopts, similarly to how one acts differently in a professional setting versus a casual setting. Maybe having multiple digital identities has the same effect as trying to live multiple lives in reality. It could be that researchers will discover the psychological harm associated with diverse personalities and will urge users to be more authentic. Either way, the digital self is definitely an area that could be further investigated.

Lastly, a salient topic worth investigating would be the effects of different social media platforms. This was discussed in the limitations sections and would be very beneficial for understanding the effects of social media. While it may be there are nominal differences between using Facebook or X, there would surely be differences found between online gaming and LinkedIn. One popular online gaming platform is Discord, which is used by gamers to communicate with text and voice chat. Voice chat is similar to having a phone call, although one is able to stream their content while talking. For example, they can share their screen or play games and have an audience with them as they do it. This also brings up the question of how sending a text message or making a phone call different from social media. As social media continues to evolve, there will likely be more platforms that emerge as new trends form. While some may have niche differences, there could be value found in professionally researching them. It could be worth doing research into how the mind views traditional forms of communication such as phone calls with social media group calls.

¹⁰¹ Nathan Roberts, *Surface Tensions: Searching for Sacred Connection in a Media-Saturated World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2022), Chapter 6.

Why the Chaplain?

Ultimately, one may question why the Chaplain is especially suited to the task of reaching the youth on social media. The chaplain is ideal for educating the younger generation on social media due to the exposure they have to pluralism. This is course does not mean pastors, clergy, ministers and other religious workers cannot deal with this issue. However, many chaplains do have the advantage of being a more general religious worker. Pastors typically are only exposed to backgrounds available in their congregation. While in the modern world it is not uncommon for pastors to work outside of the Church, it is not their primary role. Chaplains in general serve the public, opening them up to diverse groups of individuals. The research noted that students who engaged with chaplains in particular were more likely to integrate spirituality into daily life and were likely to experience spiritual growth.¹⁰² This is significant because the average person may not go to an overtly religious leader such as a pastor for spiritual growth but may approach what they see as a more "earthly" leader: the chaplain.

However, one cannot build an effective ministry strategy on assumptions alone. It is necessary to investigate the ministry of a chaplain to verify their work is improving the spirituality of others. John Maurice, the current president of Mid-Atlantic Christian University, was a navy chaplain for twenty-four years.¹⁰³ Throughout his time in the military, he noted the challenges of working in a pluralistic environment. However, he confirmed through his time in the military that people are more likely to approach a chaplain than a pastor in a church because there is a perception among regular soldiers that those in the church live behind facades.¹⁰⁴ The

¹⁰² Elena G. van Stee, Taylor Paige Winfield, Wendy Cadge, John Schmalzbauer, Tiffany Steinwert, Shelly Rambo, Elizabeth Clifford, "Assessing Student Engagement With Campus Chaplains: A Pilot Study From a Residential Liberal Arts College," *Journal of College and Character* 22, no. 3 (2021): 215-238.

¹⁰³ John Maurice, Interview by Darrien DeFederico, Phone Interview, November 26, 2021, 8-9PM.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

chaplain has the ability to reach the general public, and this is where they can help change the culture surrounding social media. Through their work, more people even outside of the Church can begin to use social media for spiritual growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social media is a useful and growing technology that will continue to dominate not only local communities but also mainstream culture. With the many different platforms available today, it is truly a self-serve experience. For those interested in improving their spiritual formation, social media can be used for this purpose. Social media offers theological knowledge that one might not discover in their normal course of life, provided one is looking in the right place. One has to be in the right mindset if they have any hopes of achieving spiritual growth. The Internet and digital communication have opened up another avenue where knowledge can be disseminated across great distances in a way truly unseen before in history. While social media may be used for nefarious purposes, it will not disappear anytime soon. It is essential for not only religious organizations but also for the world as a whole to adapt to social media. Since it cannot be avoided, it is important that everyone is educated to use it properly so that people can hopefully benefit from it in the long term. Social media can be addicting and it can destroy personal and professional relationships. However, if one looks past the damage it can cause to see how it has helped others, there can be great benefits to be had.

Christians who seek to follow the Great Commission and spread the Gospel should turn to social media as another way to preach the Lord's message. In many ways it represents another aspect of preaching the Gospel to "all creation". One cannot ignore all of the opportunities for growth that are available on the Internet. Chaplains in the service of religious organizations should do their due diligence of educating others on how to properly use social media. Since they

are able to form a personal connection with those they minister to, they are essential for changing the culture in a positive way. Chaplains who are properly trained on social media and are careful to always maintain a Christ-like attitude will ensure that the Church has a future on social media.

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Appendix I - Institutional Review Board Letter of Certification

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 19, 2024

Darrien DeFederico
Harold Bryant

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY23-24-1160 The Impact of Social Media on Young People and Christian Chaplains

Dear Darrien DeFederico and Harold Bryant,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds that your study does not meet the definition of human subjects research. This means you may begin your project with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your project is not considered human subjects research because it will not involve the collection of identifiable, private information from or about living individuals (45 CFR 46.102).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current application. Any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

For a PDF of your IRB letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study Details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page.

If you have any questions about this determination or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your application's status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix II - Liberty University Rawlings School of Divinity Thesis Approval Sheet

THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

GRADE

THESIS MENTOR

Dr. Harold D. Bryant

READER
