

The Religious Facebook Experience: Uses and Gratifications of Faith-Based Content

Pamela Jo Brubaker¹ and Michel M. Haigh²

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Abstract

This study explores why Christians ($N=335$) use Facebook for religious purposes and the needs engaging with religious content on Facebook gratifies. Individuals who access faith-based content on Facebook were recruited to participate in an online survey through a series of Facebook advertisements. An exploratory factor analysis revealed four primary motivations for accessing religious Facebook content: ministering, spiritual enlightenment, religious information, and entertainment. Along with identifying the uses and gratifications received from engaging with faith-based Facebook content, this research reveals how the frequency of Facebook use, the intensity of Facebook use for religious purposes, and also religiosity predict motivations for accessing this social networking site for faith-based purposes. The data revealed those who frequently use Facebook for posting, liking, commenting, and sharing faith-based content and who are more religious are more likely to minister to others. Frequent use also predicted seeking religious information. The affiliation with like-minded individuals afforded by this medium provides faith-based users with supportive content and communities that motivate the use of Facebook for obtaining spiritual guidance, for accessing religious resources, and for relaxing and being entertained.

Keywords

uses and gratifications, Facebook, religion online

Considering the rapid adoption of social media, it is not surprising individuals, religious leaders, and congregations have used these networks to bolster religious participation. A 2011 survey indicated 47% of Protestant congregations actively use Facebook (Roach, 2011). A Burson-Marsteller (2014) study named Pope Francis the most influential world leader on Twitter. This rise in the use of social media for religious communication has shifted the way many religious groups and individuals worship and proselytize.

Religion proliferates online, particularly within social media (Helland, 2002; Miller, Munday, & Hill, 2013; Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life, 2014). Sharing one's own faith online or engaging with faith-based content is not uncommon, particularly on Facebook, where the technological affordances of this medium help facilitate the mass communication of religious ideals and activities (Helland, 2012). Religious leaders encourage use of this platform as a conversion tool (Brunet, 2014; Rosen-Molina, 2009). In a 2014 study, 20% of U.S. adults indicated they "shared their religious faith on social networking websites or apps (such as Facebook or Twitter) in the past week" (Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life, 2014, para. 3). Equally interesting, 46% saw someone else share their religious faith online.

Engaging with religious content and communities makes it increasingly important to gain a better understanding of the

gratifications received from its use. This study seeks to explore the uses and gratifications individuals receive from engaging with faith-based content on Facebook. Due to the limited insights available about religion and Facebook (e.g., Miller et al., 2013), this study provides insights into the motivating factors that drive Facebook audiences to interact with and share religious content. In addition, this research explores whether or not the frequency and intensity of Facebook use for religious purposes as well as demographic characteristics like religious affiliation predict users' motivations for accessing this medium for faith-based content.

Facebook's Technological Affordances

Facebook facilitates a rich environment for faith online. Within this virtual space, users can engage in the reciprocal exchange of information about spiritual, religious, and secular topics. It connects like-minded individuals together and

¹Brigham Young University, USA

²The Pennsylvania State University, USA

Corresponding Author:

Pamela Jo Brubaker, Brigham Young University, 360 BRMB, Provo, UT 84602, USA.

Email: pamela_brubaker@byu.edu



has the capacity to network individuals of differing faiths and beliefs (Helland, 2012). Religion online originated with websites and discussion boards that created spaces where communities of faith could express themselves (Helland, 2002, 2012) and has since extended to social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook. SNSs are appealing to people of faith (Miller et al., 2013) because they facilitate communication between geographically distanced individuals around cultural practices, beliefs, and experiences. Among these networked publics, individuals “gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes,” connecting with diverse people and communities of varying beliefs and religions (boyd, 2011, p. 39).

The technological affordances of Facebook can extend the connections made through social networks beyond friends and family, and even one’s own religious congregation. Specifically, the editability, persistence, searchability, and visibility of this SNS allows people of faith to communicate in ways that have not always been possible with face-to-face communication (boyd, 2011; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Notably, the editability of Facebook enhances the interaction of people of faith by giving them the ability to craft strategic messages, target publics, and achieve specific communication objectives through posted messages. By leveraging multimedia elements (photos, memes, gifs, text, and video), users create and recreate shared cultural and spiritual experiences (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). The technology affordance of persistence enables users to archive information posted. Users have the ability to capture moments in time and make them accessible for others. The searchability of SNSs eliminates time and space barriers often placed on face-to-face communication, allowing users access to archived information when they desire it and where they desire it (boyd, 2011; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). This on-demand retrieval process facilitates exposure to sought-after information and the resurrection of archived content. Visibility enhances the chances of diverse groups of people seeing content posted (boyd, 2011; Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

Facebook’s technological affordances have the capacity to influence how and even why people of faith are motivated to utilize Facebook. Facebook makes the recording, archiving, and even live-streaming of events possible. It also enhances the visibility of the content. For example, it is estimated Harvest Ministries’ 2011 outreach event, a 3-day celebration featuring Christian music and messages, drew in nearly triple the audience it usually receives because, for the first time, the event could be recorded, archived, and even viewed live on Facebook. Individuals could share a link to the live stream (Murashko, 2011). Similarly, Christ Fellowship, a Christian ministry based in Texas, has developed an “Internet campus” where it broadcasts weekly religious services online and provides a virtual space for participants to interact with each other (Grossman, 2012).

Facebook makes it possible for messages to be visible among large groups of geographically dispersed people. Because Facebook has the potential to broadcast messages

and make content available to people of varying faith traditions and beliefs, religious institutions and their leaders often encourage the adoption of online communication as a way for members to proselytize. Likewise, the editability of this medium affords more calculated messages to be crafted and recrafted to more effectively achieve a specific purpose (Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

In the United Kingdom 83% of Christians agreed the Internet is a mission field and 65% intentionally share their faith online (Christian Vision, 2012). Leaders are also encouraging their congregations to use social media. For example, Paul Tighe, the secretary to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications for the Vatican encouraged Catholics to be engaged in social media as believers (RandomHouze Productions, 2014), and two Christian-based organizations worked together to encourage followers of Christ to share their faith during Social Media Week in 2014 (Murashko, 2014). Religious groups have also adopted social media and the internet as official evangelism tools. In particular, missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) use Facebook to try and convert new members (Bednar, 2014; Lloyd, 2014; “Mormons Turn to Facebook Evangelism,” 2012) and Global Media Outreach is a ministry dedicated to reaching the lost through the Internet (Wayne, 2012).

The relatively widespread use of social media for proselytizing, by individuals and institutions alike, has been both commended and criticized. Supporters argue that social media allows believers to participate in two-way conversations that build relationships (Rosen-Molina, 2009). In addition, it connects younger generations to religion (Brunet, 2014). The archival and search affordances of Facebook content makes it possible for users to access information when they want it and where they want it. John Essig, a pastor at Fellowship Church in Springfield, Ohio, said social media is simply a convenient way to spread gospel messages:

We can spend how many millions of dollars to try to sneak someone into a country, and how many get led to Christ? Very few. . . . But [because people have] cell phones [*sic*] you’re going to reach those who can’t otherwise get a missionary to come to them. (As cited in Wayne, 2012, para. 4-5)

However, the need to actively search for information that contains different viewpoints can also limit accessibility to diverse ideas, preventing exposure to different religious ideas and content altogether.

Although Facebook makes reaching mass audiences of similar and different beliefs and traditions, it does not guarantee an audience. Facebook gives users “posts they’re most likely to engage with” (Luckerson, 2015, para. 5). To help users avoid a deluge of content, Facebook’s news feed algorithm tracks users’ actions and determines the content individual Facebook users actually see in their news feeds (Luckerson, 2015). The more

individuals interact with faith-based content, the more likely they are to see similar content in their news feed. Essentially, interacting with individuals, communities, religious leaders, and religious organizations who post sacred and secular content increases the likelihood of viewing content from these same individuals in the future, thwarting ubiquitous efforts to reach greater and even more diverse groups of people.

In addition, critics of proselytizing on Facebook argue using social media to convert others lacks the benefits of face-to-face communication. Rev. Michael White, a United Methodist pastor, explains internet communication can be authentic and effective but, “the ability to read nonverbal language and vocal tone during verbal conversation makes a face-to-face connection more effective for evangelism than an email, an IM, a real-time chat in a chat room, or a blog, or even Facebook” (Rosen-Molina, 2009, para 8). In addition, Brinton (2014) argues, “Social media can undermine religion by encouraging ‘one size fits all’ messages, putting value on ‘likes’ and ‘followers’, and distracting people from a relationship with God and their nearest neighbors” (para. 2).

Motivations of Facebook Use

The use of Facebook is widespread. It is by far the most popular social media platform (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015), with 1.79 billion monthly active users, and as of 30 September 2016, an average of 1.18 billion daily active users (Facebook Newsroom, 2016).

Uses and gratifications theory suggests the vast audiences who access this medium do so to gratify certain needs. Media choices are purposeful and intended to meet individual needs and desires (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). This goal-directed behavior leads to exposure of different types of media content and media activities in different mediums, ultimately satisfying a diverse range of the users’ needs (Katz et al., 1974; Rubin, 2009). Uses and gratifications research has proven to be effective in understanding the motivations that drive users to interact with SNSs like Facebook (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Sheldon, 2008a, 2008b). Facebook gratifies many personal and social needs: It makes it possible for people to keep in touch with old or current friends, to post or look at photos, to make new friends, to have fun, to share information about oneself, and to learn about social events (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Joinson, 2008; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Tosun, 2012).

The uses and gratifications literature suggests Facebook and other online spaces are used for entertainment, to look for information, to pass time, for social interaction, and because it is “cool” (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Sheldon, 2008a, 2008b). Papacharissi and Mendelson (2011) found nine distinct motives for using Facebook: habitual pass time, relaxing entertainment, expressive information sharing, escapism, cool and new trend, companionship, professional advancement,

social interaction, and meeting new people. In the religious content spaces, scholars found people engage with religious *websites* for religious entertainment and information, to donate money and be involved, and to explore and reinforce faith (Laney, 2005). Despite the rapid adoption of online media in the religious realm, limited research is available on motivations for using this medium (Miller et al., 2013).

Building on the existing literature, the purpose of this study is to understand what gratifications motivate Christians to utilize Facebook for religious purposes. As the United States is home to more Christians than people of any other faith (Christians 70.5%, non-Christian faiths 5.9%, unaffiliated 22.8%; Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life, 2015), it is important to understand their use of this SNS:

Research Question 1. What are the primary motivations and uses for using Facebook for religious purposes?

SNSs provide users with the ability to build bonds, make connections, and become part of communities of faith (Miller et al., 2013). Specifically, scholars have found a connection between the intensity of Facebook use (i.e., feelings of connectivity with online communities) and civic participation, life satisfaction, and social trust (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009).

Frequent use also plays a role in what users do online. Ledbetter and colleagues (Ledbetter, 2009; Ledbetter et al., 2011) found social inhibitions are minimized by frequent use. Likewise, Tsay-Vogel, Shanahan, and Signorielli (2016) conducted a 5-year study of Facebook users to learn how frequent use affects privacy attitudes and subsequent disclosure of personal information. Their research revealed frequently using this social media platform cultivates more relaxed attitudes toward privacy and, as a result, those who use the platform more are also more prone to disclosing more personal information about themselves online and offline. Essentially, the proclivity to divulge information results from frequent use.

Research has shown that Facebook use is related to increased engagement (Heiberger & Harper, 2008), or the degree to which users react (like, love, haha, wow, sad, angry), comment, and share content (Cho, Schweickart, & Haase, 2014). A Pew survey (Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life, 2014) showcased how regular attendance at religious services influenced how likely people were to engage in religious activities online. They found the more frequently individuals attended religious activities (weekly vs monthly/yearly or seldom/never), the more likely they were to engage in religious activities online. Specifically, 31% of those who attended a weekly religious service also shared their faith online. This contrasted with 8% of the respondents who said they rarely if ever attend a religious service and posted online (Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life, 2014). Miller et al. (2013) examined how both religious and secular practices influenced why young adults

access and use Facebook and found more secular reasons such as school attendance and membership in a non-religious organization driving use.

To gain a better understanding of Facebook users and what propels their motivations for accessing this SNS, this study poses the following research question:

Research Question 2. Does the frequency with which someone engages with religious information, the intensity of religious Facebook use, the degree to which someone is religious, or other demographic characteristics predict the use of Facebook for religious purposes?

Methodology

Similar to other uses and gratification research, this study uses survey methodology to answer the proposed research questions (see Baek, Holton, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011; Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Sheldon, 2008b). The Institutional Review Board approved the survey instrument and methodology used.

Participants were recruited through a series of Facebook advertisements that ran periodically between 23 November 2014, and 2 March 2015. The use of Facebook ads has been shown to be a quick and relatively cost-effective method for recruiting participants (Fenner et al., 2012; Kapp, Peters, & Oliver, 2013; Tan, Forgasz, Leder, & McLeod, 2012). Given Facebook's ability to target specific audiences, the advertisements were displayed in the news feeds of individuals who were 18 years or older; resided in the United States; and expressed an interest in specific religions (e.g., Christianity), specific religious texts (e.g., Bible), and specific religious leaders (e.g., Joel Osteen, Mark Driscoll, Max Lucado, Rick Warren, Joyce Meyer, Pope Francis). Facebook uses information such as pages users have "liked" and websites they have visited to determine interests. The ads consisted of an image, a headline, and main text. The ad was attached to a neutral Facebook page titled "Media and Religion Research." When Facebook users clicked on the ad they were directed to an online survey.

During the recruitment period, the ad appeared in the news feeds of 100,458 individuals, with 937 individuals clicking on the survey. Of those who clicked on the survey, at least half chose not to participate after either clicking on the informed consent page or after completing the first set of questions, primarily the former. The survey took an average of 20–25 min to complete. Of the valid responses ($N=428$), the majority of participants (78.3%; $N=335$) were affiliated with a Christian religion. Those who completed the survey had an opportunity to enter into a drawing for one of four, \$25 VISA gift cards.

Although the survey targeted those who were affiliated with a Christian religion, the public nature of Facebook had a snowball effect that expanded the scope of participants. To enhance the validity of this study, and to focus on the

dominant religious tradition in the United States (Christians in the United States in 2014, 70.6%; 2007, 78.4%; Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life, 2015), only participants who self-identified as Christian, or as being part of a Christian religion, were included in the study's analysis ($N=335$). Approximately 22% of the participants who did not identify with a Christian religion were excluded from the analysis. Of the participants, the majority considered themselves Christian (64.8%) and did not identify with other Christian faiths. The remaining participants identified as Protestants (17.9%), Catholics (12.5%), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (3.6%; Mormon), Jehovah's Witness (0.9%), and Orthodox (0.3%; Greek Russian, etc.).

Table 1 compares the study's demographics with Christians in the United States. Notably, the current sample is slightly older ($M=54.72$), with ages ranging from 18 to 82. They are also more educated and White. The sample also includes more females than the national average; however, this is understandable as more women are on Facebook than men (Duggan et al., 2015).

Measures

Motives. To understand what motivates individuals to engage with religious content on Facebook, uses and gratifications scales originally created to test motives for Internet use (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), Facebook use (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Sheldon, 2008a, 2008b), and engagement with Christian websites (Laney, 2005) were adapted. For example, question items like those included in Papacharissi and Rubin's (2000) Facebook scale, which would traditionally read "to look for information," was modified to read "to look for faith-based information." Similarly, an expressive information-sharing item adapted from Papacharissi and Mendelson (2011)'s Facebook usage scale was changed from "to tell others a little bit about myself" to read "to tell others a little bit about my faith-based beliefs." After the items were examined and selected for relevance to the topic studied, a 53-item scale resulted. The survey asked respondents how much each reason listed was similar to their own reasons for engaging with religious content on Facebook. Using a 7-point Likert scale responses ranged from *not at all* (1) to *exactly* (7).

Frequency and intensity. Participants were asked how often they engage with religious content on Facebook and how intense their connection to that content is. Two distinct measures were chosen because frequent use fails to account for the enriching user experience afforded by this medium. Intensity of use accounts for the connections users make with content and communities.

Frequency of engagement was measured using a four-item scale, which explored how often individuals posted, commented on, "liked," or shared religious content. Responses ranged from *never* (1) to *every time I log on* (7; $\alpha=.90$; $M=5.12$, $SD=1.40$).

Table 1. Comparison of Demographic Composition of Christians.

Demographic characteristics	Christians		
	Current study	Religious landscape in the United States	
		2014	2007
Ethnicity			
White	87.2%	66%	71%
Black	1.8%	13%	12%
Hispanic	1.8%	16%	13%
Asian	1.2%	2%	1%
Other (non-Hispanic)	7.8%	3%	3%
Age (median)	60	49	46
18-29	16.7%	17%	17%
30-49	7.5%	33%	39%
50-64	41.5%	29%	25%
65+	30.4%	21%	18%
Biological sex			
Male	32.2%	45%	46%
Female	52.5%	55%	54%
Education			
College degree or more	37.6%	25%	25%

Note. The 2007 and 2014 demographic data about Christians come from the two-time Religious Landscape Study conducted by Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life (2015). Nonresponses were excluded from the Religious Landscape Study. Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Percentages for the current study do not add up to 100% due to nonresponses.

Intensity was measured using an adaptation of Ellison et al.'s (2007) "Facebook Intensity Scale." This six-item scale asked questions about the connectivity that SNSs facilitate when users connect with faith-based content and communities (e.g., "Spiritual content in part of my everyday routine," "I feel I am part of a religious Facebook community of faith," "I am proud to tell people that I visit religious or faith-based Facebook pages," "I feel out of touch when I haven't logged onto religious or faith-based Facebook pages in a while," "I feel I am part of a religious Facebook community of faith," and "I would feel sorry if religious or faith-based Facebook pages shut down"). Responses ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7; $\alpha = .89$; $M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.46$).

Religiosity. Religiosity was measured on a five-item scale developed by Plante, Vallaeys, Sherman, and Wallston (2002). Questions probed religious habits (e.g., "I pray daily" and "I consider myself active in my faith or church") and the extent to which faith gives meaning to life and dictates daily choices (e.g., "My faith impacts many of my decisions," "I look to my faith as providing meaning and purpose in my life," and "I enjoy being around others who share my faith").

Responses ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7; $\alpha = .84$; $M = 6.57$, $SD = 0.76$).

Data Analysis

An exploratory factor analysis was run to identify the motivations and uses for accessing Facebook for religious purposes (Research Question 1). For Research Question 2, a regression analysis was conducted to control for demographic factors (biological sex, age, education, and religion). Demographics were entered first followed by the other independent variables: frequency of engagement with Facebook, intensity of Facebook use, and religiosity.

Results

Research Question 1 asked the primary motivations and uses of Facebook for religious purposes. To determine these uses and motivations, an exploratory principal components analysis (PCA) was run on 53 questions items. The appropriateness of PCA was assessed prior to analysis. The overall Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was .93, with individual KMO measures all greater than .81, a meritorious or good classification, according to Kaiser (1974). Barlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p < .001$), suggesting the factorizability of the data.

Originally, nine factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 materialized. Within the original factors, only question items containing communalities above .60 were retained (MacCallum, Widaman, Zhang, & Hong, 1999). Question items that cross-loaded with multiple factors were not retained. A four-factor solution with 24 primary reasons for accessing religious content met the threshold of a 60/40 loading and were subsequently kept (McCroskey & Young, 1979). Question items for each of the four factors were then summed and averaged to form the following four factors:

1. *Ministering.* Actively reaching out to others by sharing faith-based information, messages, or beliefs that inspire, encourage, and uplift others; ministering to the spiritual and emotional needs of others by helping those who have lost their faith, those who are struggling with their faith, or those in need of spiritual guidance.
2. *Spiritual enlightenment.* Enhancing one's own spirituality by accessing content that enlightens and uplifts the user; engagement with religious content helps strengthen users' spiritual connection with deity by exposing them to information that edifies and ultimately facilitates their spiritual growth and progression. Content is actively sought for spiritual learning.
3. *Faith-based information.* Accessing or seeking faith-based information, including inspirational content,

details about religious services, activities or events, and faith-based products or services.

4. *Relaxing entertainment.* To unwind, relax, and be entertained.

Together, all four factors accounted for 70.12% of the variance, with ministering accounting for the most variance (42.68%). Reliabilities of each factor ranged from .96 to .79. Component loadings for the rotated solution are given in Table 2. The arithmetic means and standard deviations of each factor suggest Christians are more likely to access faith-based content for ministering ($M=5.36$; $SD=1.61$). Leveraging this medium for spiritual enlightenment ($M=4.61$; $SD=1.72$), faith-based information ($M=4.56$; $SD=1.75$), and relaxing entertainment ($M=3.52$; $SD=1.91$) is not nearly as pronounced.

Predictors of Motivations for Religious Facebook Use

Bivariate correlations were examined prior to examining the predictors that motivate religious Facebook use. As Table 3 shows, the relationship between the predictor variables and motivations ranges from weak to strong, positive correlations.

Research Question 2 explored whether or not demographics (sex, age, education, and religion), religiosity, frequency of engagement with religious Facebook content, and intensity of religious Facebook use predicted motives of religious Facebook use.

As sex is a dichotomous variable, with “0” representing men and “1” representing women, the mode was used for inputting missing responses. For age, the mean age ($M=54.4$) was imputed for missing data. Education was coded as a dichotomous variable; those with more education had a higher score (1 = at least 4-year college education). Affiliation with a particular Christian faith was also examined to see if motivations differed among the various faiths represented in this study. Specifically, motivations of Protestants, Catholics, and those who self-identified as Christian were examined and dummy coded, so “1” represented the specific faith (Protestant, Catholic, or self-identified Christians) and “0” represented those affiliated with the other participants in this study. These three faiths were chosen as they were the most represented within the data.

The multiple regression revealed age was a predictor of motivations for religious Facebook use; however, it proved a very weak, negative predictor. Gender and education did not predict motivations. In addition, the data did not show differences in motivations among the three Christian faiths examined. There were positive strong and moderate relationships that emerged with the remaining independent variables of interest among each of the four factors (see Table 4).

Ministering. The frequency with which a person engages with religious Facebook content significantly predicted reaching

Table 2. Factor Analysis of Religious Facebook Motives.

“How much are these reasons like your own reasons for engaging with religious information on Facebook”	Factor Loadings
Factor 1: Ministering	
To encourage/assist those who are in need of spiritual support	.86
To minister to others	.86
To share my faith online	.83
To offer others spiritual guidance	.83
To encourage/assist those who are in need of emotional support	.83
To spread gospel messages	.81
To uplift others	.80
To tell others a little bit about my faith-based beliefs	.79
To tell others what I believe	.78
To share faith-based information that may be of use or interest to others	.78
So I can reach out to those who have lost their faith	.77
To present information about my faith-based convictions	.76
Eigenvalue 10.67; variance explained 42.68%; Cronbach's alpha .96	
Factor 2: Spiritual enlightenment	
It facilitates my spiritual connection with God/Allah/deity, etc.	.82
To learn about God/Allah/deity, etc.	.80
It helps my spiritual progression	.77
Because it enlightens me	.76
To learn about the Bible, Quran, or other scriptures	.76
Because it uplifts me	.68
Eigenvalue 3.72; variance explained 14.87%; Cronbach's alpha .89	
Factor 3: Religious information	
To access information about religious services, activities, or events	.77
To obtain faith-based products or resource materials	.75
To access faith-based information	.73
Eigenvalue 1.65; variance explained 6.58%; Cronbach's alpha .79	
Factor 4: Relaxing entertainment	
Because it allows me to unwind	.84
Because it makes it entertaining	.78
Because it relaxes me	.74
Eigenvalue 1.50; variance explained 5.99%; Cronbach's alpha .79	

Note. Rotated structure matrix for PCA with varimax orthogonal rotation.

out to others and ministering on this social platform ($\beta=.52$, $p<.001$). People who were more religious ($\beta=.21$, $p<.001$) were also more likely to minister to others online. Age ($\beta=-.14$, $p<.01$) was a weak, negative predictor, with younger people being more likely to minister.

Spiritual enlightenment. Being connected to Facebook communities of faith (i.e., Facebook intensity scale) significantly

Table 3. Correlations of Motivations for Religious Facebook Use.

Correlates (r)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Gender	1	-.08	-.19**	.13*	.02	-.18	-.17**	.07	.10	.07	.03	.07	.05
2. Age		1	.00	-.06	-.05	.19**	.08	-.00	-.06	.08	-.01	-.05	-.12*
3. Education			1	-.12*	.19**	.04	-.14*	-.04	-.09	-.17**	-.07	-.08	-.05
4. Christians				1	-.51**	-.63**	-.06	-.01	.05	.14*	.02	.15**	-.01
5. Catholics					1	-.18**	.09	.01	-.07	-.14**	.07	-.00	-.00
6. Protestants						1	.03	.02	-.03	-.06	-.08	-.13*	-.03
7. FB frequency							1	.64**	.40**	.68**	.38**	.44**	.24**
8. FB intensity								1	.39**	.52**	.58	.45**	.40**
9. Religiosity									1	.47**	.18**	.30**	.09
10. F1: Minister										1	.38**	.43**	.31**
11. F2: Spiritual											1	.41**	.46**
12. F3: Information												1	.26**
13. F4: Entertain													1

Note. The Christians referenced in the independent variable represent self-identified Christians who did not specify any affiliation with another Christian faith. These participants reported they were Christians.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis of Predictors for Religious Facebook Motives.

Predictor variables	Factor 1 <i>Ministering</i>			Factor 2 <i>Spiritual enlightenment</i>			Factor 3 <i>Religious information</i>			Factor 4 <i>Relaxing entertainment</i>		
	B	SE _B	β	B	SE _B	β	B	SE _B	β	B	SE _B	β
Gender	-.07	.13	-.02	-.21	.17	-.06	-.10	.18	-.03	-.07	.21	-.02
Age	-.01	.00	-.14**	-.00	.01	.01	.00	.01	.04	-.01	.01	-.10
Education	-.22	.13	-.07	-.22	.17	-.06	-.13	.18	-.04	-.13	.21	-.03
Christians	-.34	.36	-.10	.08	.46	.02	.67	.50	.18	-1.46	.57	-.36*
Catholics	-.77	.39	-.16	.44	.51	.09	.66	.54	.13	-1.47	.62	-.26*
Protestants	-.61	.39	-.15	-.35	.50	-.08	-.06	.53	-.01	-1.55	.61	-.32*
Facebook Frequency	.61	.06	.52***	.05	.08	.04	.28	.08	.22**	.00	.09	.00
Facebook Intensity	.10	.06	.09	.69	.07	.57***	.33	.08	.27***	.56	.09	.41***
Religiosity	.51	.10	.21***	-.20	.13	-.08	.21	.14	.08	-.30	.16	-.10
	R	R ²	Adj R ²	R	R ²	Adj R ²	R	R ²	Adj R ²	R	R ²	Adj R ²
	.73	.53	.52	.58	.34	.32	.50	.25	.23	.44	.19	.17

Note. Factor 1: $F(9, 316) = 39.68, p < .001$; Factor 2: $F(9, 316) = 17.93, p < .001$; Factor 3: $F(9, 316) = 11.80, p < .001$; Factor 4: $F(9, 316) = 8.33, p < .001$. The Christians referenced in the independent variable represent self-identified Christians who did not specify any affiliation with another Christian faith. These participants reported they were Christians.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

predicted the need for obtaining spiritual enlightenment ($\beta = .57, p < .001$). Using Facebook to aide in one’s spiritual progression predicted maintaining social connections with communities of faith. Not only was this the only predictor variable of spiritual enlightenment, it was the strongest predictor among all of the variables.

Religious information. Frequency of Facebook use ($\beta = .22, p < .01$) and intensity of use ($\beta = .27, p < .001$) predicted seeking and obtaining religious information on Facebook.

Relaxing entertainment. Facebook intensity moderately predicted the use of Facebook for relaxing entertainment

($\beta = .41, p < .001$). Among the demographic characteristics, being affiliated with the Christian religions identified in this study significantly predicted use (self-identified Christians, $\beta = -.36, p < .05$; Catholic, $\beta = -.26, p < .05$; and Protestant, $\beta = -.32, p < .05$). Albeit these data showcase use among all of the faiths rather than a particular faith.

Discussion and Conclusion

With the prevalence and use of Facebook for both secular and sacred purposes continuing to increase (Miller et al., 2013; Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life, 2014), and offline religion merging with Facebook users’ online

environment (Campbell, 2012, 2013), it is increasingly important to understand the roles Facebook plays in the lives of people with faith. The current study examined the uses and gratifications of engaging with faith-based content on Facebook. Gratifications of faith-based content satisfy needs beyond those fulfilled for a typical Facebook user.

This study found the uses and gratifications of Facebook use for religious purposes reflect both a selfish and selfless desire to address more utilitarian, temporal needs as well as spiritual needs. This platform is used for disclosing faith-based beliefs and providing uplifting messages. In addition, users obtain spiritual and temporal benefits from faith-based content shared by others. Facebook use for religious purposes is primarily motivated by the need to minister to others. Users do this by sharing faith-based beliefs and providing those who are both of their faith and those who are not with spiritual and emotional guidance and support. The three other motivations driving engagement with faith-based content reflect personal benefits gained, including spiritual enlightenment, religious information, and relaxing entertainment.

At its core, the use of Facebook for the purpose of ministering originates from the use of Facebook for expressive information sharing (e.g., to provide information, to present information about a special interest of mine, to share information that may be of interest to others, etc.) identified by prior SNS researchers (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011). However, faith-based Facebook users are motivated beyond the need to merely share information about themselves. They seek to build relationships with others around their faith. They reach out to and uplift others by engaging in faith-based conversations and uploading faith-based messages. They want to inspire others, to offer spiritual and emotional comfort, and to strengthen others who may be struggling with, or who have lost, their faith.

As religious traditions continue to encourage the use of Facebook for proselytizing (Bednar, 2014; Christian Vision, 2012; Lloyd, 2014; "Mormons Turn to Facebook Evangelism," 2012; Wayne, 2012), it is not surprising to see users access this medium for seeking out and helping others by sharing gospel messages, beliefs, and teachings. Although this study does not reveal the degree to which users make conscious, or even unconscious efforts to minister to those who are not of their faith, this factor shows those who use this SNS for religious purposes recognize the potential for visibility and therefore reach out to people with diverse beliefs and varying commitments to those beliefs.

Although users are motivated to leverage this platform for helping others, their motives are not always all altruistic. Facebook facilitates a spiritual connection with deity. Access to religious messages and content enhances this relationship. Through this online environment users obtain spiritual insights and uplifting messages that allow them to enhance their own understanding of deity and of the scriptures. This content ultimately aids in their spiritual progression.

The current study suggests religious Facebook content serves utilitarian purposes, meeting specific informational and entertainment needs. Much like gratifications obtained by using religious websites (Laney, 2005), Facebook users are also motivated to fulfill faith-based information and entertainment needs by accessing faith-based posts. Specifically, informational motivations to access Facebook (see Table 2) reflect a specific need to seek faith-based resources and information (e.g., information about religious services, activities, events, and faith-based products or information). In addition, Facebook makes it possible for religious information to be accessible on demand.

Unlike the motives Laney (2005) found for using religious websites, Facebook, users' religious informational motives are separate and distinct from their entertainment motives. The relaxing entertainment factor reflects the diversion this SNS provides users who have a need to unwind, to relax, or to be entertained. This motive is not unique to those who utilize Facebook for faith-based purposes. Entertainment is a common gratification of engaging with Facebook in general, other SNSs, and even more traditional media (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Rubin, 2009). The technological affordances of this medium allow users to attach images to religious beliefs and edit them. As a result, one of the more popular forms of practiced religion is the creation and sharing of religious memes, which often come in the form of humorously altered images users mimic, repack-age, or remix to give voice to religious cultures, practices, and beliefs (Burroughs & Feller, 2015). As this research suggests, more entertaining forms of religious expression such as memes are not only valued, they are desired as well, particularly among younger audiences.

The current findings suggest Facebook is an expressive medium where users can both give and receive spiritual support, expressing beliefs and informing others about religious practices and perspectives while at the same time receiving spiritual guidance, religious resources, and entertainment for themselves. Facebook provides an outlet through which religious needs and desires are expressed and fulfilled online. The four reasons this study identifies for engaging with faith-based content showcase the intrinsic need to give and receive spiritual support.

An understanding of individuals who are motivated to share and consume faith-based content on Facebook becomes even clearer after examining the frequency with which users engage with faith-based content (e.g., by posting, liking, commenting, or sharing the content) and religiosity. Prior research shows an association between personal disclosure, online social connections, and frequent use (Ledbetter, 2009; Ledbetter et al., 2011; Tsay-Vogel et al., 2016). This relationship suggests the sharing of religious beliefs is easier and much more natural for those who, because of frequent online use and more developed online connections, have minimal social barriers inhibiting the sharing of personal, faith-based beliefs. This is perhaps why frequent users are more likely to

disclose religious views and engage in conversations aimed at convincing others of their beliefs.

Religious leaders need to be aware that merely encouraging members to proselytize online is not likely to result in congregations sharing religious beliefs. These actions are more likely to result from, and be sustained by, devout members who are active in their faith or church offline (i.e., those who pray more regularly) and frequently share their religion online.

Facebook eliminates prohibitive geographic boundaries from interfering in meaningful relationships with individuals from different and similar religious traditions or beliefs. Interestingly enough, those who have strong online connections with like-minded, faith-based communities are motivated to seek content that supplies them with spiritual guidance. For these individuals, faith-based content has become part of their everyday routine as they regularly check in on faith-based Facebook pages or feel out of touch when they have not logged onto such pages for a while. Of all the variables examined, the intensity of use for faith-based purposes was the only predictor of Facebook use for spiritual progression; it was also the strongest predictor of any other variable.

In addition, the frequency and intensity of use predicted seeking religious information. Those who use Facebook more frequently and make religious connections through these communities recognize the valuable resources these networks can provide for religion online and offline (e.g., information about religious services, activities, and events; access to faith-based products and resources materials). As a result, faith-based Facebook community members become a go-to resource when faith-based content and information is needed.

Facebook use for connecting with communities of faith (i.e., intensity scale) predicts use for relaxing entertainment among those who are affiliated with the various Christian religions examined in this study. Strong connections with these online communities of faith breed an environment where users can retreat for shared cultural experiences that can offer comedic relief (i.e., humorous memes; Burroughs & Feller, 2015), relaxation, and enjoyment.

These findings illustrate the relationship between religion, spirituality, and Facebook, showcasing the reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship Facebook facilitates. Notably, being more religious influences outreach and giving service to others whereas using this platform to maintain strong, faith-based connections helps users gratify more selfish needs that result in both tangible and intangible benefits. This research shows the use of this platform for religious purposes is goal directed and plays a critical role in how Christians practice religion online.

Research Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited in that it does not examine the degree to which religious practices or teachings of religious organizations influence Facebook use. Likewise, the degree to which

Facebook users engage in online religion (their religion is in the online world) versus religion online (they connect their offline religion with their social lives online) was not assessed. Future research should explore the influence of these variables.

To enhance the validity of this research, this study explored the motivations of those who self-identify as Christian or part of a Christian religion. Future researchers should explore more diverse religious populations to see if differences in gratifications sought exist. Of note, this study did not reveal many real differences among the various Christian denominations examined. As this sample comprised participants who were more White/Caucasian and older, future researchers should examine preferences among younger users of faith.

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Author Biographies

Pamela Jo Brubaker (PhD, The Pennsylvania State University) is an assistant professor in the School of Communications at Brigham Young University. Her research focuses on the impact and use of social media for strategic communications.

Michel M. Haigh (PhD, The University of Oklahoma) is an associate professor in the College of Communications at The Pennsylvania State University. Her research focuses on strategic communications and media effects.