

Church 2.0:

How the Church online platform shapes religious ceremonies and practices surrounding online religion.



Michel Stiller

5495520

Thesis

MCMV16044

Supervisor: Michiel de Lange

Words: 10937

Abstract

In the last several years we see the internet becoming a tool to extend a church's offline ministry into online spaces. Many churches use social media platforms and livestream platforms to share their message to their community and to reach people around the world. One such platform is the *Church Online Platform* that is created by *Life.Church*. This online platform shapes traditional religious ceremonies and Christian practices of the church. I will use a tailor-made version of the walkthrough-method to better understand the phenomenon "digital religion", which means how digital media and spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practice. Furthermore, I can examine the platform's technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences.

I will focus on the religious practices' ritual, community, and authority. First, I will analyze how the affordances of the platform shape the experience and practices of religion. Second, I will look at the vision of the platform because it can tell us how the platform can be used and what it is supposed to do. Finally, I will analyze the operating model of the platform whereby I look at the complex dynamics that take place between users, technologies, and business models which indicate underlying political and economic interests.

I conclude that the Church online platform is not a standalone platform, but it is part of a larger ecosystem where Google and Facebook are being in charge of. With nowadays technological possibilities churches are now capable to extend their religious ceremonies beyond their church walls hereby churches have to pay attention to what they show and don't show to the world. Finally, I argue that the Church online platform is part of a Christian ecosystem with related apps and services named Life.Church Open Networks. In this way, Life.Church appropriates and remediates its authority across different platforms and churches.

Table of contents

1.0	Introduction.....	4
2.0	Theoretical framework.....	7
	2.1 Digital Religion	7
	2.2 Religious themes.....	9
3.0	Method	15
4.0	Analysis	17
	4.1 The Church online platform	17
	4.2 Religious theme: rituals	18
	4.2.1 The affordances of the platform.....	18
	4.2.2 What says the website about rituals	20
	4.2.3 The underlying political and economic interests by the religious theme rituals	21
	4.3 Religious theme: community	22
	4.3.1 The affordances	22
	4.3.2 What says the website about community	24
	4.3.3 The underlying political and economic interests by the religious theme community	25
	4.4 Religious theme: Authority	26
	4.4.1 The affordances	26
	4.4.2 What says the website about authority.....	27
	4.4.3 The underlying political and economic interests by the religious theme authority	28
5.0	Conclusion.....	29
6.0	Bibliography	31

1.0 Introduction

In times of crisis in which corona makes it impossible to organize real-life church services, the internet becoming a tool to extend a church's offline ministry into online spaces.¹ Many churches have now Instagram pages, YouTube channels, and use live stream platforms to stream their church services online. In these examples, we see how communication technologies influencing how people practice religion. This means that the workings and the architecture of the platform give direction to how religious experiences and practices, like worship, preaching, and prayers, are organized online.²

To understand these changes in digital technology and how religion is conceived within a digital environment professor of communication Heidi Campbell uses the term *digital religion*. According to Campbell, "[d]igital religion does not simply refer to religion as it is performed and articulated online, but points to how digital media and spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practice."³ This concept helps us to talk about the current condition of religion to new media and the culture in which it is situated.⁴

A digital media platform that is shaping and being shaped by religious practice is the *Church online* platform that is created by *Life.Church*. According to the website, the platform is a free tool which means that you don't have to worry about fees, trial-periods, or hidden costs. The platform allows churches to stream content, track salvations, prayer requests, have a chat function, and more.⁵ According to the website, the tool removes the barriers of technology and brings a live or recorded experience to an online community.⁶ This statement sounds ironic because how can a technology removes its own technological barriers.

Campbell describes in her book that "the use of digital media evoke mythical utopian and dystopian images of religion, where religious practice could be freed from traditional constraints and patterns so it could be re-envisioned beyond the screen."⁷ This means, on the one hand, that the platform ensures that people around the world can gather and experience a church service without

¹ Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 1.

² José van Dijk, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *De platformsamenleving. Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 10.

³ Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 1.

⁴ Ibid. p., 2.

⁵ "Launch Your Online Ministry for Free | Church Online Platform," accessed January 13, 2020, <https://churconlineplatform.com/>.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 2.

being physically present. On the other hand, by using a platform the revenue model and the architecture of the platform can shape how religious ceremonies and practices are organized online.

So as new media have become integrated into our daily lives, technology helps to extend the abilities to infuse religion into our lives.⁸ The book *Digital Religion* written by Naomi Campbell raises several questions about religious practices and experiences in a digital environment. These questions are mainly focused on how religious practices like communities, rituals, authenticity, and authority are being formed or formed by new media technologies and cultures.⁹ However, none of these questions have a focus on the affordances and the economic-political interests of the platforms and how they shape various aspects of religious practices and ceremonies.

According to Van Dijck et al., a platform is a programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between users, corporate entities, and public bodies. This means that single platforms cannot be seen as stand-alone factors but are connected in an online environment with other platforms that are structured by their logic. You can, for example, login with your Facebook account on another platform. These assemblages of platforms constitute a platform ecosystem that shapes everyday practice but also religious practices when they are transferred in an online environment.¹⁰ This means that the Church online platform could also be in this platform ecosystem what eventually could shape the religious practices and ceremonies of a church.

The *Church Online Platform* is also not a neutral nor value-free construct. First, the platform collects data to gain insights into every facet of the church online services. Second, the platform is accessible via Facebook-login and third parties can gain access to user data via social buttons.¹¹ Furthermore, one of the features of this platform is that churches can gain powerful insights into every facet of your church online services to help you make solid, informed ministry decisions. Besides that, the platform provides access to this data to third parties through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs). This data can be used as a fuel to connect the different platforms and give the third parties detailed insights into user behavior and metrics.¹² The last feature I want to mention is that the Church Online Platform advertises itself as a free tool. However, van Dijck et al. calls this free tool advertising a myth because these free strategies adopted by many platforms have resulted in this ecosystem where it usual to trade convenient services for personal information. Van Dijck et al. explain that “technological and economic elements of platforms steer user interaction but simultaneously shape

⁸ Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 8.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *De platformsamenleving. Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 18.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem.

social norms.”¹³

Although a platform architecture affords a particular usage and users are often confronted with a set of possible options, they are not just marionettes of the techno-commercial dynamics that are built on the platform. Van Dijck et al. argue that “through its interfaces, algorithms, and protocols, a platform stages user interactions, encouraging some and discouraging other connections.”¹⁴ Choices in the architecture of the interface, like inserting a like button on the right side of the interface instead of the left side, have consequences for the role that platforms play in determining and safeguarding public values.¹⁵ According to Van Dijck et al. this role is not fixed but is largely determined by the interaction between the technologies, revenue models, and use practices of platforms. Platform technologies, revenue models, and related user conditions shape how individuals, organizations, and institutions develop activities through platforms.¹⁶

In this case, we see that the workings and the architecture of the platform give direction to how religious practices are organized online. For example, the platform changes the way how people experience Christian rituals because they attend the church service in an online environment or the possibility to chat during the preaching of the pastor, virtual hand-raising, and one-on-one prayers. With the use of the platform, the notion of religious authority is also changed by digital technologies because people are not gathered in a central place where there is one-way of communication from the preacher. There is a multi-sided way of communication, whereby people are not passive listeners but can actively participate during the service with the chat function. The research question that is therefore central to this research is:

How does the Church online platform shapes religious ceremonies and practices, like rituals, community, and authority in an online environment?

To answer this question I want to do a tailor-made version of the walkthrough-method where I will look at the affordances of the platform, how the website of the platform describes itself, and the underlying political and economic interests.¹⁷ The religious practices I want to analyze are explained in the book *Digital Religion*. The book divides different religious practices into five different themes:

¹³ José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *De platformsamenleving: Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 18.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 37-38

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay, “The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (March 2018): 881–900.

authority, authenticity, community, identity, and ritual.¹⁸ For my research, I selected the religious practices' ritual, community, and authority because the Church online platform and its affordances have the most influence on these themes. These themes are further explained in my theoretical framework. Therefore, I have the following sub-questions:

1. How do the affordances of the platform change the Christian rituals?
2. How forms the Church online platform an online community?
3. Are religious authorities undermined due to the Livestream of church services, or is it a new medium to maintain influence in their communities?

These sub-questions structure my research thesis into three main elements: rituals, community, and authority. In each main element, I will analyze how the affordance of the platform change the experience and performance of each element, how the website talks about rituals, community and authority on the Church online platform, and as a last step I want to examine the underlying processes and interests that are involved in the church online platform and how these three main elements are influenced by that. So, with these three sub-questions I want to answer my main question.

2.0 Theoretical framework

2.1 Digital Religion

Before I define the notion of digital religion, I will explain the notion of religion and new media separately. In this way, I want to show the connection between these concepts and how they can fit together. Heidi Campbell uses the definition of religion from the work of Clifford Geertz. He describes religion as:

*"a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."*¹⁹

This definition tells us that religion involves a system of cultural practices that are informed by a distinctive model of reality and possesses the ability to transform people's conceptions of the everyday

¹⁸ Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 1-21.

¹⁹ Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (Florence, UNITED STATES: Routledge, 2010), 7.

world and provides a basis for justifying those actions and understanding of reality.²⁰

However, this definition doesn't include the social fact of religion which also consists of beliefs and practices that unite a community and ignoring the spiritual fact that religion can also transcend reality. I think that it is important to add the social act of community to the definition of Geertz because communities refer "to groups who share a common ideology and theology and can be identified by distinctive patterns of practice and circulating discourse which supports and justify their experience of the sacred and the everyday."²¹ Finally, there are no gods or other divine beings in this definition, so it could also apply equally to ideologies or other social formations with authority.²² Besides, these critical notes it is useful to use this definition as a starting point for considering how media consumption can be seen as part of one's religious life and practice because it presents religion as being an expressed practice and experience that informs people's understanding of everyday life.²³

To understand the notion of *digital religion* is also important to define new media. According to Lev Manovich, new media consist of two layers: "a computational layer composing the technical structure of the object, and a cultural layer which suggests the very nature of new media encourages certain forms of interaction."²⁴ Manovich describes this as a symbiotic relationship where they influence each other and lead to new forms of media use and expectations.²⁵ By mapping the outline of religion and new media it becomes clear that both focus on considering the social connections and cultural practices.²⁶

With the concept of *digital religion*, religion and new media are merging. According to Naomi Campbell, "[d]igital religion does not simply refer to religion as it is performed and articulated online, but points to how digital media and spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practice."²⁷ Campbell's reference to Stewart Hoover whom suggests that the study of religion and new media has been changed from simply exploring the "digitization of religion," to consider what the digital contributes to religion.²⁸ The first is more about how digital media force religious groups and practitioners to adapt and altering notions of religious tradition, authority, or authenticity, while the latter is about how religion is constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures.²⁹ This

²⁰ Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (Florence, UNITED STATES: Routledge, 2010), 7.

²¹ Ibid., p. 8-9.

²² Ibid., p. 7.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁵ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (MIT Press, 2001). 27-48.

²⁶ Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (Florence, UNITED STATES: Routledge, 2010), 10.

²⁷ Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 10.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁹ Ibidem.

concept gives me a lens to look at religious online platforms and see how they could shape religious practices and beliefs and a framework to explore how religion is culturing new media context with settled ways of being and beliefs about the nature of reality and the world.³⁰

2.2 Religious themes

To understand how religion online is connected to and influenced by religious culture as a whole, I will use three religious' themes: rituals, community, and authority from the book *Digital religion* of Heidi Campbell and connect it to how platforms and platform mechanisms guide the experience and practices surrounding these three themes. Van Dijck et al. explain that technological and economic elements of the platform are used to steer people through the platform. The use of the platforms is being used more and more in daily life and therefore it's important to critically reflect on the role that platforms have in social and economic traffic.³¹

Rituals

Christopher Helland describes rituals as a “purposeful engagement with the sacred whatever the sacred may be for those involved.”³² This means that a ritual can be spontaneous and personally constructed or can be elaborated, structured, and can be extremely formal. He explains further that “a religious ritual is an aggregate of performance, media, script, and representation of belief.”³³ According to Helland, these are the fundamentals or elements that make up a ritual, and they impact each other as they change, develop, or are transformed.³⁴ According to Helland, the script is “a set of rules laid out to be followed by the ritual, the words, action, gestures, and symbols that are to be used.” After that, he describes the media as “the mechanisms for communicating and receiving the ritual performance.”³⁵ Finally, there are the representations of belief “that are embodied through the ritual performance itself: myths, sacred narratives, sacred stories, the belief of the supernatural, or whatever the participants view as sacred.”³⁶

Helland describes several factors that influence whether online rituals will be accepted as an

³⁰ Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 3.

³¹ José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *De platformsamenleving: Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 11.

³² Christopher Helland, "Ritual," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 25.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Christopher Helland, "Ritual," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 27.

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

authentic ritual practice. Because rituals are dynamic and changing, Helland uses a framework for assessing the different components that would be altered or transformed when a ritual is transferred into new media. This process of adapting and changing can be described by the three heuristic components of transformation, invention, and exclusion.³⁷ With these three components, I want to analyze how the Church online platform transforms, invents and excludes the activity of rituals to make it work in an online environment and compare them with the traditional offline rituals. Campbell cites in her text Heinz Scheifinger who explains that above mentioned comparison is important because if a ritual appears to be transformed online but it is still deemed to be acceptable, then it suggests that the ritual itself has not changed significantly. This means that there are unlikely to be fundamental changes in the religious experience that it gives rise to.³⁸

The first component Helland describes is transformation this is “the process of shaping or reshaping a ritual that already exists, changing its content or structure in certain ways so it can be facilitated online.”³⁹ To make this work, a new aspect has to be applied to allow for the ritual to work in cyberspace and there has to be an innovation within the ritual itself based upon the new media environment. Because the ritual is changing in an online environment certain things have to be left out of the ritual activity to make it work in an online environment.⁴⁰ These three forces act upon the ritual and because the rituals have to be changed for the online environment it gives direction to the way people experience and practice religion.⁴¹

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler describes in her text that the performance of ritual online is often questioned as being more a simulation or a reproduction of something real rather than being something authentic and whether social actions within digital realms have the same quality as face-to-face communication.⁴² According to Radde-Antweiler, the adjective authentic means two things: “it can be used to describe something as true or genuine, or something or someone as trustworthy or reliable.”⁴³ With nowadays technical opportunities in virtual environments, social actions within online environments were not considered to be equal to offline actions. Similarly, religious performances online, such as rituals, are often heavily doubted, especially by religious institutions.⁴⁴ Radde-

³⁷ Christopher Helland, "Ritual," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 35.

³⁸ Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 13.

³⁹ Christopher Helland, "Ritual," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 35.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, "Authenticity," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 88.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 89.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

Antweiler elaborates that “the evaluation of the authenticity of the online space is often based on definitions of what constitutes the “virtual” and “real” for different people in these contexts.”⁴⁵

Helland’s chapter about rituals is focused on the technical aspects of online rituals but does not take into account the economic elements of transfer rituals to an online platform. To make my thesis academic relevant I want to focus on these economic elements of the religious platform and positioning myself in the tradition of platform politics. Van Dijck et al. explain that every form of user interaction online can be quantified as data: rating, paying, enrolling, watching, searching but also friending, liking, posting, and commenting.⁴⁶ We see these interactions also on the Church online platform when performing a Christian ritual. It is because of such user practices that data identification penetrates deeply into social relationships and processes.

Furthermore, user activities are not only quantified on platforms themselves, but the online behavior of users is increasingly being followed by platform companies all over the web. Online platforms are accessible via Facebook-logins and third parties can gain access to user data via social buttons of Facebook and Google+.⁴⁷ With this research, I want to contribute to the field of digital religion by analyzing how religious rituals are used to gather data and how commodification converts rituals into tradable products with economic value.

Community

In an age of networked digital technologies, the internet’s ability to facilitate and mediate social relations has shifted many people’s notions of friendship, relationship, and community.⁴⁸ Religious communities in a networked society function quite differently from traditional religious institutions. In the article “Online Communities versus Offline Communities in the Arab/Muslim world” the authors cited the definition of Hamman who says that “a traditional community is characterized by a group people who share social interaction and some common ties between themselves and the other members of the group and who share a physical space for at least some of the time.”⁴⁹

According to computer scientist Jenny Preece, an online community should be consisting of:

⁴⁵ Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, "Authenticity," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 93.

⁴⁶ José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *De platformsamenleving: Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 39.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Heidi A. Campbell, "Community," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 57.

⁴⁹ Yeslam Al-Saggaf and Mohamed M Begg, “Online Communities versus Offline Communities in the Arab/Muslim World,” *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* 2, no. 1 (February 29, 2004): 43.

“People who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles such as leading or moderating. A shared purpose such as interest, need, information exchange or service that provides a reason for the community. Policies in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws that guide people interaction. Computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness.”⁵⁰

The above definition of online community shares most of the elements presented in the definition of offline communities. One of the differences is that the space of interaction of an online community is changed into online cyberspace. This has the consequence that online communities are more focused on shared interests and issues, while offline communities are focused on sharing places, times, customs, and a sense of closeness. Therefore, online religious communities function more as loose social networks with varying levels of religious connection and commitment, rather than as a tightly bound social structure, according to Campbell.⁵¹

Another point that Preece includes in her definition is the element of ‘defining authority.’⁵² I think that this element is also important for the offline definition within this research of religious communities because these are characterized by the existence of a leader.⁵³ With this definition of online community, we see that technologies began to influence conceptions of community and new form of religious gatherings. This evokes questions about how a community online is formed, validated, evaluated, and legitimated by users.⁵⁴

With this research, I want to contribute to the academic field of platform politics. According to van Dijck et al., platforms are tools that enable citizens to connect through online activities and to form communities to reshape social order and the democratic order.⁵⁵ Citizens can do more by themselves and don't need the help of traditional institutions like labor unions, community centers, or churches. Van Dijck et al. explain that there is a deterministic idea of digital technology that could lead to more collectivity and transparently with the rise of platforms. However, Van Dijck et al. also argue that platforms do not act as tools used by citizens and civil society organizations for communication

⁵⁰ Jennifer Preece, *Online Communities: Designing, Usability, Supporting Sociability* (Chichester: UNITED KINGDOM Wiley, 2000). 10.

⁵¹ Heidi A. Campbell, "Community," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 57.

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ Jennifer Preece, *Online Communities: Designing, Usability, Supporting Sociability* (Chichester: UNITED KINGDOM Wiley, 2000). 10.

⁵⁴ Heidi A. Campbell, "Community," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 57

⁵⁵ Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, *De Platformsamenleving*, p. 31.

and organization purposes. They also give direction to the socio-economic and social order in which they gradually become interwoven.⁵⁶

Even though the church online platform is not a platform that is focused on making profit, Van Dijck et al. describe that even collective or non-profit platforms are almost always interwoven in the existing ecosystem, simply because otherwise they cannot benefit from the economies of scale (network effects) of the commercial web in making connections.⁵⁷ Facebook and Google often play an important role as connectors, as visitors to these platforms are encouraged to bring their activities on the platform to the attention of a larger audience via external social networks. You could argue that there is hardly any real public or non-profit space in the ecosystem of platforms.⁵⁸ By taking this position in the academic debate on platforms, I want to analyze which mechanisms are behind the church online platform.

Authority

In the previous section about community, I already mentioned the term authority, and, in this section, I will elaborate it in more detail. Pauline Hope Cheong describes that different forms of religious authority are altered by digital technologies, which perceived to distort and repulse traditional faith doctrines and domains, often embedded in forms of hierarchical communication. This is delineated into two logics. The first logic refers to the dominant approach whereby digital media are framed as corrosive and disruptive to traditional religious authority, emphasize the erosion of the power of traditional religious institutions and leaders to determine the meaning of religious symbols. Campbell elaborates that the latter refers to digital media as supportive and complementary of religious authority, and rebuild the legitimacy of religious symbols, and work contexts, amidst creative and countervailing (re)presentations.⁵⁹

The dominant logic is the logic of disjuncture and displacement. Cheong explains that the dominant logic is that religious authority is eroded by online religious activity. She argues that “disjuncture involves arguments which propose between religious authority and new media is characterized by upheaval and/or disconnectedness.”⁶⁰ Displacement refers to the acts of apparent change, including supersede power, and arrange an equivalent authority in place of another. One more prevalent view is that the internet challenges authority by extending access to religious information in

⁵⁶ José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *De platformsamenleving: Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 31.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁹ Pauline Hope Cheong, "Authority," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 57-71.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

a way that can erode the base or foundation of a religious system. According to Cheong, the internet allows access to information previously only understood by elites who were certified, it is posited that religious authority may diminish, with non-professionals gaining greater control over access to religious knowledge.⁶¹

Another facet of displacement logic indicates how the condition of authorities and ecclesiastical structure is undermined when followers gain more access to relevant knowledge, because, according to Meyrowitz “to preserve status, knowledge is often protected by encoding it in jargon, or by restricting access to it in other ways.”⁶² This means that the internet is seen as a danger to religious authority because it presents potentially oppositional information that negatively affects the credibility of religious institutions and leadership. Cheong explains that seekers and believers on the internet may now experience increased access and ability to initiate debates and even actively confront religious authorities with online information.⁶³ According to Cheong, “digital media is perceived to be corrosive and disruptive to traditional religious authority, online forum leaders and webmasters have been portrayed as new authority figures.”⁶⁴ Thus, religious interpretation, texts, ecclesiastical structures, and the importance of positions are changed by digital technology and the capabilities of the Internet to expand resource access, facilitate new ritual practices, and support new positions of power.

On the other side, there is also the logic of continuity and complementarity. Cheong explains that the logic of continuity “involves arguments which propose or reason that the relationship between religious authority and new media is characterized by connectedness, succession, and negotiation.”⁶⁵ The logic of complementary alludes to the acts of interrelation of socio-technical developments that co-constitute and augment authority. This logic sees social media platforms as an avenue of renewal rejuvenating the life of religious organizations.⁶⁶

Furthermore, Cheong describes that “the logic of complementarity includes transmediation, a process whereby authority practices are appropriated and remediated across different communication platforms.”⁶⁷ She explains that nowadays religious authorities have a strong brand presence online because they “generally believed to be able to reconcile a duality of concern with the “other-

⁶¹ Pauline Hope Cheong, "Authority," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 75.

⁶² Meyrowitz and Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York, UNITED STATES: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 1986), 63.

⁶³ Pauline Hope Cheong, "Authority," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 75.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁷ *Ibidem.*

worldliness” of spiritual life with the “this-worldliness” of new media marketing.”⁶⁸ This means that they use internet and digital technology to advance their outreach and missions. With these two logics, I want to look at the Church online platform and analyze how the platform makes religious authority stronger or weaker.

3.0 Method

To answer my research question, I want to use a tailor-made version of the walkthrough-method designed by Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay.⁶⁹ Ben Light et al. define the walkthrough-method as "a way of engaging directly with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences."⁷⁰ This method consists of two components and will be explained in the next paragraphs.

The first part of the walkthrough-method relates to the design of the application. This method is grounded in the principles of the Actor-Network Theory(ANT). This theory considers non-human actors also as actors with the capacity to act. In other words, design can act as an intermediary factor when using it. Moreover, it distinguishes between intermediaries and mediators, which can be human or non-human. According to Ben Light et al. intermediaries pass meaning without changing it throughout a network of relations, while mediators alter the meaning within a system.⁷¹

Another way of understanding the influence of non-human actors is to think of a technology’s materiality and the affordances it extends. According to James Gordan, affordances are “as relational, triggered by the particular ways in which an actor, or set of actors, perceives and uses [an] object.”⁷² In this way, technologies can both shaped by and shaping of the practice humans use in interaction with, around and through technology. Affordances can differ from context and species but they cannot be seen as freely changeable.⁷³ In the article “Technologies, texts and affordances” Ian Hutchby explains that different technologies have different affordances and these affordances can constrain the ways that they can be written or read.⁷⁴

This enables me too look at the religious themes rituals, community, and authority and see how these religious themes are adjusted for the online environment of the Church online platform.

⁶⁸ Pauline Hope Cheong, "Authority," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 80.

⁶⁹ Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay, “The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (March 2018): 1-26.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p., 3.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷² Andrew Richard Schrock, “Communicative Affordances of Mobile Media: Portability, Availability, Locatability, and Multimediality,” *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1232-1233.

⁷³ Ibidem.

⁷⁴ Ian Hutchby, “Technologies, Texts and Affordances,” *Sociology* 35, no. 2 (May 2001): 445–446.

Hereby, I can focus on the elements of the interface and their connection to the platform's environment of expected use. Therefore, I want to look at the different features and affordances of the platform and analyze the architecture of the interface. This gives me a systematic approach to identifying cultural discourses that shape and are perpetuated by an interface element.

The second component is described by Ben Light et al. as *the environment of expected use*. They explain that "this part of the walkthrough points researchers toward pivotal aspects of an app's context for analysis in conjunction with its technological architecture."⁷⁵ I will do this by looking at the discourse surrounding the Church online platform. According to Norman Fairclough, discourse constructs a reality in which the role of technology influences how we absorb reality. Indeed, language can produce social identities and social relationships.⁷⁶ Therefore, I am focusing on the *vision* of the platform.

The app's vision consists of its purpose, target user base, and how you use it, which are communicated through the app provider's organizational materials. Ben Light et al. explain that the vision of an app "tells users what it is supposed to do and, by extension, implies how it can be used and by whom."⁷⁷ Understanding the original vision of the app supplies a baseline for identifying user appropriation. This vision can be fulfilled by the governance of the app."⁷⁸ In my thesis, I want to look at the vision of the platform by looking at how the website describes the Church online platform. In this way governance simply expands from managing user activity to enforcing norms and values. This enables me to look at how the makers of the platform imagine Christian rituals, community formation, and authority on an online platform. This means that I can analyze what kind of users are allowed on the Church online platform and which place boundaries around the types of activity that users can conduct.

Another element of *the environment of expected use* is the *operating model*. According to Ben Light et al. "An app's operating model involves its business strategy and revenue sources, which indicate underlying political and economic interests."⁷⁹ Ben Light et al. explain that revenue generation may involve payment for the app or in-app purchase but it can also not involve monetary exchange, like access to services in exchange for personal data that can be sold to advertisers and data miners.⁸⁰ Both the level of access and the experience of the user can depend on how much data users provide. This process starts during registration, where the app companies collecting basic information and

⁷⁵ Light, Burgess, and Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method," 10-11.

⁷⁶ Norman Fairclough, "Discourse and sociocultural change," in *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 93.

⁷⁷ Light, Burgess, and Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method," 11.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 12-13.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 11-12.

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

escalates as users encounter features requiring more data. According to Ben Light et al. “Apps may cultivate multi-sided markets, garnering revenue from in-app advertising and purchases as well as partnerships with other platforms.”⁸¹ Although the Church online platform is not a commercial platform, it still receives recourse reports to operate. This element enables me to look at the business model of the platform and see how religious themes play a role in this.

For my research, I will watch the livestreams of *Life.Church* who are using the Church online platform as a platform to broadcast their livestreams. Life.Church is an American evangelical multi-site church founded by Craig Groeschel. With 34 Life.Church locations in ten U.S. states you can speak of a megachurch.⁸² *Life.Church* is also the founder of the Church online platform and provides streaming integration, chat tools, behind-the-scenes admin controls, and tech support. With this tailor-made walkthrough method, I want to engage with the platform by using the interface, working through different screens, tapping buttons, exploring menus, and interact with the people in the chat. I do this by watching the live stream services of Life.Church as often as possible to engage with all the aspects of the platform.

4.0 Analysis

In this chapter, I am going to analyze the Church online platform. First, I will briefly explain what the platform is. After that, I want to analyze the three different religious themes, which I have elaborated in the theoretical framework, and how they shape the experiences and practices of Christian religion. I will start with the theme rituals where I will look at how the affordances of the platform shape the experience and practices of religion. After that, I want to focus on the vision of the platform. According to Ben Light et al. the vision of the makers of the platform can tell us how it can be used and what it is supposed to do. Finally, I will focus on the *operating model* whereby I look at the complex dynamics that take place between users, technologies, and business models which indicate underlying political and economic interests.⁸³ These steps also apply to the other two religious’ themes: community and authority.

4.1 The Church online platform

The Church online platform is part of Lifechurch.tv and is a free tool to help churches launch online ministries. The platform provides streaming integration, chat tools, behind-the-scenes, admin

⁸¹ Light, Burgess, and Duguay, “The Walkthrough Method,” 11.

⁸² “Launch Your Online Ministry for Free | Church Online Platform,” accessed January 13, 2020, <https://churchonlineplatform.com/>.

⁸³ Light, Burgess, and Duguay, “The Walkthrough Method,” 10-13

controls, and tech support. It's completely free, and so far, more than 7,000 churches have signed up.⁸⁴ The platform is part of Life.Church Open Networks consist of an entire library of sources, training, and apps available for free to every church and created a vibrant online community where you can grow alongside others. This means that besides the Church online platform, the *Open Network* also includes apps like *Church Metrics* and the Bible app *Youversion*. This Open Network is part of the American evangelical multi-site church *Life.Church*. Craig Groeschel is the founder and senior pastor of Life.Church.⁸⁵

4.2 Religious theme: rituals

4.2.1 The affordances of the platform

There are a couple of different rituals that are performed on the Church online platform. These rituals are worship music, the sermon of the preacher, the offertory, conversion, and prayer. In this chapter, I am going to analyze how these rituals shaping and being shaped by the online platform. The first ritual I will elaborate on is worship music. This music block takes 20 to 25 minutes, where they sing two or three songs. This part of the ritual is not very different from the church service in real life.⁸⁶

However, while they sing these songs, they don't particularly speak or participate with the viewer. In a physical church service, the lead singer has more interaction with the audience, for example, he asks to sing along with him, to clap your hands or raise your hands, and invites the churchgoer to do the same thing as he does. In this way, the lead singer asks for an active attitude when worshipping God. This differs from the online ritual because they are only singing three or four songs and doing their thing on the stage, but don't invite the online viewer to participate with them. In this way, the online broadcast seems like just a normal television broadcast where the viewer has a passive attitude worshipping God. This lack of interactivity makes the authenticity of the worship experience weaker because the content or structure of the ritual is not adapted to the online environment and no new aspect has been added to the ritual.⁸⁷

The other part of the service consists of the sermon of the pastor. In this part, the preacher translates an old Bible story into something relevant for now to encourage people. Most of the ritual has remained the same in the online environment but adjustments have been made to make it feel more authentic. The first thing to notice is that the preacher is talking directly to the camera. In this way, the platform ensures that people who are watching this behind their screen have the feeling that

⁸⁴ "Launch Your Online Ministry for Free | Church Online Platform," accessed March 27, 2020.

⁸⁵ Ibidem.

⁸⁶ Ibidem.

⁸⁷ Ibidem.

the preacher makes eye contact with them. Because of this, people who are watching online become more involved and this strengthens the feel of a community.

Furthermore, there are some new aspects added to this ritual to make it work in cyberspace. One of these new aspects is the chat function. With the chat people are encouraged to discuss and talk with other people during the sermon.⁸⁸ In this way, the online church service is different than the offline church service because normally as a churchgoer you are not supposed to talk during an offline church service. With the chat function, people are now stimulated to talk and discuss the sermon of the preacher during his or her sermon. Another added section to the online livestream services are the presentation parts. In these parts one person sitting in a separate room talking directly to the camera and tell the general announcement of the church. These announcements are about the vision of the church and following their social media platforms. This aspect and setting you don't see in a traditional church service but is added to make the service more playful and more like a television program.⁸⁹

In addition to these rituals, some rituals have a smaller role in the livestream. These rituals are offertory, prayer, and the conversion ritual and are integrated with buttons in the platform. The first button I want to discuss is the prayer button. With this button, you can ask for one-to-one prayer during the service.⁹⁰ In this case, we see that the structure is changed for the online environment. Before communication technologies, you had to go physically to a pastor, deacon, or a Christian friend and ask him or her to pray for you. People can now watch the Livestream and if they feel the urge for prayer, they click on the button and get directed to a one-to-one chat box with a chat host where they can share their need of prayer. In this way, people are no longer having to go physically to priests, pastors, or other clergy but are one mouse click away for prayer.⁹¹

We see with this ritual that the structure of the ritual is changed for the online environment. The platform is also adding something new to the ritual to make it work in the online environment and that is the chat function. When you click on the prayer button you will be directed to a chat box whereby the person who needs prayer can communicate his or her prayer with a chat host. The chat host can pray for the person via the chat function whereby the face-to-face aspect of prayer is replaced by the chat function. we see here that the physical aspect of praying is left out to make the ritual work online in an online environment.

The second ritual, I want to talk about is the offertory. In the livestream the pastor tells a little story about why it is important to give money to the church when a blue button appears in the chat where you can click on. When you click on the button you will be redirected to another page where

⁸⁸ "Life.Church," accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.life.church/>.

⁸⁹ Ibidem.

⁹⁰ "Life.Church."

⁹¹ Pauline Hope Cheong, "Authority," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 57-71.

the user can make a transaction via the website or the Life.Church app.⁹² We see here that with this button the Christian ritual of offertory is adapted to the new media environment because otherwise, it cannot work in cyberspace. In an online environment, it is impossible to pass a physical basket where you can put your money in and for this reason you can make a digital transaction.

The second time when a button appears is during the conversion call for viewers who don't believe in God. During this activity, a window appears in the chat which says "I commit my life to Jesus" with underneath two buttons. The first button is the 'raise your hand' button whereby you let Life.Church know that you have given your heart to Jesus. The second button is the 'dismiss button' by which the viewer can refuse the "I commit my life to Jesus" statement. When you click on the button next to the "raise your hand" button a number appears which means how many people have clicked on the "raise your hand" button and the prayer request button appears where people can ask for prayer or just talk to a chat host. On the one hand, we see that the conversion of people is quantified as data but on the other hand, the platform tries to make personal contact with the prayer request button.⁹³ Finally, the viewer has also the possibility to just ignore the two buttons.

4.2.2 What says the website about rituals

According to the vision of the platform, the Church online platform is 100% free. This means that that "the Church Online Platform is available completely free of charge what extends to support and updates, too. You'll get personalized customer service, software upgrades, and new features for the life of the tool."⁹⁴ The platform is founded by Life.Church and they think that irrational generosity is a core value of their church. Life.Church doesn't want that money is an obstacle for a church to use this platform to reach people around the world something impossible if a church only has a physical church meeting every Sunday.⁹⁵

However, Van Dijck et al. describe that even non-profit institutions are interwoven in the platform ecosystem where big platforms, like Facebook and Google, rule the services.⁹⁶ This is because otherwise, they cannot take advantage of the economies of scale of the commercial web in making connections. This is for the Church online platform very important because of their vision "reach every soul on earth." Without, for example, the visibility from Google's search engine it is impossible to reach this vision in this platform ecosystem. Van Dijck et al. argue that there is hardly any real public or non-

⁹² "Life.Church."

⁹³ Ibidem.

⁹⁴ Ibidem.

⁹⁵ Ibidem.

⁹⁶ José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *De platformsamenleving: Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 24.

profit space in the ecosystem of platforms.⁹⁷

Another point that the website of the Church online platform describes, is that the platform can “organize data and gain powerful insights into every facet of your church online services to help you make solid informed ministry decisions.”⁹⁸ With this data you can see how many unique attendees have watched the livestream, the total watched time of the livestream, 3-second viewers, 10 second time viewers, and the average watched time of the livestream. In this way, the data of the livestream could influence how church leaders sort their online church services to maximize their online viewers. This means that the insights of data could influence what a church service will look like.

4.2.3 The underlying political and economic interests by the religious theme rituals

In this section, I want to focus on the datafication of the Church online platform. Van Dijck et al. explain that technological and economic elements of the platform are used to steer people through the platform. Platforms are being used more and more in daily life and therefore it's important to critically reflect on which role platforms play in social and economic traffic.⁹⁹ I have explained in section 4.2.1 that the conversion ritual is quantified into numbers. When you click on the “I commit my life to Jesus” button you can see a number of how many people have given their life to Jesus.

This affordance of the platform is very different than the physical offline ritual because when a conversion call is happening in a physical church service the preacher asks to raise your hand and to come forward at the stage. This action could be difficult to take because it can be tense for a person to come forward at the podium while there are a lot of people in the church. This can eventually stop someone from conversion to God. With the digital method, the physical obstacle disappears, and it makes it easier for people to convert to God because they can sit behind a screen where nobody is seeing him or her and the only action you have to take is to click on a button. The easiness to convert to God is very important for the platform because one of their goals is to convert as many people as possible. However, you can argue that the authenticity or trueness of the ritual disappears because there is almost no threshold in cyberspace.

Another aspect of the Church online platform is the cookie window which appears when you visit the website. Accepting these cookies allows to keep the users' preferences from session to session and you permit Nextroll and their advertising partners to "use cookies and similar technologies on this site and on the internet that collect and use personal data (e.g. your IP address) to select and offer

⁹⁷ José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *De platformsamenleving: Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 24.

⁹⁸ “Life.Church.”

⁹⁹ Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, *De Platformsamenleving*, 24.

measurable personalized advertising from this site and other advertisers in NextRoll's network, but also to analyze and understand your use of our websites using the services of NextRoll.”¹⁰⁰ NextRoll is according to their website a company that is helping marketplaces and marketing platforms grow revenue by empowering them to build and enhance their marketing solutions. This means that allowing cookies on Church online platform you permit to the placing and use of cookies by NextRoll and its advertising partners.¹⁰¹

Van Dijck et al. describes that most platforms follow users by placing a cookie (a small text file) in the web browser, which not only makes it possible to identify users when they visit the platform themselves but also to when they subsequently visit other websites.¹⁰² These economic interests have a huge influence on the ritual going to church and attend a church service. To follow a church service, you have to accept cookies and take a username for in the chat. These affordances are elements that you don't have to do attending a live church service. In this way, the affordances of the church online platform change the experiences and practices of a church service.

4.3 Religious theme: community

4.3.1 The affordances

One of the aspects of the Church online platform is that it is an around-the-world community builder.¹⁰³ According to Yeslam Al-Saggaf and Mohamed M Begg, an online community consists of people who interact socially, have a shared purpose, have policies in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws that guide people interaction, Computer systems to support, and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness.¹⁰⁴ With this definition of online community, we see that technologies began to influence conceptions of community and new form of religious gatherings. This evokes questions about how a community online is formed, validated, evaluated, and legitimated by users.¹⁰⁵ The Church online platform uses a chat function, social buttons, and life groups to build their community.

¹⁰⁰ “NextRoll - Home,” accessed June 26, 2020, <https://www.nextroll.com/>.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem.

¹⁰² José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *De platformsamenleving: Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 49.

¹⁰³ “Life.Church.”

¹⁰⁴ Yeslam Al-Saggaf and Mohamed M Begg, “Online Communities versus Offline Communities in the Arab/Muslim World,” *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* 2, no. 1 (February 29, 2004): 43-44.

¹⁰⁵ Yeslam Al-Saggaf and Mohamed M Begg, “Online Communities versus Offline Communities in the Arab/Muslim World,” *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* 2, no. 1 (February 29, 2004): 43-44.

The first aspect of the Church online platform, I want to elaborate on is the chat function. With the possibility of chat during the online church service, people can now talk during a sermon of a preacher. This is in contrast to a physical church service where people are not allowed to talk during the sermon. Hereby, viewers of the Livestream can interact with each other and discuss certain elements of the message of the preacher. On the one hand, people can agree with his points and simply react with the Christian phrase "amen", on the other people can disagree with his points and explain to the others in the chat why they disagree.¹⁰⁶ Instead of the passive way of listening to the preacher, the platform gives the possibility to an active way of listening whereby a viewer directly can discuss the content with other viewers, share life experience, answer questions, or encourage other viewers. In this way, the chat function is supportive and strengthens the community because it mediates social interaction.¹⁰⁷

Another element of the chat function is the chat hosts. These hosts are according to the website responsible to engage with attendees in the chat. Furthermore, they welcome the people who are entering the chat, answer questions, and repeat the most important points the preacher is saying in his sermon with the result that the conversation is kept going. This is in line with the definition of community where people interact socially and have a shared purpose that strengthens the community. However, this strengthening of the community has consequences on the attenders who are watching the rituals online. This continuous conversation could be distracting the viewer from actually follow the online church service.¹⁰⁸

The social buttons are the other function of community forming. These buttons are placed above the video player and have a goal to share the online church service to friends or other people around the world via Twitter, Facebook, or E-mail. With these buttons, the Church online platform extends the reach of their ministry because they are not limited to a physical church building. However, the use of buttons on their platform indicates the political and economic interests of the platform.¹⁰⁹ I will elaborate this more in section 4.3.3 of my thesis.

The social groups are another aspect of the platform in relation to the community. If you watch the livestream, they invite you to join an online Life.group of Life.church. According to Campbell, online religious communities function more as loose social networks with varying levels of religious connection and commitment, rather than as a tight bound social structure like a church service in real

¹⁰⁶ "Life.Church."

¹⁰⁷ Heidi A. Campbell, "Community," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 59.

¹⁰⁸ "Life.Church."

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem.

life.¹¹⁰ The central point of online communities is that the space of interaction has changed however the basic act of social exchange has not.¹¹¹ This online community forming ensures that geographical separation is no longer a point in the exclusion of a social network. A lot of digital devices have increased ease of travel to maintain social relationships even when they are not physically nearby that social relationship.¹¹² So we see that the three above mentioned aspects facilitate the elements of an online community on the church online platform.

4.3.2 What says the website about community

The website of the Church online platform explains that the platform “it's more than a video player.”¹¹³ It's an agreeing-in-prayer, real-life, around-the-world community builder. With Chat, Live Prayer, and synced video streaming, Church Online Platform is all about doing church together.”¹¹⁴ With this vision, the Church online platform claims that there is no difference between an offline church service in a physical building and an online church on the Church online platform and the way they organize rituals, community, and authority. However, in reality, these aspects of Christian religion do change when they are transferred in an online environment. We have to critically look at the sentence “Church Online Platform is all about doing church together” because who is “all” in this sentence. There are a lot of viewers who only watch the livestream and don't participate in the chat or as a volunteer of the platform and not interested in the community aspect but only in the sermon of the preacher.

They explain further on the website that the power of the Church online platform is the unity of the shared experience. According to the website “you can broadcast your services live or ‘simulated live,’ and all your viewers and chatters can watch a service with a synced starting time—they'll discuss the message or ask questions in real-time as the sermon is happening.”¹¹⁵ It is remarkable that the vision of the platform describes that “the power of the Church online platform is the unity of the shared experience.” However, they do not describe in comparison to what because the power of an offline church service is also the unity of the shared experience in a physical environment. I think that the real power of the Church online platform is that it is capable to extend the reach of the church past the walls.

¹¹⁰ Heidi A. Campbell, "Community," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 59.

¹¹¹ Ibidem.

¹¹² Heidi A. Campbell, "Community," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 64.

¹¹³ Life.Church.”

¹¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹¹⁵ Ibidem.

4.3.3 The underlying political and economic interests by the religious theme community

The Church Online Platform advertises itself as a free tool and is founded by Life.Church itself. These two components ensure that it is a non-profit organization that does not aim to generate revenue. However, Van Dijck et al. describe that even platforms from this sector are almost always interwoven within an online commerce ecosystem. Van Dijck et al. construe that the metaphor of the ecosystem emphasizes, on the one hand, the great interdependence and mutual entanglement of all online platforms through shared mechanisms but on the other hand, the strong hierarchical structure of platforms in this ecosystem.¹¹⁶ They explain that no platform operates alone but position itself to other platforms, websites, and applications. At first glance, new small platforms, websites and mobile applications often appear to be independent players, but when we have a closer look we see that they appear to be encapsulated in all sorts of ways in the ecosystem where the big players (Facebook and Google) determine the rules of the game.¹¹⁷ For example, the Church online platforms use Facebook and Google + profiles for logging in.¹¹⁸

Furthermore, there are also Facebook and Twitter buttons, by which users can share the online church services to family and friends. Van Dijck et al. explain that such buttons enable platforms to collect user data across the entire web and control how users can express themselves and how they can share content.¹¹⁹ Therefore, platforms not only measure what users do, think, and feel, but also shape it. Another way the platform gives third parties entry to the user data of the platforms is by using *Application Programming Interfaces*(APIs).¹²⁰ The centralization of data in the hands of large platform owners is, therefore, an important reason why the platform ecosystem is in principle hierarchically organized despite its seemingly open nature.¹²¹

We have seen with these examples that the Church online platform as a non-profit platform is also interwoven within the existing ecosystem, simply because otherwise they cannot benefit from the economies of scale of the commercial web in making connections.¹²² This platform is connected with Facebook, Google, and other third parties. These platforms often play an important role as connectors because visitors of these platforms are encouraged to bring their activities on the platform to the attention of a larger audience via external social networks. You could argue that there is hardly any

¹¹⁶ José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *De platformsamenleving: Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 21.

¹¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 21-22

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

¹²⁰ Ibidem.

¹²¹ Ibidem.

¹²² Ibid., p. 24.

real public or non-profit space in the ecosystem of platforms.¹²³ Van Dijck et al. describe that the platform society is increasingly turning the traditional model of public and commercial media that has been reasonably clearly distinguishable upside down. Platforms partly undermine the traditional economic model that revolved around the commodification of media products and media republics by a model based on the commodification of user data.¹²⁴

The social buttons on the Church online platform are for collecting the user data of the visitors of the Church online platform. The centralization of data in the hands of large platform owners is therefore an important reason why the platform ecosystem, despite its seemingly open character, is in principle hierarchically organized.¹²⁵ This means that the Church online platform has nothing to say about the data of visitors of the Church online platform because big platforms, like Facebook and Google, largely determine the rules and conditions for social, economic, cultural, or other data traffic.

4.4 Religious theme: Authority

4.4.1 The affordances

The chat hosts are one of the affordances of the platform that changes religious authority on the Church online platform. These chat hosts are volunteers and have the power to lead the conversation in the chat. This means that they can react to questions but also ignore certain questions. In this way, chat hosts can determine which topics are discussed and which are not. According to the website of the platform, chat hosts have even the ability to delete comments or mute guests. When there is a heated discussion between two online church attenders, and they scold each other the chat hosts try to mediate. They mediate by saying that it is important to respect each other.¹²⁶ When heated discussions don't stop, they delete the comments or mute guests in the chat. For this reason, you can say that the freedom of speech is taken away by these elements but on the other hand, say something that's not related to the sermon or trolling can be distracting for people who want to listen to the sermon.

The chat hosts are people of around the world who want to be a volunteer as chat host for the Church online platform. If you want to be a volunteer, you can click on the volunteer button in the top right corner. After that, you will be referred to another page where you have to fill in your first name, last name, e-mail, and phone number. When you click on the "Submit" button you'll be taken to the

¹²³ José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *De platformsamenleving: Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 18.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹²⁶ "Life.Church."

volunteer application site where you can create an account to get started as a volunteer at Life.Church. After that, you have to fill in a volunteer application and a screening release. This screening release consists of questions like have you ever been accused or convicted of criminal activity, or entered a plea of guilty or no contest to a criminal offense of any kind? Have you ever been accused or convicted of sexual misconduct, or entered a plea of guilty or no contest to abuse or sexual misconduct? Are you aware of any traits or tendencies that you possess that could pose a threat to children or youth? According to the website, they ask these questions to ensure their volunteers' safety as well as the safety of everyone involved in their ministry and community.¹²⁷

With this background check, they want to ensure that not just everybody can volunteer for Life.Church because the volunteers could have very personal conversations with the viewers. These conversations are for example about conversion to God or various forms of addiction. Furthermore, Life.Church wants to ensure that the chat hosts are examples for other people because they act in the name of the church.¹²⁸ This means that they want people who believe in God and are not related to recent criminal activities. In this way, they can be sincere talk and pray with other people without maybe dealing with the same problems. However, people can also lie about their lives when they fill in their volunteer application and act like a different person. With this example, we see that the way how churches get their volunteers on an online or offline context is different. When church leaders can interact face-to-face with a person it is different than an online conversation via chat or a volunteer application. This means that in an online environment the degree of trusting people has to be much higher than in an offline environment. By watching the livestream of the online platform, I have seen that the chat hosts do not act alone but always work with different chat hosts with the results that they can control each other.

4.4.2 What says the website about authority

On the Church online website, there are recommendations of Church leaders of different churches why you as a church should use this platform. One recommendation is of Greg Surratt from Seacoast Church he explains that "From seekers and homebound believers to those looking for their first experience with a church, the Church Online Platform allows us to connect with people right where they are." Another recommendation is from Craig Groeschel from Life.Church who explains that "The

¹²⁷ "Sign In with Life.Church," accessed June 4, 2020, https://lifechurch.auth0.com/login?state=g6Fo2SA4N1BDbnFMWG9TWWdURkN6SWhUZ3ZHN3puMHkxbmxNZKN0aWTZIGdNZjFadEIWZkRtZVp4OExKOG9hRVFFcU1DcVhRUJEE2o2NpZNkgV0c2OXROQ0Vha2FTanRDZDFXZFA4OVZiNmE2cXlhUms&client=WG69tNCEakaSjtCd1WdP89Vb6a6qyaRk&protocol=oauth2&response_type=code&scope=openid%20profile%20email%20phone_number%20birthdate&audience=https%3A%2F%2Flifechurch.auth0.com%2Fuserinfo&redirect_uri=https%3A%2F%2Frms.life.church%3A443%2Fpage%2F501.

¹²⁸ Ibidem.

Church Online Platform has allowed us to reach people who might never have walked through the doors of a church building. God is changing lives around the world beyond what we even imagined!"¹²⁹ Another story is from Blessing Mpfu who describes that "Today was probably the largest church online experience the world has ever seen. My guess, it's going to grow in the next few weeks. I hope your church is checking out @COPlatform & other similar resources."¹³⁰

These recommendations of church leaders who using the Church online platform themselves are very positive and utopian. The Church online platform can "reach people who normally not going to a church and with this platform you have the opportunity to have a church online experience the world has never seen when you using the platform."¹³¹ However, this recommendations is of Craig Groeschel who is one of the founders of the Church online platform. These positive and utopian recommendations are beneficial for him and the platform because if a church is interested in reaching a lot of people outside the church walls this platform is suitable for achieving their goal.

There are also stories on the website about the experience of chat hosts with the platform. For example, the story about chat host Matt who says that "We've been able to share the message of Jesus with the people in our city and across the country. Recently, a mother in the hospital in Florida got to be "in church" with her daughter here in Flint, all thanks to Church Online Platform."¹³² Church is in quotation marks because they were actually in the hospital watching a church service. In this way, the platform serves as a solution for people who are not able to go to a church building.

4.4.3 The underlying political and economic interests by the religious theme authority

The Church online platform is not a stand-alone platform but also a piece of an ecosystem of Christian related apps and services name Life.Church Open Networks. This ecosystem consists of the app *Church metrics* for tracking church data so you can make better, more informed ministry decisions, the YouVersion Bible app, YouVersion Bible Lens what is an app that transforms your photos into profound, and Biblically based artistic shareable images. It seems that Life.Church is like a Christian Google where they own different digital technologies to gather data from different platforms and different churches. These data are used for making the platforms better but also give direction to other churches and how they can organize their religious ceremonies and practices.

In this way, Life.Church is appropriate and remediates its authority across different platforms.

¹²⁹ "Life.Church."

¹³⁰ Ibidem.

¹³¹ Ibidem.

¹³² Ibidem.

Cheong describes that nowadays religion authorities have a strong brand presence online because they "generally believed to be able to reconcile a duality of concern with the "other-worldliness" of spiritual life with the "this-worldliness" of new media marketing,"¹³³ This means that with these different platforms they want to help people with problems in the world by offering different spiritual objects and use the internet and digital technology to advance their outreach and missions. The different platforms feel like they give more authority to the users but with this little Christian ecosystem eventually Life.Church gets more authority because with this network they not only influence how their own church services look like but also influence the church services of other churches.

5.0 Conclusion

This thesis aims to explain which different ways does the Church online platform shapes religious ceremonies and practices surrounding online religion. I used a tailor-made version of the walkthrough-method designed by Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay, where I looked at the features of the platform, how users and providers talk about the platform, and which underlying processes and interests are involved in this platform.¹³⁴ In this thesis, we have seen that the workings and the architecture of the platform give direction to how religious ceremonies and practices like community, rituals, and authority are shaped.

I have argued in this thesis that some rituals are adapted to the online environment, for example, the use of buttons and the chat function to invite the viewer to participate. On the other hand, I have shown that some rituals are not adapted to the online environment with the consequences that it lacks the authenticity of the ritual. Furthermore, different economic and political interests shape the online religious ceremonies. The Church online platform is not a standalone platform but is part of a larger ecosystem of platforms where Google and Facebook are being in charge of. This has the consequences that a ritual like a conversion to God is quantified but also that this platform has social buttons because otherwise, they don't appear at the top rankings on Google and social media.

When we look at the religious practice community, we have seen that the platform uses a chat function, social buttons, and life groups to strengthen and build their community to maintain social relationships even when they are not physically nearby other people. With these possibilities' churches are now capable to extend their religious ceremonies beyond their church walls hereby churches

¹³³ Pauline Hope Cheong, "Authority," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012), 73.

¹³⁴ Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (March 2018): 1-26.

should pay attention to what they show and don't show to the world. In an offline church service, the pastor can say more unnuanced things because it stays inside the church.

An affordance that plays a big role on the platform is the chat function. This affordance changes the role of authority in religious ceremonies. The chat hosts have the power to lead the conversation in the chat and to mute people. This means that with this platform you don't have only pastors, elders, and deacons but also chat hosts as a new authority figure in Church who can use their power to influence the conversation in the chat, delete comments, and mute guests.

The most notable thing about this platform is that the Church online platform is a grey area in the ecosystem of platforms. On the one hand, the platform cannot sell data to third parties according to the terms of use, but on the other hand, this website is connected to other commercial platforms via plugins, buttons, and log-ins. Furthermore, it seems that Life.Church is like a Christian Google where they own different digital technologies and services to gather data from different platforms and different churches. These data are used for making the platforms better but also give direction to online social traffic and the way how religious experiences and practices are organized for different churches. To bring these technologies and services to as many other people and churches as possible they use the commercial ecosystem to bring their activities on the platform to the attention of a larger audience via external social networks. In this way, Life.Church has the power to influence churches around the world with their apps and platforms.

For my analysis, I used my own experience of an offline physical church service because I am a Christian myself who goes to a church. This given fact could maybe biased my findings although I tried to be objective in this research thesis. Furthermore, in my research, I focused especially on the affordances of the platform and the economic and political interests. Because of this, I don't look at the experiences of online church attenders in the chat and pastors of the online religious ceremony. Hereby, I can't say something about how the affordances of the platform shape the experience of the online church attenders. Suggestions for further research would be to focus on the experiences of the users instead of the affordances of the platform. Another suggestion for further research is to apply my research and method for other religious online platforms with another belief system to broaden the horizon of the underlying processes of religious platforms. My research has only focused on a religious platform with the Christian belief system therefore it excludes other religions.

6.0 Bibliography

- Al-Saggaf, Yeslam, and Mohamed M Begg. "Online Communities versus Offline Communities in the Arab/Muslim World." *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* 2, no. 1 (February 29, 2004): 41–54.
- Campbell, Heidi. *When Religion Meets New Media*. Florence, UNITED STATES: Routledge, 2010.
- Campbell, Heidi A. "Community." In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012.
- Campbell, Heidi A. "Introduction." In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012.
- Cheong, Pauline Hope. "Authority." In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012.
- Dijck, José van, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal. *De platformsamenleving. Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld*. Amsterdam University Press, 2016.
- Helland, Christopher. "Ritual." In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012.
- Hutchby, Ian. "Technologies, Texts and Affordances." *Sociology* 35, no. 2 (May 2001): 441–56.
- "Launch Your Online Ministry for Free | Church Online Platform."
<https://churchonlineplatform.com/>.
- "Life.Church." Accessed April 3, 2020. <https://www.life.church/>.
- Light, Ben, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay. "The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps." *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (March 2018): 881–900.
- Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. MIT Press, 2001.
- Meyrowitz, and Joshua Meyrowitz. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. New York, UNITED STATES: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 1986. h
- "NextRoll - Home." Accessed June 26, 2020. <https://www.nextroll.com/>.
- Preece, Jennifer. *Online Communities: Designing, Usability, Supporting Sociability*. Chichester: UNITED KINGDOM Wiley, 2000.
- Radde-Antweiler, Kerstin. "Authenticity." In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012.
- Schrock, Andrew Richard. "Communicative Affordances of Mobile Media: Portability, Availability, Locatability, and Multimediality," 2015, 18.
- "Sign In with Life.Church." Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://lifechurch.auth0.com/login?state=g6>.

