

## Article

# Established Churches on Social Media: The Case of the Finnish Churches

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**Abstract:** Two established churches, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Orthodox Church of Finland, have an active presence on several social media platforms. In this article, I review their online presence and analyze their Facebook content in depth. The analysis indicates that the churches have a traditional and educational output that represents a form of cultural Christianity. Additionally, I discuss how operating on social media is relevant to established churches, and that it is a reflection both of their desire to be visible and to construct a certain type of presence.

**Keywords:** churches; Facebook; social media; branding; communications

## 1. Introduction

Many of us spend a great deal of time online, often consuming a wide variety of content on social media. In this context, the presence<sup>1</sup> of actors on social media and the content they create to represent themselves are certainly not irrelevant. My data include the two churches established in Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Orthodox Church of Finland. The research questions are: What is the role of social media in church communication? How are churches communicating through Facebook? Essentially, this study examines the ways in which social media presence contributes to the construction of the image of established churches in line with the theoretical concept of branding.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (the ELCF) and the Orthodox Church of Finland (the OCF) are Finland's two national churches. Collectively, they represent nearly 70 percent of the Finnish population; they are a majority and a minority church, with almost 67 percent (3.7 million) of Finns belonging to the ELCF and 1 per cent (approximately 55,000) to the OCF ([Kirkon Jäsenyys n.d.](#); [Tilastotietoja Kirkon Väestöstä Vuodelta 2021](#)). To this day, membership in these churches has been more of a self-evident matter than a choice made based upon individual consideration. This is in large part due to the practice of infant baptism in churches. In general, the Finnish churches have had a stable position regardless of the effects of the digital age, social media, or recruiting. Since these churches have a solid status established by the state and quite extensive support from the population, they have never really had a reason or pressure to invest in their brands, lure people, or represent themselves through advertising. Regardless, support for churches has been declining for a long time, and resignation has become more common.

This article begins with a brief introduction of the two case churches. The key concepts that frame the chosen theoretical discussion are then described. This is followed by introducing the data and methodology. Within the empirical chapters, after describing the churches' activities across different digital platforms, the focus is then placed on the official Facebook pages of the case churches.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the study of religions on social media and to offer viewpoints about online religion in established protestant churches. The results of this study indicate that creating online content is an important way for churches to connect Finns to the Christian tradition.



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## 2. Finnish Churches: An Introduction

The Lutheran and Orthodox churches embody Western and Eastern Christianity in Finland, which is geographically located between Lutheran Sweden and Orthodox Russia. In Finland, Lutheranism has been the predominant religion since the sixteenth century. Finland was historically a part of Sweden, which embraced Catholicism until the Reformation. The Orthodox Church of Finland, in turn, originated in the Russian Orthodox Church, from which it separated in 1918 when it was declared the second state church of the newly independent Republic of Finland (Laitila 2006, p. 161).<sup>2</sup> Since the twelfth century, Orthodox Christianity had existed in the area of formerly Finnish Karelia (Martikainen and Laitila 2014, p. 151). The state church system was dismantled in Finland in 1870, but still left the churches with many benefits and rights (Ketola 2008, p. 61). In 1919, two years after Finland declared its independence, it was proclaimed a religiously neutral state; however, the state nevertheless maintains close ties with the Church to this day (Ketola 2008, p. 61; Sakaranaho 2012, p. 107).

The majority of Finns are members of these churches, with the Lutheran church accounting for almost 70 percent of the population, and the Orthodox church for 1 percent. Until 1923, membership in a church was essentially mandatory in Finland, and even into the 1980s, more than 90 percent (and even up until the dawn of the 21st century, over 80 percent) of Finns were voluntary members of the Lutheran Church (Heino et al. 1985; Palmu et al. 2012, p. 73). Specifically, the decline has accelerated only during the past two decades, reaching a point where only 66.5 percent of Finns are part of the majority church (Kirkon Jäsenyys n.d.). While the decline has been steady over the past two decades, it has accelerated significantly in recent years. The membership of the Orthodox Church has also been in an accelerating decline in recent years, since approximately 800 people per year have voluntarily left the Orthodox Church in recent years (Tilastot n.d.; Seurakuntien Jäsentilasto 2020; Luvut Miinuksella 2020).<sup>3</sup>

The decline may not seem that drastic; after all, most Finns are still members of these churches. Nevertheless, the seemingly high percentage has never reflected a commensurately high commitment to personal religion among the Finns, nor has it been an indicator that Finns are active churchgoers. On the contrary: according to statistics, only two percent of Finns attend mass once a week, and six percent once a month (Salomäki 2020, p. 98). Finns most often go to a church at Christmas, when almost two out of five Finns attend church (Kaksi Viidestä Suomalaisesta Osallistuu Joulukirkkoon 2009). Thus, the high percentage of Finns that are officially church members has for a long time conveyed a sense of belonging without believing, or even believing in belonging; that is, being members, although with low rates of attendance or actual religious commitment or belief (Bäckström 1993).

As well as having the majority of Finns as members, these two denominations have shared a similar status despite their differences in size. They are profoundly rooted in the Finnish society, since they are maintained by the state. In addition, the Lutheran church is responsible for a variety of important social functions such as burials, charity in various forms, and popular children's clubs (Hytönen 2020, pp. 200, 207). Furthermore, Parliament is opened with a church service, and the churches have the right to collect taxes in addition to receiving financial assistance from the state. Lastly, (Lutheran) Christian holy days are celebrated throughout the calendar year as public holidays. Rather than the churches constantly keeping watch over the Finns' morality and religion, they focus more on keeping Finns within their traditions: baptism, marriage, funerals, and Christian holidays.

Generally, membership in a church is defined by baptism and belonging to a local parish. According to this parochial system, parishes are geographically distributed, and every church member automatically belongs to the closest local parish, based on where they currently reside. Parents usually decide to baptize their children into the church when they are babies. As a result, these churches do not often recruit new (adult) members, since the assumption is that everyone is already a member. Nevertheless, according to data, the tradition of baptism has declined in recent years, and the trend is similar in all Nordic

churches (Hegstad 2021). In 2000, nearly 90 percent of Finns baptized their children, while in 2019 only 62.2 percent did.

The churches, given their strong position, generally do not seek new adult members. Instead, these churches strive to preserve their members, discourage them from leaving the church, and encourage them to baptize their children in a chain of generations.

### 3. Theoretical Frame

In this section, the theoretical basis of the study is described.

#### 3.1. Secularization

Recent changes in religiosity have been primarily explained by theories of secularization. Secularization refers to the social decline of religions, resulting in a decline in empirical expressions of religion because of modernization (Taira 2006, p. 36). Bruce (2014, p. 192) summarized the secularization of religion on two levels: first, at the level of social structure, and second, the rise of religious liberty. Because of these trajectories, religious institutions are ultimately less influential, and people's contact surface with them is reduced. This results in a reduction in the socialization of religious values and beliefs.

Europe, in particular, has been identified as one of the most secularized regions of the world (Torpey 2010; Davie 2002). In general, the decline of religion is a result of a series of subtle social changes (Bruce 2017, pp. 5–6). In Europe, the religious field has always been characterized by the dominance of national churches. De-institutionalization is one of the major trends resulting from secularization, since it encompasses a process of moving away from the established religious institutions that dominate European religious life. During the 2020s many of these established churches have lost their positions to varying degrees, especially in the Nordic countries, which are secularizing at a fast pace and are thus facing a steep decline in church membership.

#### 3.2. ... or Consumer Culture?

In recent decades, another emerging field has attempted to explain religious change. According to many sociologists of religion, another valid theory explaining the changes in religion is the effects of the neoliberal consumer society. As has been argued, neoliberalism and consumerism constitute a joint process in which economics has become the ethos of our age (Gauthier 2020, p. 4. See also Gauthier et al. 2013a). It is embodied in consumer culture, which is a widespread manifestation of consumption and its logics (Featherstone 1991; Gauthier et al. 2013b, pp. 4, 15; Miles 1998, p. 1; Slater 1997; Stolz and Usunier 2018, p. 3).

A key characteristic of consumerism is marketization. Marketization is the process by which market-related practices and market-related logic are introduced into previously non-economic areas of life (Gauthier et al. 2013a; 2013b, p. 3). In particular, Moberg (2017) has demonstrated the increasing use of marketing methods among established churches in Europe. In this study, marketization is viewed through the lens of branding, since branding is a more specific and concrete application of marketing.

#### 3.3. Branding

The concept of branding originates from marketing, where traditionally profit-driven companies seek to sell their products, ideas, or even lifestyles. In general, brands are communications-based, constructed sets of images (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000; Aulajärvi and Heinonen 2011; Vuokko 2003, pp. 107–21). When it comes to religion, branding is a process that is commonly employed by new communities (Stolz and Usunier 2014). The Finnish scene is far from a situation where churches would be competing for new members because the established churches have a historic presence and are highly connected to the state. Still, in a modern environment, churches may attempt to influence their image through platforms that present the opportunity to do so. According to Einstein (2011), religious branding has several evolutions, and one of them is using branding in order to meet organizational objectives. These descriptions of branding offer a viewpoint where

religious branding is used less to offer consumers a choice but more as a tool to achieve a variety of objectives, depending on the organization's needs.

Branding has mainly been exploited by, and studied in, new religious communities, such as megachurches that seek growth through recruiting new members. When it comes to the established Finnish churches, the situation is rather different. In Europe, the religious situation has long been dominated by majority churches gathering almost entire populations into the membership of national churches. This is also the case in Finland. In addition, branding in general has often been studied through the lens of its effectiveness. For example, [Casidy \(2013\)](#) studied brand effectiveness on church participation activity. On social media branding for religious purposes, [Cheong \(2016, p. 82\)](#) studied how spiritual leaders are engaging social media to build desired images.

In Finland, “branding” churches is closely related to the concept of embracing and utilizing marketing methods more broadly. [Moberg \(2016\)](#) has explained how church discourse in Europe and the Nordic countries has increasingly embraced marketing terms and models. [Valaskivi \(2019, pp. 311–12\)](#) has argued that the ELCF has engaged in branding in various ways throughout the 2000s. [Valaskivi \(2019, pp. 321–22\)](#) has also observed how branding generally follows the same principles in churches as elsewhere. As phrased by [Stolz and Usunier \(2018\)](#), these phenomena are a way of readjusting communications and replicating successful secular models for use in a religious context. According to [Valaskivi \(2019, p. 317\)](#), branding is seen as problematic in the Lutheran church due to its public function and strong cultural and societal position. In addition, branding contributes to a shift from a transcendental to an immanent frame, where emphasis is placed on strengthening people's connections with the church, rather than God ([Valaskivi 2019, p. 321](#)).

### 3.4. Digital Religion

Lastly, when studying social media, religion online must be addressed. In this field, [Campbell \(2013\)](#) has used the term “digital religion” to describe online religious practice and expression. Religion in the digital age is closely tied to the Internet, which provides a wide range of platforms and methods for distributing digitalized content. In regard to this study and case, my understanding is that religious organizations digitize through social media, for instance.

[Campbell \(2020, p. 3\)](#), when analyzing social media usage in the United States, drew attention to the fact that at the beginning of the pandemic, local ecclesiastical and spiritual actors started to share videos and streams from their own communities in a greater quantity than before. On the other hand, [Webb \(2012\)](#) suggested that new Christian communities, in particular, have used social media to increase membership and visitor numbers before the current pandemic. He even asserts that media usage by confessional communities directly affects their number of visitors and membership. This might be the case in new communities, where their appearance on media may even materialize in the form of visitors. Generally, online churches have presented examples of a virtual community ([Cheong and Ess 2012, p. 12](#)), but the online environment is not exclusive to them. However, this kind of causality is far from the situation with the Nordic churches. [Grieve \(2012, p. 108\)](#) asserts that digital religion differs primarily in three areas from what he calls analogue religion, namely: interactivity, hypertextuality, and method of dispersal.

The purpose of this study is to examine how established religious organizations are engaging in digital religious content creation. These organizations have thrived for a long time without a digital environment. In the past decades, the Finnish churches have entered various social media platforms, producing a type of “digital religion”. In the case of established churches, one can ask whether the digital form has much influence on making them more “interactive”, “hypertextual”, or altering the method by which they disperse their message. I conceptualize the presence of these churches online as a continuation of “analog” religion: merely another method of communication. According to [Gauthier \(2020, p. 9\)](#), the use of digital media has even become an obligation for religious communities.

As such, it affects religion by formatting it in accordance with the principles of visibility, recognizability, and branding.

Studying the social media content of religious communities has often focused on the expression of the individual users see (Pihlaja 2018; Brubaker and Haigh 2017, for example). For example, Hodøl (2021) examined the very similar case of the Norwegian Lutheran Church and concluded that its social media accounts are used to inform others about church activities rather than to directly engage them in dialogue. In this article, I analyze the social media presence of a religious community from the perspective of organizational production: which platforms are engaged, and what content is produced? Due to their (often) one-sided input, digital platforms can often be viewed as a place or setting for performance.

#### 4. Method and Data

This analysis is conducted using a qualitative methodology, aiming to offer a viewpoint on the matter as well as a methodological suggestion regarding how social media communications may be examined through the lens of branding in the established churches. As a result of the qualitative method used, the statements presented in this study cannot be generalized. The purpose of this analysis is to offer a viewpoint and a thematic perspective on the case; that is, an understanding of platform discourses is provided through the use of qualitative discursive methods. In studies of this type, conclusions are formulated and explained within the study rather than merely reporting results. This is addressed in the empirical section, which examines the churches' use of social media, and specifically Facebook.

Laaksonen describes social media data as being similar to other types of textual information. The data are in a sense natural because the researcher does not manipulate the data, as for example in an interview, as Kallinen and Kinnunen (2021) describe. Rettberg (2018, p. 429) discussed how self-presentation is possible on three levels on social media, that is: visual, written, and quantitative. This study examines the written level, since it reviews discourses carried out through social media posts.

A more detailed customized frame of discursive analysis is based on Jokinen et al.'s (2016) theory of language as a constructor of social reality. This frame is commonly utilized in the Finnish field as a frame for research. I am particularly interested in how language is used in different contexts, as well as how meaning systems are constructed. In this case, I looked at Facebook posts (as a situation) and themes or discourses (as meaning systems produced).<sup>4</sup> In this study, discourses are the observation units, as it is discussed how they represent and construct reality (Jokinen et al. 2016, pp. 29, 34). As a key to categorize the data presented above, the discourse analysis is used to examine the shared content in terms of topics, categories, and discourses. As a result, a description is provided of the type of posts used, what topics they cover, and what these discourses tell us.

The data for this study consist of samples of Facebook (from now on referred to as FB) posts from a randomly chosen period; in this case, one month between 15 May and 15 June 2020.<sup>5</sup> During this period, 156 posts were created on selected FB pages (116 by the ELCF and 30 by the OCF).<sup>6</sup> This month was during the first summer of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Finland was subjected to a mild "lockdown" for a month, which ended in mid-April. Another key factor to consider is the Church year: in terms of major Christian events, Easter had just passed.

Due to the new form of the material, social media materials are associated with special ethical issues, and a couple of important points need to be addressed in terms of research ethics.<sup>8</sup> First, the Facebook pages reviewed here are public, and part of the church's public communications. There is no information concerning individuals in the material; it describes the communication of national churches. Therefore, the FB posts are treated in the material as non-anonymized. Second, the processing of the material respects the subjects of the research and cannot be construed as harming the user accounts being studied (see Kosonen et al. 2018).



## 5. Churches Online

Social media is characterized by its fast pace, resulting in constantly changing content. Finland's churches are seldom described in similar terms as agile or dynamic, but rather as stable and prudent. In contrast, at the beginning of the Internet era, in the early 1990s, both national churches began setting up websites relatively early on, and were among the first actors in Finland to do so. Over the years, the churches have moved from hosting homepages to exploring new social platforms. Over time, a few social media channels have become an integral part of congregational communication. Generally, social media channels are observed to have a cycle: new platforms are initially designed exclusively for the use and enthusiasm of young age groups, but after a while, older generations also start to use the "new" platforms. Currently, the Lutheran and Orthodox churches in Finland are active on a number of popular social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.

There are a few ways that churches such as these are engaging on social media platforms. First, on many social media platforms, churches are active with their official profile (such as "Church in Finland" and "The Orthodox Church").<sup>9</sup> Because local parishes are relatively independent in their communications and administration, it is common for local parishes to be fairly active on social media. There is also a third form or level of church communication online, in the sense that local parishes form dioceses, a type of parish union. Parish unions are also local; for example, they are grouped by city in the capital area ("Church of Espoo"). These entities provide a diverse range of church voices and online presences.

Next, I will briefly review the presence of the Finnish churches on social media platforms. Facebook was introduced to Finland in 2007 and became one of the few social media platforms which both churches have joined and established official organization pages for. In many other social media platforms, the church presence is more fragmented and based on individual parishes. FB is a huge operator in the social media genre in Finland. In recent years, FB has reached approximately 61 percent of Finns weekly ([Stat.fi 2021](#)). Despite the fact that is not the newest platform, it provides a valuable sample of data, since these churches have established their presence on it and it has become a normal means of communication for them.

According to a study by Statistics Finland ([Statistics Finland 2019](#)), the use of social media by Finns has increased, particularly during the pandemic, and by 2020, nearly 70 percent of Finns used social media. Based on statistics, Facebook was the most popular social media site in Finland this year, with 58 percent of users coming from the 16 to 89-year-old age range ([Kohvakka and Saarenmaa 2021](#)). In addition, the messaging application WhatsApp (50%) and the image sharing service Instagram (39%) are popular in Finland. A little more than 70 percent of Finns watch YouTube. TikTok, on the other hand, was used by only 6 percent (but 34% of 16–24-year-olds) ([Stat.fi 2021](#)).<sup>10</sup>

In addition to Facebook, the churches have also entered other social media platforms, including Instagram and Twitter. The Lutheran Church is also active on Twitter. In contrast, the Orthodox Church does not have an official Twitter account, but many of its congregations are active on Twitter. On YouTube, both churches are represented by their official channels as well as on the channels of several congregations. Many congregations have also outsourced youth work to Discord during the pandemic, which originally operated as a game side-view server. Regarding other channels favored by Finns, WhatsApp and Snapchat are used primarily for direct communication between people, and the temporary story feature that became well-known in Snapchat has since been added to several other channels. Some parishes even have a TikTok account.<sup>11</sup> Neither of these churches maintains an official profile on that platform, but some parishes do. Additionally, some Lutheran churches have priests who work on Jodel, an anonymous messaging service favored by students. Next, the churches' FB activity is considered more closely.

### *Finnish Churches on Facebook*

Both Finnish churches have their own official FB pages. The ELCF operates a page called “The Church in Finland” (Kirkko Suomessa in Finnish; see: [Kirkko Suomessa n.d.](#)), founded in 2011, with approx. 62,000 followers. The OCF has a page called “The Orthodox [community] in Finland” (Ortodoksit Suomessa in Finnish, see: [Ortodoksit Suomessa n.d.](#)), founded in 2012, with approximately 6200 followers.<sup>12</sup> There are several FB accounts in both churches that were not considered for this study; approximately every parish (in the ELCF) and shrine (in the OCF) has its own page, as do pages for youth work, diaconal charities, and (orthodox) monasteries.

With regard to the management of these FB pages, it seems that the official pages of these churches are managed quite similarly: the OCF states that page maintenance consists of “the employees of parishes, organizations, and communities who are active on social media”.<sup>13</sup> The ELCF states that page maintenance is in the hands of “a various number of representatives of different occupations—priests, deacons, youth workers, publicists, etc”. but also that “church communication is responsible for the content of the pages”. Therefore, it seems evident that there is no absolute line of communication or clear strategy in the operation of these pages, and individuals mainly manage them. However, with or without a uniform strategy, these pages are a place where the churches are building their public images.

In regard to the purposes of these pages, the “About” tab of the OCF FB page states that the page “is a place to get to know, seek and ask about orthodox life, church and faith with a low threshold”. In addition, the page states that “on this page, we try to offer resources for life through different texts, pictures, music, and conversations”. The ELCF page, on the other hand, states on the “About” tab that “the Church in Finland is a meeting place on Facebook that is open to everyone”. In addition, there are links for different language versions, as well as links and phone numbers for people who need help. Under the “Additional information” tab, the intent of the page is described more specifically: “take part, share, ponder, get excited with us! On this page, there is space for conversations, questions, differences, and insecurity. Through this page, we wish to answer people’s yearning for the holy, based on Lutheran premises”. In the following, the discourses on this platform are explored more closely, with examples of each case.

## **6. From Informing to Influencer Marketing—And Everything in between**

I have categorized the FB posts thematically according to the discourses used in them. In summary, in these posts, language is used to inform, teach, and offer devotion and examples, all of which overlap to some extent. These posts, however, often encompass multiple discourses or themes simultaneously. The posts cover a wide range of topics, ranging from informing to influencer marketing. These conclusions are discussed in detail below. One observation that can be made is that the thematic output of the churches on social media is remarkably similar. This may be explained by the fact that in Finland, the Orthodox Church has taken on several characteristics of the Lutheran Church (see [Takala-Roszczenko 2018](#)). In addition, considering the fact that there was a global pandemic during the spring and summer of 2020, it was expected that this event and its effects would also be present in these posts, as the data were collected during May and June of that year. Surprisingly, it became apparent that the pandemic was not as visible or prominent as might have been expected. It was occasionally mentioned as a side plot that affected the practical matters of arranging church services, for example.

First, churches posted common announcements that served as a means of conveying information, as might be expected through a church communication channel. These posts consisted of merely informing people about events or inviting people to consume content. This can be considered a “standard” method of informing by a well-established church. In the ELCF, these posts were informative and would announce upcoming celebrations or broadcasts:

Today, on Yle TV1 at 10 a.m., the Studio Church's Summer Hymn Sunday service will be shown. 24 May 2020

Similarly in the OCF:

Follow the liturgy, a prayer service will begin at 10 a.m. and/or 11:30 a.m., here or on the Church website. 7 June 2020

Another theme was posts categorized as containing educational content, which could even be categorized as teaching. The citations above demonstrate that this was a dominant theme that was reflected in a large part of the content. The teachings of a church constitute a distinct set of discourses, or the way churches speak to their followers. As a theme, they took many forms. In the OCF, for example:

Next Sunday, 31 May, [we] celebrate the Holy Trinity Day or Pentecost. Many churches have been consecrated to the Holy Trinity—on Sunday, the service of the *praasniekka*<sup>14</sup> will be performed, for example, in the main church of the Lintula Monastery and the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Oulu. 29 May 2020

According to the citation above, the OCF often posted about Christian celebrations, and subsequently taught about them in more depth. Teaching is not only visible in deepening the theme, but also in posting according to the church year and keeping followers on track with events. Educating in this manner is more subtle. The ELCF also had a fair amount of teaching similar to the OCF, but it was somewhat more systematic, since the ELCF had a number of posts dedicated to teaching topics. A good example of these is the series on the Ten Commandments:

The Ten Commandments express the basic laws of life: what we should do and what we should not do. [ . . . ] The second commandment directs us to speak to God. 23 May 2020

Obviously, this series consisted of ten posts. Another series of posts presented similar teaching about the Lord's Prayer:

The passage in the Lord's prayer, "but rescue us from the evil one", is explained in the Catechism in this way. Everyone would like to avoid evil. When we pray as Christ taught, we trust in God [ . . . ] 16 May 2020

The teaching posts by the ELCF are primarily composed of these two series, which are published regularly. Both of these series are deeply religious, since they both derive directly from the Bible, and they are the most spiritual series in this dataset. What makes this observation interesting is something already stated earlier: generally, the Lutheran church is considered more society-oriented, whereas the Orthodox Church keeps its Christian traditions closer.

With regard to devotion, which comes relatively late in this analysis evaluating church posts, I have classified this theme in the ELCF posts as being primarily comprised of direct quotations of hymns or devotionals. In some cases, the prayers were anonymous and unidentified, such as:

In the beginning of the week, I pray for the persistence to stand in front of a closed door in my life. 25 May 2020

Nevertheless, devotional messages such as those containing only prayers were not commonly used by the OCF, where similar prayers were only posted as citations of what was said by someone. These posts included individual citations that were taken directly from other shared content, such as videos linked in the post.

"We thank you, Creator, for having received the teaching of your grace. Bless our parents, teachers, and mentors who lead us to know the good, and give us endurance and enthusiasm for learning". 30 May 2020

As an integral part of the church's teaching on how to live as a Christian, devotional posts are also seen as part of the church's life in practice. At the same time, they naturally



offer an occasion and words for personal devotion or the actual practicing of digital religion. These messages were posted consistently and on a regular basis in the ELCF, whereas they constituted a relatively small portion of the posts in the OCF. However, the number of devotional messages posted was relatively small, contrary to what might be expected from church platforms.

Posts with teachings related to the liturgical year could be categorized as devotional content instead of educational, for any of them could surely offer an occasion for devotion. They may even serve two goals, since they have a devotional component as well. In this interpretation, part of the church's performance is its devotion, an expected part of the actions of a spiritual organization.

It is reasonable to ask whether all of the content that religious organizations publish is religious, or if these churches use social media as an extension of their "normal" communication. Answers may arise when looking at what these churches claim to offer on their web pages, and what they provide. The OFC embraced both getting to "know, seek and ask about Orthodox life, church and faith" and to "offer resources for life". The ELCF stated that its pages are "a meeting place", and it also hopes to give answers to people based on "Lutheran premises". These statements convey two distinct messages: first, they invite anyone to join, and second, they hope to offer content that rises from a Christian perspective. From both of these statements, and the analysis conducted above, it seems that church content on Facebook is intended to offer both education and devotion.

An examination of various greetings in the posts reinforces the theme of teaching. Many of these greetings begin or end the post. Themes associated with the liturgical year are often reflected in greetings, and in the OCF, these were orthodox Christian greetings. There are several examples, such as wishing for a good festival or using greetings specific to a particular festival, for example "Christ is risen!" which is associated with Easter and is far more used in the Orthodox than in the Lutheran realm. A similar set of church holiday greetings was posted by the ELCF as well: "Happy holy Ascension Day!"

Moreover, the ELCF celebrated the newly established days of the church that did not originate directly from the traditional liturgical year by wishing "Have a good Sunday of Summer Hymn!" The example above presents a new, non-traditional day in the liturgical year. There were also many greetings related to everyday life, such as "Have a good weekend!" or "Peaceful evening!" In this way, the church may be trying to live alongside people in their everyday lives.

I suggest that such greetings are another way of keeping people connected to the Christian liturgical year, and from this perspective, the greetings are definitely an essential part of teaching church life. Greetings that speak to more common facets of everyday life are indicative of a church that lives alongside its members.

Churches also directed to consume their content elsewhere. The Orthodox Church mainly urged people to visit YouTube:

Go and watch from the Church's own YouTube channel [ ... ] (the OCF) 20 May 2020

However, the category of directing elsewhere was most visible in the Lutheran Church. It primarily consists of articles from the ELCF's productions. This type of production is available on the national broadcasting station, YLE, both on television and radio. Posting content from the ELCF's own productions is very thematic, and it was a common way of providing the ELCF's extensive and diverse content. Many general invitations were made to consume church content. Such posts were often formulated to express an individual's point-of-view or opinion. In addition, these reposts are partially educational since they represent examples of life as a member of a church community.

Being a godfather led me to go to confirmation camp as an adult. 16 May 2020

Furthermore, the ELCF posted a series along with social media influencers that the church sponsored for their cooperation. They were primarily personal brands operating online and on social media.

Have you just been asked to be a godparent? Mutsimedia has put together tips for nice christening gifts. 16 May 2020

Another activity related to the reposts with YouTube video bloggers about godparenting is the Lutheran campaign known as “godparent day”. This campaign encouraged godparents to spend time with their godchildren. Reposting from the production seems to be a way of illustrating how the church’s life is intimately entwined with the lives of people. In general, it directs users to consume church content. It may also be useful to use godparenting as an example in order to emphasize how well-known Finns are associated with the (Lutheran) church through godparenting.<sup>15</sup> The use of video bloggers can provide an interesting insight into the church’s use of YouTube as a highly popular channel, especially for certain target groups. In addition, the ELCF even uses influencer marketing in this manner, which is a relatively new but widely popular form of marketing. Even so, “influencer marketing” is probably not a term the church would use. It is more likely that the church would use well-known individuals to reach a certain audience, typically a specific age group (Hytönen et al. 2020, p. 254). Cooperation with influencers could be a way to provide a relatable example of belonging to the church and living as part of it. That is, influencers are selected to represent the membership of the Church.

In addition to the themes above, some other observations can be made. Next, a brief review is made of how people are addressed on FB. Both churches used a variety of methods to address people more directly or personally. This kind of address often consisted of questions:

Do you know precisely why Sunday is a Christian holy day? (the ELCF) 14 May 2020

What would such an additional verse sound like in the Summer Hymn? (the ELCF) 20 May 2020

Along with such questions, both churches also presented some gently worded challenges. These included, for example:

We want to challenge you to join godparent day [ . . . ] (the ELCF) 18 May 2020

Did you remember that the fast of the apostles ends today with the festival of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul (June 28)? If you have not fasted before, then this is a good opportunity to start practicing fasting. (the OCF) 8 June 2020

These can be considered as generalized ways of communicating with people depending upon the channel, whether that is face-to-face at a Sunday service, through a parish magazine distributed to all members, or through a public social media platform. A common method used to reach out to one’s audience on social media is to pose a question or challenge. Therefore, the themes above simply mimic a common style used across all social media, applied to an ecclesiastical context.

## 7. Conclusions

This study explored both the Finnish Lutheran and Orthodox use of social media, focusing on their activity on Facebook. The analysis examined the content in terms of topics and categories. As a result, a description of the typical messages that churches send and the ways people are addressed was provided.

Based on the analysis, the messages were primarily tradition-centered, as the churches posted predominantly about events in the church year and the Christian life: in their posts, they highlighted the current Christian festivals occurring during the liturgical year, while also conveying prayers and devotions and providing examples of individual people living their lives connected to the church. Throughout these posts, language is mainly used to inform, teach, and offer devotions and examples of church life. In addition, influencer marketing was applied. The pattern of the church messages seems aligned with those of another Nordic church, the Norwegian church as explored by Hodøl (2021). Similar to their Norwegian counterpart, Finnish churches also mainly inform about and promote events,

activities, or worship services. However, this is not surprising, since Nordic churches share many characteristics.

Nonetheless, another viewpoint can be adopted to describe the churches' online communications. Keeping a cultural Christian perspective is essential if their Facebook activity is to offer a connection to church institutions rather than (merely) provide devotional content. The term *cultural Christianity* denotes a situation in which people appreciate their Christian heritage, but do not ascribe to the doctrines of the Church as absolute truth (Nielsen 2015, p. 150; Ketola 2020, p. 73). Day believes that belief in other matters, such as identification with a group, is more important than Christian doctrine (Day 2011, p. 2009). It is even possible that cultural Christianity (or *tapauskonto* in Finnish) explains why most Finns still belong to a church.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, a decline in cultural Christianity has occurred in Finland, especially among individuals in their 30s and 40s (Hytönen et al. 2020, p. 254). Tradition-related messages on FB, especially those regarding the liturgical year and church life, may be used to maintain people's affiliation with cultural Christianity and to validate their membership in the broader Christian group. This aligns with the Ayeni's (2021) observation that churches can seek to sustain their communities and engage people through social media.

The most intriguing aspect of a traditional or educational approach to Facebook is that it is actually not common, at least in the Lutheran church. Both Kokkonen (2019) and Valaskivi (2019) argued that Lutheran publicity campaigns in particular have emphasized the church as an important actor in society, rather than otherworldly messages. The assumption of that branding, shifting the emphasis to this life instead of the afterlife, is not emphasized in this data. Moreover, the churches' FB emphasis is rather traditional and highlights Christian life. This is also a reoccurring discussion in Finland: whether churches should be more modern and follow all of the trends in society or remain in their traditional roles of faith and belief in eternity. For example, the Lutheran church has allowed women to serve as priests since 1988, allows its priests marry "rainbow" couples, and has attended Pride events in recent years. The Orthodox Church, on the other hand, has not done any of these things, and is not involved in the heated discussion of them in the public sphere (Homoilta see e.g., Kallatsa 2020, p. 57). According to Metso (2018), the minority church has not been subjected to the same expectations or demands as the majority Lutheran church, which is expected to share common values, such as equality and a unified treatment of all people.

Social media appears to be an extension or even an instrument of the Finnish churches' communications. Finland's churches are concerned about a severe decline in membership, especially among Lutherans, so there is a need for them to construct a desirable social presence, that is to say, a brand with which people are eager to connect. Therefore, social media does not serve as a recruitment tool, but rather as a way to construct a presence, remind people about the church, and offer a place to connect with the church in a modern way. Hutchings (2017, p. 4) has argued that churches on the Internet can offer a variety of approaches, including streaming from parishes, communicating on a variety of sites, participating in forums, and chatting. The online or digital sphere is not a distinct form of offline religion, but rather one of the places in which churches may engage people.

Religious organizations have entered various digital platforms worldwide. The issues related to the platforming of established churches with historically strong support from the state and the people are very different from those of much younger communities that are beginning from scratch. Historically, the Finnish churches have been an integral part of Finnish culture. They intend to maintain their position, both in modern society and among their current and future members, finding growth in infant baptism as opposed to the recruitment of new adults. Furthermore, there is no reason why churches should not be active participants on all available platforms, providing their point of view and sharing their message—especially as our time is increasingly consumed with storytelling. As Carpentier et al. (2019) noted, this phenomenon extends beyond religious organizations, for it is often recognized how "social media presence relates positively to organizational

warmth". In this study, it is argued that the way churches are present on various platforms affects their image.

With the intention of understanding the relationship between media and institutional Christianity, [Moberg and Sjö \(2012\)](#) conceptualized how the transformation of Church communication can be a means for institutions to "re-enter or find new ways of entering" the mediated sphere and adapting while doing so. According to them, the Lutheran Church actively engages with the "present-day media environment in order to perpetuate and increase its presence in today's mediated public sphere". Participating on a digital platform is simply one manifestation of this. Taking part in social media and implementing influencer marketing can be seen as a church reforming itself according to the mediated sphere. This seems to aptly describe the churches' actions on online platforms. Moreover, the Lutheran church in particular appears to be deepening its connection with marketing methods, as it employs influencer marketing.

I will conclude by suggesting how social media ultimately brands churches.<sup>17</sup> It occurs via two trajectories: first, through visibility, and second, through what is communicated. With regard to the former, people spend a great deal of time on social media, so the presence of certain actors is not irrelevant in these environments. In a sense, being present on social media is itself a message. It is beneficial for churches to be visible on platforms where people are present. Social media platforms make it relatively easy to select a message and abide by it, thus regulating the image in a way. Using platforms such as Facebook, churches can aim to control the image they wish to project about themselves.

Posting on social media is definitely a part of constructing a public identity and "brand". When people are deciding whether to remain members of a church, its image, or the brand, is crucial. Acting on Facebook can be seen as a means by which churches can try to influence their image, both through their messages and through their presence in general. As [Stolz and Usunier \(2018\)](#) have indicated, churches utilize their social media presence and branding for their benefit, and in any way they need it.

## 8. Discussion

An established church is not run in the same way as other organizations, and their communications or branding are in no way comparable to churches that have a solid brand strategy and are seeking to recruit members. Although this article discusses the use of branding by churches, it must be emphasized that the phenomenon of branding is a research tool used to investigate certain phenomena rather than necessarily arising from the deliberate intent of these churches. Even so, there may be some unconscious or unintentional branding being carried out by these churches.

Communication on new platforms and channels is part of churches' efforts to find new ways to communicate in today's world and to better represent themselves. Their process of regulating information is based on the use of certain kinds of messages, as well as their mere presence and activity on social media platforms. Whether church communications on social media affect how people view them can be debated. In light of this, it is reasonable to ask what is the goal of these types of established churches presenting themselves on social media.

A question worth studying is whether the churches' message varies across different platforms, and if so, how and why. The Facebook pages discussed in this article are not the only ones operated by these churches. Therefore, it may be that the message and presence of the churches are different on different pages or in different groups, for example when they are more local than national or more specific, as in the case of the young. The use of Facebook as a communication and presence tool within the church is an established practice and merits further study, as more questions remain on how churches operate on social media and its effects. The current study covers only a portion of such discourse, and there are many more formats to explore: images, icons, and video formats such as TikTok, or the anonymous messaging platform Jodel, for instance.

In addition, the sampling of material used in this analysis does not take into account the popularity of the content in terms of sharing, liking, and accessibility. It would be particularly interesting to examine how the sharing, liking, or following of ecclesiastical content may create inclusion in the church, and what is the true nature of this relationship?

Regarding the limitations of this study, it is based on a relatively small, time-limited sample. As in qualitative studies in general, the conclusions are based on the researcher's chosen theoretical lens and interpretation. In this type of study, the material is considered sufficient when it can provide a meaningful interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated. This means that the "explanation" is supported and appears to be relevant in light of the broader context (Alasuutari 2011). Based on previous studies, such as Hodøl's (2021), we can estimate that this standard has been met. However, in order to expand the qualitative study of religion, it would be beneficial to apply the findings to a broader dataset, or even to quantitative research in similar settings.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Presence generally describes existence or being; the presence of social media refers to visibility on a platform. The visibility of an actor is a complex phenomenon. On a basic level, the actor may or may not be present on digital platforms. Furthermore, the extent of a presence varies technically, for example according to how often and what the operator does there. For instance, it may send one-way messages or reply to comments. Finally, presence is strongly related to the kind of presence an actor builds, either unconsciously or consciously. What type of messages and what kind of images does it send? What kind of image does it create of the actor?
- <sup>2</sup> The Orthodox Church in Finland, see (Metso 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> During the 1940s the OCF had over 80,000 members, but by the 1990s this number had declined significantly. Throughout the following three decades, the number of members increased to 61,000.
- <sup>4</sup> For studying social media discourses, see also (Thurlow 2018).
- <sup>5</sup> The data were collected on 8 July 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> The reason for this ratio can be attributed to a number of factors: the size or membership of the churches are different, and the staff resources available to the churches and their need for communication are different. The number of posts in the OCF, however, should not be underestimated, as it represents a very typical month—as it does in the ELCF as well. The objective is not to perform a quantitative analysis, but to explore the existing data.
- <sup>7</sup> The first spring of the pandemic was mild in Finland compared to many other European countries.
- <sup>8</sup> More closely on social media research methods, see (Quan-Haase and Sloan 2017).
- <sup>9</sup> As well as the general level presented here, churches communicate through dioceses, parish unions, and local parishes. These levels of communication are also found on social media.
- <sup>10</sup> Meta currently owns Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram.
- <sup>11</sup> See Kokkonen (2022) for information on the Finnish churches in TikTok.
- <sup>12</sup> The statistics are from June 2022.
- <sup>13</sup> Translated from the Finnish originals by the author.
- <sup>14</sup> The Finnish word *praasniekka* refers to a festival usually held in honor of the patron saint of each temple. Also known as *prazdnik* or *kermis*.
- <sup>15</sup> Compare, for example, the concept of the "celebrity endorser" in Stolz and Usunier (2018).
- <sup>16</sup> E.g., the case of the Summer Hymn, see Taira (2019).
- <sup>17</sup> On the relationships between social media and branding in more detail, see Kokkonen (2022).

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