**An authentic life and an authentic self – What we can learn from megachurches in promoting social inclusion**

**Keywords: authenticity, authentic self, social inclusion, religion**

Marketing studies have recently developed a strong interest in how social fabric is constantly recreated, maintained and reshaped through chains of interaction (Sterchele, 2020; Collins, 2004). Specifically, studying the interaction of Individuals with wider society has become a focal point in developing a critical understanding of social inclusion, which notes that inclusion can help enhance self-esteem (Leary and Baumeister, 2000; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), validate self-belief (Hogg and Abrams, 1993), strengthen a sense of distinctiveness and acceptance (Brewer, 1991), and indeed that inclusion in groups is essential to humans (Correll and Park, 2005).

Jansen et al. (2014) proposed that social inclusion comprises two elements: *belongingness* and *authenticity*, the latter particularly being a strong predictor for group performance. Further studies suggest a positive association between perceptions of both group performance (Sheldon et al.,1997) and individual well-being (Deci and Ryan,2000) with authenticity, which is viewed as the degree to which a group member believes they are encouraged by the group to remain true to themselves and be different or similar to other members (Kernis and Goldman,2006). However, Jansen et al. (2014) do not identify what is needed to develop authentic interactions and relationships while building strong socially-inclusive groups, and this invites further critical reflection on authenticity and the types of authentic activities that could enhance social inclusion.

Our project, therefore, aims to address those gaps by using religion as a lens to examine ‘social inclusive authenticity’, since living an authentic life and cultivating an authentic self is undoubtedly a fundamental element of spirituality (Gauthier, 2021). Moreover, religious studies offer a range of concepts and approaches to authenticity, including respect for authenticity and the primacy of personal experience in the validation and legitimation of practices and beliefs (Gauthier, 2020; Broo et al., 2015). Religion and spirituality also place a strong focus on the experience of self-orientation (Taylor, 2002) and the ‘regime of authenticity’ which explains the structuring characteristics and principles of group organisation (Gauthier, 2021). We selected megachurches as the focus of our research since they are inherently consumer driven and survive only by offering a distinct ritual experience that combines the authentic with the dynamic (Davies, 2021).

Our research explores the core research questions:

* How do megachurches establish a regime of authenticity to construct social inclusion?
* How do megachurches create an inclusive environment by promoting personal experience?
* How can megachurches spirituality ensure the authenticity of contemporary experience without diluting Christianity’s dependence upon historic rituals?

We aim to address these questions through conducting netnographic research (Kozinet, 2020) on the approach of Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC) to the global pandemic in 2020-2021. This London-based megachurch serves more than 34,000 congregants online around the world and promotes a faith-driven narrative of motivation, inclusion and self-betterment across its events, conferences and services, both online and offline. This includes career development mentoring and coaching schemes to encourage aspiration and opportunity among women and young people. Our analysis will show how KICC’s commitment to authentic daily spirituality practices promotes inclusion, cohesion and wellbeing among adherents.

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