

Connecting with God through Live-streaming

The process of mediatisation, referred to the growing importance of media in post-modern society (Thompson, 1995), has long acknowledged the media influences on a number of fields, including cultural studies (Bourdieu, 1993), consumption (Jansson, 2002), education (Friesen and Hug, 2009), and religion (Hjarvard, 2012, 2008). The advent of internet technologies has further enabled the birth of various forms of media, among which live-stream has emerged as a popular mode for engaging with consumers (Golan and Martini, 2019). Defined as content delivered-synchronously over the internet, live-streaming has garnered much attention from scholars across the fields, ranging from education (Shephard, 2003), politics (Thorburn, 2014), consumption (Criddle and Murphy, 2022; Li et al., 2021), and religion (i.e Przywara et al., 2021).

We are particularly interested in live-streaming in post- pandemic religious consumption with an aim to contribute to current research some fresh insights into 1/ the role of live-stream in society, 2/ Consumers' motivations behind virtual donating, gifting and subscribing, and 3/potential adjustment of live streaming practices. Religious live-streaming offers an interesting context to see how churches can respond to the public when entering the general media's public sphere through religious media, and showcase their ability to use technology and genres in an appropriate and interesting way (Hjarvard, 2012). Furthermore, we are keen to see how churches can address the challenges of religious live-streaming, including the (co)creation and maintenance of online religious experiences, rituals and traditions when the sacredness of religion has now been placed in the secularised virtual sphere.

In this study, we focus on the case of a megachurch in London, Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC). Defined itself as a 'church without walls', KICC has successfully performed various ways of digitally engaging with its congregant consumers since its early stage. During and post-pandemic, the church has been further active in particularly daily live-streaming church services, and recently generated £6.09m through Donations and legacies in 2022.

KICC responded to the increasing demand for finding and gaining spiritual authenticity (Moufahim and Lichrou, 2019), and, particularly, spiritual authentic self, which is explained by the transformation of the (ordinary) self into an authentic spiritual self through participating in the pilgrimage. Its religious live-streaming services have enabled consumers to gain access and exposure to the spiritual authenticity process, finding their intra-personal authenticity - which is built "on the personal investment that is tied to one's identity" (Leigh et al., 2006, p. 491) - and inter-personal authenticity (Wang, 1999) which encourages the shared religious narratives that connect experiences of particular places, objects and actors (Kelner, 2001; Leigh et al., 2006). As such, live-stream acts as an extended environment of offline religion that offers new types of interactions and alternative forms of community, which assists the existing offline religious communities (Campbell, 2017; Helland, 2005; Siuda, 2021). Our study also highlights the importance of a shared understanding and practices between congregant consumers and the church leader in co-creating and maintaining the re-mooring traditions and transformable rituals, essential in replicating key components of real-world worship gatherings.

Summary statement

The growth of online religion and consumer engagement with donation and church services, especially post-pandemic, has inspired us to look into the role of Religious live streaming in society. This study aims to develop an understanding of how megachurches can respond to the public when entering the general media's public sphere, develop transformable rituals to help congregant-consumers to find, create and grow their spiritual authentic self - including both intra and interpersonal authenticity.

Keywords: *Religious live streaming, Authenticity, mediatisation*

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