

Article

‘Wife, Mommy, Pastor and Friend’: The Rise of Female Evangelical Microcelebrities

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Abstract: The popularity of digital media has spurred what has been called a “crisis of authority”. How do female evangelical microcelebrities figure in this crisis? Many of these women belong to churches led by male pastors, have amassed a large following online, and are sought-after speakers and teachers. This paper analyses how gender, religious authority, and the digital sphere collide through the rise of female evangelical microcelebrities. Bringing together ethnographic data, textual analysis, and social media analysis of six prominent women, I emphasize the power of representation to impact religious practices and religious meaning. This article examines how evangelical women are performing and negotiating their legitimacy as the Internet and fluid geographical boundaries challenge local models of religious authority. Moving away from a binary perspective of “having” or “not having” authority, this paper considers the various spheres of authority that evangelical microcelebrities occupy, including normative womanhood, prosperity theology, and politics. Finally, by examining the social media content put forth by female evangelical microcelebrities, I interrogate the political stakes of evangelical women’s authority.



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1. Introduction

On 5 March 2021, the popular bible teacher Beth Moore announced her disaffiliation from the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest evangelical denomination in the United States. The statement sent shock waves through American evangelicalism; Bowler called Moore’s departure a “significant loss” for the SBC (Smietana 2021), while (Gaddini 2021) argued that it represented deeper fault lines around gender roles within evangelicalism. Moore’s decision arose from her increasing frustration with evangelical Christianity’s embrace of Donald Trump, her perception of racism within white evangelicalism, and the SBC’s ongoing preoccupation with male headship. Even though Moore has not fully renounced a complementary perspective on church leadership, which champions male headship and female submission, her move indicated that the contestation over religious authority within evangelicalism is ongoing.

The mediatization of religion is one means of challenging traditional forms of religious authority, including the vertical structures of power that proliferate in conservative religious communities, including evangelicalism (Barker 2005; Campbell 2007; Cheong et al. 2008; Cheong et al. 2011; Clarke 2010). Digital religion shifts how people practice their faith and reconfigures authority structures, whether through the use of social media channels (Sabaté Gauxachs et al. 2021), vlogging (Harding and Day 2021), or file sharing (Tsuria 2021). This article brings gendered attention to the ways digital religion challenges, changes, or threatens religious authority structures in evangelical Christianity, where gender is a “central organizing principle and core symbolic system” (Ingersoll 2003, p. 16). Thus, this article aims to examine how evangelical women are performing and negotiating authority as the Internet and fluid geographical boundaries challenge local models of religious authority. It also questions to what extent this authority threatens or undermines traditional, male-centric “epistemic authority” within evangelicalism (Cheong et al. 2008).

Borrowing (Fader 2017, p. 199) conceptualization of “spheres of authority” to guide the analysis, the article investigates three particular spheres where American female evangelical microcelebrities perform authority: ideal womanhood, prosperity theology, and politics.

My analysis centers on the Instagram profiles of six prominent evangelical microcelebrities and I bring this analysis to bear on data from four years of ethnographic fieldwork with single evangelical women in the US and the UK. Evangelical Christianity features an emphasis on propositional belief over ritual, an emphasis on evangelising, crucicentrism and conversion, and adherence to conservative doctrinal interpretation (Bebbington 1989; Strhan 2015). A report in 2019 found that only 3% of American white evangelical congregations are led by women, the same percentage as in 1998 (Chaves et al. 2020). The number was one of the lowest of all the religious congregations surveyed, second only to Roman Catholics (Chaves et al. 2020). In England, women make up 28% of paid clergy, and less than one in fifty of the largest churches in England are led by women, despite the Church of England authorizing female ordination since 1994 (Davies 2017). The microcelebrities featured in this article belong to evangelical congregations with varying degrees of acceptance of female authority within the church. Some of the women in this paper are co-pastors with their husbands, while others are pastor’s wives or pastor’s daughter’s; roles which carry their own authority within evangelical churches. However, even in the case of co-pastoring, it is nearly always the male counterpart who leads the public-facing roles in the church, including preaching, administration, and church leadership, meaning that many evangelical women still lack visibility and legitimation as leaders in their own right (Bowler 2019). By emphasizing visibility as a key mode of religious authority (Lövheim and Lundmark 2019), this article examines how the heightened visibility afforded by social media allows evangelical women to perform authority in spheres where they are otherwise denied.

Another aim of this paper was to highlight an overlooked group in the research on white evangelicals’ support for Trump: women. In the 2016 US election, 81% percent of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump for President (Martinez and Smith 2016), reflecting the enduring presence of the religious right. A marriage between conservative evangelical Christianity and Conservative politics, which the religious right developed in the 1970s to oppose the desegregation of private schools (Balmer 2021). Today, white evangelicals remain a powerful group within the Republican party, and their support for Trump in 2016 amounted to the largest “evangelical vote” in nearly two decades. Academic scholarship has sought to make sense of this phenomena, in terms of the racial element of white evangelical Trump supporters (Gorski 2019), the importance of regular churchgoing (Smith 2017), and the role of nationalism (Whitehead and Perry 2020). However, the gender dimension of evangelical support for Trump has not been sufficiently researched to date, even though 73% of white evangelical women voted for Trump in 2016 (McKelvy 2018). This article begins to address this gap by arguing for a gendered analysis of the relationship between religion and politics in the United States, and proposing that Trump’s anti-abortion and anti-sex trafficking policies, and his strongman presentation, make him an appealing figure for white evangelical women (Kobes du Mez 2020).

In her study of Black Protestants’ use of digital media, Monique Moultrie (2017, p. 9) states: “If the personal is political, then the virtual is also political”. With that in mind, I bracket my analysis to social media posts from 2016–2020, in order to situate these images within the political climate that included the GOP nomination and ensuing presidential administration of Donald Trump. By focusing on digital media, and social media in particular, this article proposes that female evangelical influencers are shaping religious authority structures and shaping evangelicals’ involvement with conservative politics. The next section reviews the literature on digital religion and how this field contains unique opportunities to challenge, subvert, shape, and/or consolidate religious authority.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Digital Religion and Religious Authority

Within the canon of literature on digital religion, this article contributes to the so-called “fourth wave,” which emphasizes power, authority, and identity (Tsuria 2021; Campbell and Lövheim 2011). The focus on religious authority, and the way it is exercised online, brings Weber’s (1949) model of authority to the fore and highlights the question of power within the practice of digital religion. As gender power dynamics are especially fraught in evangelical Christianity, it is crucial to examine how shifts in religious authority within this community might shift power imbalances (Taragin-Zeller 2021). For that reason, this paper purposely uses the concept “microcelebrity”, as one of the roles of a microcelebrity is to “redistribute cultural power in both media and marketing” (Khamis et al. 2016, p. 7). The term microcelebrity was put forward by Theresa Senft (2013) and refers to social media users who actively solicit a following through a carefully cultivated self-presentation and branding (see also Marwick 2017). This concept affords particular attention to how women *perform* authority through social media, to emphasize how authority is consolidated through ongoing and repetitive performances, as well as to highlight the role of performance in microcelebrity social media culture (Marwick 2017; Raun 2018; Khamis et al. 2016; Senft 2013).

Scholars within the field of digital religion have stressed the importance of defining religious authority and specifying the precise modes of authority under analysis (Campbell 2007; Hjarvard 2016; Lövheim and Lundmark 2019). Taking that exhortation seriously, I draw on a Weberian (Weber 1949) approach and consider legitimization to be the “crux” of religious authority (Campbell 2007) and visibility a key mode of cultivating legitimization. For the evangelical microcelebrities in this paper, legitimization-through-visibility is consolidated in various ways: a large social media following, positive responses to the expression of ideas and viewpoints on social media, the popularity of their material culture products, and the validation conferred by everyday evangelical women (Bartholomew 1981, p. 120; Hjarvard 2016). Instead of asking *if* female evangelical microcelebrities have authority, this paper proposes a more exploratory approach by analyzing how religious authority is performed, which spheres it touches, and the relationship of this religious authority to traditional, male-centric structures. The next section considers the theoretical implications of religious authority as digitally performed.

2.2. Representation and Social Life

Following (Hall 2013), this paper treats social media images as “visual texts”, which produce, articulate, and construct knowledge regimes. (Hall 2013, p. 259) highlight the relationship between representation and power:

Power, it seems, has to be understood here, not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical control, but also in broader cultural and symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone, or something in a certain way—with a certain ‘regime of representation’. It includes the exercise of *symbolic power* through representational practices.

Building on this theoretical framework, my analysis attends to the productive work of social media images and interrogates them as signifiers that produce meaning within evangelical culture. These signifiers, in turn, are materialized into and inform social practices, including political behavior. Emphasizing the link between digital media, material culture and everyday lived experiences draws attention to the power of representation to impact religious practices and religious meanings. Whilst recognizing that online and offline are separate fields of authority (Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019), this article deliberately holds these fields in close relation to each another, thus emphasizing the social impacts of digital religion.

Rather than viewing the images presented in this paper as a standalone form of discourse, I understand them as re-enforcing other forms of evangelical discourse, including

sermons, books, magazines, and bible study texts, as well as working in tandem with evangelical women's everyday identity performances. In this sense, multiple forms of evangelical discourse circulate and create discursive links, which trigger and connote one another (Hall 1988). These various discursive links further raise evangelical women's visibility, solidify their legitimization within evangelical culture, and fortify their authority (Lövheim and Lundmark 2019; Cheong 2011). Moreover, in a feedback loop of representation and articulation, everyday evangelical women themselves shape evangelical culture just as social media influencers do through images; the material and the figural exist in co-presence.

The stakes of these discursive representations exist beyond the figural or symbolic. By highlighting the political field in which these images proliferate and to which they contribute, this study enriches the field of digital religion, whilst calling for more attention to be given to the importance of social media within the religious landscape.

2.3. Methodology

This paper draws from ethnographic research exploring how single evangelical women negotiate their religious, gender, and racial identities in the US and the UK. The full study consisted of four years of ethnographic fieldwork; over 50 semi-structured interviews; participant observation; and the textual analysis of books, sermons, magazines, and digital media. Here, I focus on data collected from a social media analysis and examine Instagram in particular, as it is the platform most often cited by women in my ethnographic study (Cheong 2014). The six women whose profiles are featured were selected through purposive sampling, and according to a number of factors, including number of Instagram followers, size and importance of the church they belong to, and public profile, gained through writing books, speaking at public events, and producing music. Finally, the six microcelebrities were deemed influential by the single evangelical women in my ethnography.

I used content analysis to categorize the images according to recurring themes, thus following a qualitative, iterative, interpretative analysis technique (Faulkner et al. 2018). This approach to analysis also relied heavily on the intertextual relationships arising from other forms of material culture I analyzed, as well as the ethnographic data from my larger study. The ethics of researching and analyzing publicly available social media images is an emerging area of discussion for scholars (see Chambers 2013; Markham and Buchanan 2012). Following the (British Psychological Association 2013) guidelines for conducting ethical research with digital media, I proceeded with my social media analysis after confirming the following: all the social media profiles analyzed were in an open and public online platform, the women themselves could reasonably be considered "public figures" within the evangelical Christian world, and that by participating in paid advertising for brands it is reasonable to consider that they intended to reach a wide audience (Townsend and Wallace 2019; Jones 2011).

Beyond the formal ethical considerations, as Gangneux (2019, p. 2) notes, scholarly attention needs to be paid to the "co-constitutive relationship" that researchers forge through social media analysis and the importance of contextualizing that relationship within the social world. Responding to that provocation, this article does not treat social media images as static, one-dimensional objects of study, but rather as a productive, 'lively' (Gangneux 2019; Lupton 2016), form of discourse whose meaning is multivalent and always actively interacting with the social and political world.

3. Results

3.1. Womanhood (Re)defined

The first sphere where evangelical social media stars perform authority concerns norms of Christian womanhood. Female microcelebrities consolidated this authority through their "beauty capital", a form of social capital that rests on heteronormative values of femininity and beauty (Moreno Figueroa 2008). Through beauty capital, evangelical

microcelebrities literally embody authority by performing and visibilizing the ideal Christian woman.

One way that evangelical microcelebrities shore up beauty capital is by having a specific type of thin body, achieved through diet and exercise. To underscore the point, one research participant in my ethnography referred to the ideal Christian woman as “a Scandinavian Barbie”, which in the US context connotes an image of a tall, thin, blond-haired, blue-eyed woman. Evangelical microcelebrities often posted pictures of themselves at various stages of their workout: at times a picture of them doing lunges in the gym or afterward, sweaty and victorious. Caressa Prescott (The information provided in this paper was true at the time of data collection and analysis in May 2019), an evangelical microcelebrity, is married to Ben Prescott of Free Chapel Church in Orange County, California. This Free Chapel is one of seven “campuses” led by Caressa’s father, the televangelist, mega-church pastor, and spiritual advisor to Donald Trump, Jentzen Franklin (Bowler 2019). In an Instagram post from 13 February 2019, Caressa posted a series of two photos of herself lifting weights and doing crunches outdoors. Underneath the images she wrote: “Trying to get my best body and doing it in the most comfortable @varley set. Strong is the new skinny.” Her hashtag #ad let viewers know that the post was a paid advertisement sponsored by the athletics brand Varley. Below her post users commented on her body and appearance, writing messages such as “You should be a model!”, “Stunning”, and “What’s your diet?”.

A friend of Prescott’s, Courtney Lopez, is co-pastor of Hillsong California with her husband Sam and runs a marketing firm called West of Fairfax. Lopez was featured in the Christian women’s magazine *Magnify*, read by many of the research participants in my study, and which claims a global circulation. In February 2019, Lopez posted a series of shots to Instagram from her bachelorette party in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, where she and five other women, including the singer and actress Selena Gomez, posed on the beach in white swimsuits. In the comments section Prescott wrote: “I’m dying at these photos!! You look insane.” Beneath that, Lopez responded: “My first year consistently working out. I’m posting 1000 photos lol,” to which Prescott wrote: “it shows!!!!” Another user asked, “what is the regime?! You look so good!”.

Prescott’s Instagram feed also features several swimsuit posts, including one of her in a black bikini while on holiday with her husband in Mexico. In the text accompanying the image, Prescott reveals that she struggles to love her body but is working on accepting it. In another post, Prescott stands on a rocky beach in Australia, wearing a bikini top and jean shorts, her arms reaching upwards. Her ribs are strikingly visible in the image and one of Prescott’s followers commented “those ribs tho”, “#Thighgapgoals” another wrote.

The abundance of evangelical microcelebrities’ swimsuit posts surfaces an uneasy tension between hypersexualized postfeminist media culture and conservative Christian values around sex (Jackson and Lyons 2013). Similarly, single women in my ethnography spoke of the ideal Christian woman as “sexy but chaste”, a contradiction they found difficult to inhabit. In evangelical Christianity, women are expected to adhere to pre-marital sexual purity standards, which involves sexual abstinence, as well as mental purity (Gaddini 2020). Evangelical microcelebrities’ swimsuit shots re-enforce the abundance of hypersexualized books, sex manuals, and sermons in evangelical culture that create an *enticement* toward sex, rather than a *rejection* of it (Avishai and Burke 2016; Burke 2016; Gaddini 2020; Gardner 2011; Johnson 2018). The enticement toward sex further strengthens the importance of heterosexual marriage within the evangelical context. Indeed, the microcelebrities’ swimsuit posts that were analyzed feature women on vacations with their husbands or at a bachelorette party in preparation for (heterosexual) marriage, which suggests that a woman’s expression of sexuality is only legitimate within marriage.

Evangelical microcelebrities swimsuit and exercise posts also displace the pressure for women to be beautiful from the outside to the inside. Scharff and Gill (2017) argue that in the current neoliberal and postfeminist beauty culture, not only are women’s physical appearances scrutinized, but also their psychic lives, and the two are linked together so that

to look good is to feel good and vis versa. The “love your body” discourse, mobilized by brands such as Dove and replicated by female evangelical microcelebrities, urges women to love their body however it looks. However, “feeling good” about one’s body, these images imply, can only happen when one has a slim, middle-classed, white body (Griffith 2004). Such language also obscures societal pressure that women’s bodies conform to normative ideals of thinness, hairlessness, and whiteness, and instead places the onus of responsibility on women to both feel good about their body and conform to the dominant paradigm of beauty.

A second characteristic of ideal womanhood performed by evangelical microcelebrities is heterosexual marriage. My research with single women reveals the value evangelicalism places on marriage and the pressure women feel to find a suitable male husband. As a result, the roles of wife and mother are defining for evangelical womanhood (Aune 2008, 2015; Baille 2002; Sharma 2008; Kobes du Mez 2020). One British evangelical woman reported:

I think there’s that archaic stereotype of being the good wife, as a woman all you’re expected to be is a wife and a mother and be quiet and subservient and I completely push against that. A group of people once told me on a church course that because I was over the age of 25 I had gone past my Christian sell-by date so what I should look forward to is a life of spinsterhood and just being a charitable person who gave all my free time to the church.

Many posts by evangelical microcelebrities re-enforce the importance of heterosexual marriage by featuring photos of the women with their husbands, often in intimate poses. At the time of this research, Alyssa Quilala attended Jesus Culture Sacramento with her husband, Chris, who directed worship at the church and is a Christian music recording artist. On her Instagram bio, Alyssa identified herself first as “wife to Chris Quilala” followed by “actress, model, author” and then “mommy of 5”.

In a post from 4 March 2018 Alyssa praises her husband for supporting her to have a fourth child. She writes “He told me I was beautiful when I felt like a blob” next to a heart and fire emoji. The image that goes with the text is a photo of her, heavily pregnant, embracing her husband next to the kitchen table.

Similarly, on Prescott’s website she identifies herself as “Wife, Mommy, Pastor + Friend”. Her Instagram features photos of her with her husband, at the beach in Florida or vacationing at expensive resorts. Her website, called Leo & Luca, advertises itself as “a blog dedicated to being a source of inspiration to women, mama’s and young girls.” Under the “Lifestyle” section, Caressa provides suggestions for Valentine’s Day gift guides “for him” and “for her.” A “sexy teddy” and Yves Saint Laurent lipsticks are listed “for her”, while “for him”, Prescott writes “I will just say this, the best you can give a guy is sex. I think that’s [sic] pretty universal for every type of personality. If you want to do more than that I would suggest these things to go along with it” (Leo and Luca website).

DawnChéré Wilkerson, another evangelical Instagram microcelebrity, is co-pastor with her husband Rich, of Vous Church in Miami. The couple gained fame after Rich married Kim Kardashian and Kanye West, and in 2015, DawnChéré and Rich were featured in the TV docuseries called “Rich in Faith”, which detailed their lives as pastors in Miami. In November 2018, DawnChéré posted a photo of a Polaroid featuring her and her husband embracing in the sea. The caption states simply “Us”.

Holly Furtick, who with her husband Stephen leads Elevation Church, a multi-sited, megachurch with over 26,000 congregants headquartered in North Carolina, similarly identifies herself primarily as a wife and mother on her website. Just like Wilkerson, Prescott, and Quilala, Furtick also posts regular pictures of her with her husband on Instagram, with captions describing their strong relationship and devoted love. Her website bio mentions her book, *Becoming Mrs. Betterhalf*, which is described as “an eight-week study about becoming the wife God created you to be. This journey is about changing your marriage one step at a time, starting with the woman in the mirror” (Elevation Church website). In an Instagram video post from May 2020, Furtick sits at a desk surrounded by framed photos of brides and grooms, a pink mug, and a vase of roses. She looks directly

into the camera and says: “You have a super power as your husband’s wife, and that power is the power to encourage. And I think many women are missing out on this beautiful opportunity they have to call out greatness in your [sic] husband . . . and the God of peace will be with you when you put this into practice”.

These digital images are embedded within a social context that urges single women to maintain pre-marital purity as a “gift” to give their future husbands. In that sense, evangelical microcelebrities visibilize the evangelical promise that if you wait, then your marriage will be blessed; a promise which proliferates through sermons, Bible study texts, and books (Burke 2016; Gardner 2011; Johnson 2018). Furthermore, the posts described above redefine beauty by showing how it is validated through heterosexual marriage. Women in my ethnographic study described the difficulty in finding a marriage partner, given the scarcity of single men in the church, and the ensuing marginalization they felt for remaining single into their thirties and even forties (see also Aune 2008; Clarke and Blackaby 2018).

Through social media, the figure of the ideal Christian woman has become visibilized like never before; she’s multiplied and proliferated, making her nearly inescapable, and increasing the normative force. In other words, the integrity of the ideal has withstood the profusion, and the lines of normativity are now more strongly enforced.

3.2. Prosperity Theology

In 2013, Pastor Steven Furtick and his wife Holly came under scrutiny after purchasing a USD 1.7 million house in their hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina, and calling it a “gift from God” (Arriero and Observer 2013). Their response resembles prosperity gospel theology, the teaching that God will reward believers with wealth and success for their faithfulness and tithing. Indeed, Kate Bowler (2013, p. 5) classifies the Furtick’s church, Elevation Church, as a “prosperity church”. Bowler also notes that “the prosperity gospel thrives in diverse forms on the American religious terrain”. One of the “diverse forms” of the prosperity gospel, I argue, is social media. Female evangelical microcelebrities’ posts on “lifestyle” and “wellness” constitute a form of prosperity theology, making it a distinctly theological sphere where evangelical influencers perform authority.

During a fieldwork visit to Bethel Church in August 2016, after the praise and worship segment of the service, I observed the congregants reciting a prayer before tithes and offerings were collected. The words to this prayer included a petition for God to “give us checks in the mail, bonuses at work, and commissions from sales.” Bethel’s acceptance of prosperity gospel theology also arose when the lead pastor Bill Johnson stated, in relation to why he supported Trump, that “God gives us the ability to make wealth, and that merely giving people money without work can create a lifestyle of dependency that is dangerous for them and our government” (Lodge 2016).

Female evangelical microcelebrities also promoted a prosperity gospel theology on Instagram by linking their affluent lifestyles and promotion of brands with their faith. Esther Houston, a fashion model from Brazil, is married to Joel Houston, pastor of Hillsong New York, and son of Brian and Bobbie Houston, founders of the Hillsong global network of churches. With close to half a million Instagram followers and close links to other evangelical influencers, such as Courtney Lopez, as well as mainstream celebrities, such as Justin and Hailee Beiber, Houston has achieved considerable legitimization as an authority within evangelical culture. In 2019, Houston posted a picture of herself on a beach in Montauk, New York. Seven brands, including Chanel, were tagged in the photo, which linked beauty, branding, and prosperity, as emphasized by her caption: “Living our best.” A large cross necklace, similar to the one Lopez wears in many of her swimwear posts, dangled on her neck, signifying her Christian faith. As with the other social media stars, Houston met all the markers of an ideal evangelical women: white, thin, upper-class—as evidenced by photos of her at five-star resorts and expensive clothing—and married.

Alyssa Quilala also advertised for brands as an “Amazon Influencer”, which, according to Amazon’s website, allows social media influencers with large followings to earn

a commission when they advertise products on their social media platform. In a post from April 2019, Alyssa featured three of her favorite face cream products on Instagram along with a link to her Amazon page, where followers could buy the products. Wilkerson, Lopez, and Furtick's Instagram feeds are the same; all, to varying extents, promote brands, products, and even their own merchandise, combining consumer-driven images with captions that refer to their Christian faith.

In addition to representing brands, evangelical women posted images of vacations they took to five-star resorts, large and expensive-looking homes, shopping trips, and designer clothing purchases. In one post, Prescott walks down the street in New York carrying a large Alexander Wang bag; in another picture there is simply a Celine bag in a hotel room in Paris. In a post from November 2015, she is taking a selfie in a dressing room, wearing a floor length beaded gown. The caption reads: "Oh you know just getting a dress for church tomorrow. #Sundaybest #casual #saturdaysareforshoppingwhilebenstudies".

Similarly, Alyssa has a series of dressing room selfie shots of her at Saks Fifth Avenue in San Francisco. She writes that she is trying to find a dress for the Grammy's, which she will attend with her husband, who was nominated for an award. Like Prescott, Quilala nods to her role as a Christian woman and wife in the post by writing, "I ended up catching a designer gown on flash sale for under \$200. WHAT?! The Lord loves me, guys!" By relating their Christian identities to high-end shopping, both women perpetuate a feminized version of prosperity theology, combining normative womanhood with middle/upper class sensibilities and a Christian identity. Such discourse suggests that obedience to God results in affluence, which was also reflected in the tithing prayer recited at Bethel Church on the Sunday I attended.

Perhaps the best example of a gendered prosperity theology is put forth by Rachel Hollis, who, although not considered an evangelical microcelebrity, associates her entire career as a lifestyle guru and business coach with prosperity gospel logics. In her first book, *Girl Wash your Face*, Hollis (2018, p. xv) writes "As a Christian I grew up learning that God was in control, that God had a plan for my life, and I believe in the marrow of my bones that this is true . . . but I don't think that means we get to squander the gifts and talents he's given us simply because we're good enough already". In her second book, Hollis admits that as a child she wanted to be rich and encourages other women to not feel ashamed of this desire. Similarly, in an Instagram post from February 2019, Hollis writes "Who certified me to be a business coach? I DID. By building a multi-million-dollar business from scratch, by myself. By creating one of the biggest podcasts in the BUSINESS category. By creating one of the biggest podcasts in the health category while I was at it. By writing a book that's been at the top of the NYT bestseller list for half a year and has sold over 3 Million copies. By creating one of the biggest personal development conferences in the world. By becoming one of the highest paid speakers (male or female) on the planet".

Christian microcelebrities' emphasis on self-commodification and consumerism follows a neoliberal sensibility where everything, including one's own body, is economized, and governed by market logics (Brown 2006, 2020). This sphere of authority resembles a gendered version of what Connolly (2005, p. 883) calls the "capitalist-evangelical resonance machine"; the collision of late-capitalist values and neoliberal ideology with white evangelicalism. Alternatively, it resembles a Christian version of what Gill (2016, p. 613) calls a postfeminist sensibility, which is "deeply enmeshed with neoliberalism".

American evangelical Christianity's neoliberal character is exemplified in the way evangelical female microcelebrities promote prosperity theology. At the same time, the digital sphere provides a unique opportunity for white evangelical women. As previously mentioned, the women featured in this article do not often preach from the pulpit or hold the authority to interpret theology in their churches, even when they attend churches that endorse an egalitarian interpretation of scripture. Social media opens up a theological sphere of authority to women, by allowing female evangelical microcelebrities to visibilize and perpetuate a gendered form of the prosperity gospel.

3.3. Politics

The third sphere where evangelical social media stars perform authority is politics. A survey from 2016 reports that nearly two-thirds of American Protestants and Catholics reported hearing their pastor speak about politics or political issues directly from the pulpit (Pew Research Center 2016). This statistic bore out across the data I collected in California. At a Sunday morning service I attended at Jesus Culture, an offshoot of Bethel Church, the lead pastor Banning Leibscher spoke about SB 1146, a bill proposed by California Senator Richard Lara, that would close a loophole allowing religiously-affiliated private universities that receive federal funding to discriminate against students and staff on the grounds of gender identity and sexual orientation. "We prayed for it to be shot down", Leibscher told the congregation enthusiastically, "and they withdrew the bill from the Senate." The congregants clapped and cheered in reaction to this news. He went on to emphasize that, as a church, they had a "responsibility" to shape politics because "what happens in Sacramento affects the nation as a capital city".

At another Sunday service in 2016, a pastor at Jesus Culture spoke about the Obama administration's recommendation that schools nationwide allow students to use whichever bathroom corresponded to their gender identity. Although not written into law, the administration had threatened to withdraw federal funding from non-compliant schools (Horsley 2016). The pastor urged congregants to pray for this recommendation to be repealed. Similar to Leibscher, this pastor cited the church's proximity to the capitol as a reason they must exert political influence, and he used the phrase "combat mode" to describe the attitude believers needed to adopt in confronting these political issues. In 2018, Bethel Church vocally rejected AB 2943, a bill proposed by Assembly Member Evan Low, which aimed to designate paid "conversion therapy" services as fraudulent (Mason 2018). In a letter to Assembly Member Low, the senior leadership of Bethel wrote "We see AB 2943 as discriminatory to those with certain ideological viewpoints or religious beliefs." The bill was later dropped by Low, citing his desire to reach an agreement with religious groups opposed to the bill.

The evangelical women I interviewed also saw it as their spiritual duty to be politically engaged. One of the key areas for evangelical political engagement is anti-trafficking. At a church event I attended in London in 2014, the entire evening was dedicated to praying for the emancipation of sex-trafficking "victims". The guest speaker that night, a woman who volunteered with an anti-sex trafficking organization, presented a moving story about the issue to the congregants in attendance. At another London church event in 2017, a woman named Patricia spoke about her work directing a charity that campaigned to end human trafficking. Similarly, several of the evangelical social media microcelebrities post selfies with a red cross on the back of their hand and tagged @enditmovement. In one image, Furtick and her daughter pose with red "x"s on the backs of their hands. She tagged A21 and End It Movement in the post. On the website for End It Movement, they declare themselves to be "a coalition of the leading organizations in the world in the fight for freedom [against slavery]." Amongst the coalition partners are the evangelical non-profits International Justice Mission, Polaris, Hagar, Not for Sale, and A21.

American evangelical Christians' interest in sex trafficking and human trafficking represents an attempt to "rescue" defiled women argues academic Elizabeth (Bernstein 2010). Indeed, there has been disproportionate attention given to trafficking as a social justice issue within white evangelicalism, where language of "freedom", "restoration", and "salvation" is mobilized, resonating with Biblical parables such as the prodigal son, Jesus's atonement for human sins, and, indeed, the entire conversion process, which is meant to offer "freedom" from one's previous life, at the same time as it accords with neoliberal notions of personal freedom and meritocracy.

Another area where evangelicals exercise political engagement is by voting in presidential elections. Sandra, who I interviewed in August 2016, before the presidential election, said she knew that her church leaders at her American evangelical mega-church wanted her to vote for Trump. Nevertheless, she had hesitations. A former victim advocate

who had only recently converted to evangelicalism, Sandra left her job in a big Californian city and was studying for a degree in pastoral counseling when I met her. Due to her line of work, she struggled to reconcile voting for Trump with her beliefs about equality and social justice. Another evangelical woman, LeeAnn, also interviewed in 2016, told me she planned to vote for Trump in the upcoming election because “he is a Republican and that label is important to me.” She also said that curtailing immigration and opposing abortion were key issues motivating her support for Trump. As mentioned in the Introduction, the pastors of Bethel Church, Beni and Bill Johnson, openly supported Trump. On her Facebook page, Beni posted a ten-point list of reasons why she would be supporting Trump in 2016, and after Trump was elected president, Bill issued a written defense of Trump in a Christian publication (Lodge 2016).

On 20 October 2016, weeks before the presidential election, Prescott also alluded to her support for Trump via an Instagram post. She wrote

A few months ago I listened to my baby’s heartbeat at just 5 weeks old... he didn’t look like a baby then, or have the obvious physical characteristics he does now but he was very much alive and just as human as he is now at 36 weeks... With that being said, there are things that are apart [sic] of the foundation of my faith that I can’t ignore—The sanctity of life. I think anyone who has had the opportunity to carry a child in their womb and experience the greatest miracle that God allows us to have on this earth would agree it is just that—a miracle. If this was the only reason why I have decided to vote it’s enough of a reason to me. I understand there are many other important issues facing our country today but I choose to vote on the one most important to me...my precious innocent baby and his future, along with all future babies just like him.

She cited Psalm 139, pp. 13–16, bible verses which evangelicals often reference to oppose abortion. Linking scripture to a political issue ahead of a major political event shows how Prescott’s authority is both Christian and political in character. Moreover, her reference to the “greatest miracle that God allows us to have on this earth” emphasizes motherhood, which is a central aspect of ideal evangelical womanhood.

At the time of Prescott’s post, her father, Jentezen Franklin, served as one Trump’s faith advisors during his campaign (Shellnutt and Zylstra 2016). Two and a half years later, on 2 May 2019, Prescott posted a picture of herself with her mother Cherise Franklin, Ivanka Trump, and Paula White-Cain, who is pastor, speaker, and chairwoman of Trump’s Evangelical Advisory Board. Prescott captioned the photo “This administration is doing more than any other has in history to invest in women’s economic empowerment and the next generation. I am so honored to have had the opportunity and seat at the table”. The next day, Prescott posted a photo of her standing alone in front of the White House in a brown dress and heels.

In addition to Trump, there are other key conservative issues that white evangelical social media stars rally behind, such as opposing vaccinations and supporting military intervention. On 7 April 2017, the day after the first American attack on the Assad regime in Syria, Esther Houston shared a picture of herself laughing in a windowsill and wearing a silky pink dress that resembled a negligée. Her blond hair is tousled, as if she’s just woken up, and her right leg is raised, exposing her thighs. “Don’t be solely caught up in an image of a pink satin-wearing careless girl: I have my eyes wide open”, Houston writes under the image. She continues:

At what point do we decide its [sic] enough injustice to idly witness? At what point do we stand up to other’s lives at the risk of ours? At what point do we start denying lives in fear of losing ours? How much is too much? When do we protect ourselves and our loved ones and when do we actually and literally love others and somehow step in? If not this, then what is our Red Line?

Another key Republican issue for white evangelical microcelebrities is vaccinations. Alyssa Quilala expressed her opinions against required vaccinations in April 2019, when

she posted a photo of her and a friend marching at the California state capitol against Senate Bill 276, which proposed a tightening of doctor-approved medical exemptions for vaccinations. In the context of the worst measles outbreak in twenty years, the bill aimed to cut medical exemptions by at least 40% by permitting the state's public health department to reject doctor-approved exemptions (Gutierrez 2019). As vaccinations are required for children to attend public school and day care, Quilala viewed this bill as an infringement of her rights. In the caption to the post, Quilala wrote "The fact that the government is saying I need to endanger my child to be present in society WITHOUT A CHOICE is unacceptable." Whether endorsing a political candidate, attacking a Senate bill, or rallying behind a conservative issue, evangelical microcelebrities perform their authority in the political realm. Just as previous studies documented evangelical women's involvement with right-wing politics through anti-abortion rallies (Ginsburg 1998; Fitzgerald 2017), embryo-adoption programs (Cromer 2018), and abstinence-only education lobbying (Gardner 2011), in the digital age conservative evangelical women exercise their political participation via social media. In this sense, their social media activity constitutes an extension of the political activities of their churches. However, within these churches, men hold the authority to speak publicly about politics and lead political activities on behalf of the church, as in the case of Bethel Church's engagement with Assemblyman Low. Social media offers a new sphere of religio-political authority for women, by giving them a platform to speak about politics publicly. Thus, female evangelical microcelebrities represent a dynamic and important role in US politics; a role which continues to be overlooked in gender-blind studies on the evangelical relationship with conservative politics.

4. Conclusions

This paper analyzed the spheres in which American female evangelical microcelebrities perform religious authority. Women consolidate their legitimization through the visibility afforded by social media and the circulation of evangelical material culture to which they contribute, including books, magazines, music, and events. However, social media creates an increased opportunity to perform religious authority, as its format increases women's visibility, reach, and control. The three spheres of evangelical microcelebrities' authority explored in this paper include Christian womanhood, prosperity gospel theology, and politics. In analyzing the social media images of these evangelical microcelebrities and marrying this data to ethnographic data from the US and UK, I have demonstrated that although the digital landscape opens up new modes of religious authority for evangelical women, this authority is not transgressive enough to be considered a "threat" or "challenge" to traditional authority structures, as has been suggested (Cheong 2014). In other words, rather than rupturing existing patriarchal authority structures within evangelical churches, these women re-enforce and support, rather than supplant, their husbands (and some cases father's) authority. Moreover, female evangelical microcelebrities' use of digital media upholds the racial, class, and gender inequalities in evangelical communities that arose in my ethnographic study.

White evangelical women's digital media content articulates and re-instates ideals of Christian womanhood by offering visual representations of normativity, from which many evangelical women are excluded. An environment where womanhood is so circumscribed raises the question: which bodies can be visible authorities? And what about those who do not fit the norm? Judith Butler (2007, p. 955) notes "For photographs to communicate in this way they must have a transitive function. They do not merely portray or represent, but they relay affect." (Gaddini 2019) documents the affective toll that marginalized women bear in evangelical contexts by surfacing the wounds of women who fall outside the norm. Exclusion runs along lines of age, beauty, marital status, and even more intractably, it runs along racial and class lines. In a similar vein, we might consider the affective states evangelical microcelebrities' social media posts relay and probe how these photographs contribute, or indeed generate, suffering for the women who consume such images and cannot live up to the ideal.

Finally, recalling Moultrie’s assertion from the beginning of this paper—“the virtual is also political”—this paper concludes by drawing attention to the stakes raised by evangelical microcelebrities’ engagement with political discourse on social media. All of the women featured in this paper participate in politics, whether by voting, attending political rallies and events, or commenting on political issues on social media. By foregrounding the political, I signal toward the larger-scale ramifications of these images and, indeed, female evangelical celebrities’ authority to advance conservative policies and candidates.

Since Trump’s 2016 election, academic journals have published a spate of articles trying to make sense of the outcome and, particularly, the role of evangelical Christians in securing Trump’s victory. Most of these articles have overlooked half of that voting bloc. There are uniquely gendered features of evangelical women’s support for Trump, including his appeal as a strong, “protector”-type figure, which accords with normative evangelical masculinity in the United States (Kobes du Mez 2020). Future research ought to investigate why white evangelical women supported Trump and, moreover, right-wing politics, and in what specific ways female evangelical microcelebrities are influencing political outcomes. Considering that Trumpism continues to outlast the Trump administration, scholars of religion must continue to examine not only the ways white evangelicalism is implicated in politics, but how white evangelical *women* are implicated.

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