Fear Not, For I Am With You Again (Socially Distanced): A Qualitative Thematic Analysis

of Megachurch Post-COVID Lockdown Re-Opening Videos on Facebook

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Abstract

Churches in the United States closed their doors to in-person gatherings during the COVID-19 lockdown in March of 2020. As conditions improved, churches began re-opening to indoor worship services instituting safety measures to comply with CDC guidelines. Churches used social media to promote their re-opening to their congregationd. With the goal of evaluating the video messages of churches promoting their re-opening, the study analyzes the content of Facebook videos from non-denominational megachurches between June and October 2020. This qualitative thematic analysis explores how the videos address the threat of COVID-19, the risk of attending in-person services, and the efficacy of health and safety measures. The inductive analysis was sensitized by the extended parallel processing model, ritual communication theory, and the concept of security theater. The themes identified have potential implications for future religious and health communication research, especially concerning contentious safety protocols, managing fear and anxiety, liability concerns, livestreaming technology, and more digitally transient congregations.

Keywords: Megachurches, COVID-19, re-opening, Facebook video, extended parallel processing model, security theater

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The subject of church re-opening during the COVID-19 pandemic has been contentious and controversial in many communities across the United States. Prominent and high profile churches have made headlines for defying health department and court orders regarding indoor public gatherings and the requisite health and safety protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Wingfield, 2020; Woo, 2020). As infection levels fluctuate across the country, church leaders contend with a varying degree of restrictions on their worship practices impacting the size of indoor gatherings permitted, masking wearing, social distance, and singing. Like the rest of the country, churches closed their doors to worship services during the initial lockdown phase that began in late March of 2020. As pandemic levels improved in some areas, churches began re-opening to indoor worship services by putting in place health and safety measures to comply with their local and state requirements. This effort required churches to communicate to their parishioners—to both promote re-opening and inform them about the health and safety Measures. Many churches moved their worship services to an online live stream during the lockdown, which made using online video over social media channels like Facebook the obvious channel to distribute their re-opening messages (Heilweil, 2020; Yurieff & O'Brien, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to explore the socially mediated video communication of large churches intended to inform and promote their re-opening after closures during the initial lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020. Specifically, the study would seek to understand the nature and motivation of the visual and scripted messages churches are using to address congregational fear and anxiety about the risks of contracting the illness from attending in-person worship services by pursuing the following research questions:

RQ 1   How did churches use online video on their Facebook pages to communicate re-opening

plans to their congregation after lockdown restrictions for the COVID-19 pandemic in

Spring 2020 were lifted?

RQ 2   What were the major themes present in these mediated messages that address the risk

assessment that church attenders might engage in when deciding to return to in-person

worship services?

RQ 3   How do the themes that emerge describe the strategies churches are using that address

both institutional and congregational risk and uncertainty with resuming in-person

worship?

RQ 4   As church communities engage in discourses about public health and their relationship to

government institutions amid the pandemic, what conflicts between church authorities

and congregants are made visible by the themes?

In order to investigate these research questions, an in-depth examination of the extant literature

will be reviewed. Following the literature review, the researcher will include a presentation of

the method, the results of the study, and a discussion of the implications for the field.

Review of Literature

Church Branding and Advertising

Posting video messages on Facebook that are both informational and promotional falls

into the category of social media marketing. Subsequently, consideration was given to literature

addressing church branding and advertising. While there is a plethora of literature related to

branding and advertising, research into church and church-related marketing is scarce by

comparison. This may be due in part to the shifting paradigm for management and growth of

churches to a more business-oriented model in line with the emergence of megachurches

(Thumma, 2012) in Christian Evangelicalism (Worthen, 2014). By the mid-1980s, McDaniel (1986) published a study that surveyed clergy and the general public on their views about the appropriateness of church advertising. Given the era of McDaniel's study and the media formats for which his research was conduct, the specific findings are hardly useful today. However, McDaniel's (1986) study is interesting in that it distinguishes between two key groups, professional clergy, and parishioners, finding that clergy had a more positive view of advertising than church members. This was followed by a national survey of marketing techniques used by churches (McDaniel, 1989) and a taxonomy of church marketing strategies (Vokurka & McDaniel, 2004).

Einstein (2008) notes that the move toward branding churches was an outgrowth of an overall shift in marketing strategy toward identity formation. With religious faith already closely tied to identity, church branding is another manifestation of the intersection of the church with secular commercial culture (Einstein, 2008). At the megachurch level, as defined by Thumma (2012) as a congregation of 2,000 or more regular attenders, a marketing and branding orientation has been explored from a cultural and historical-critical perspective by Moore (1994) and Twitchell (2004). As megachurches emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, the church growth movement gave rise to a plethora of texts that promoted the practices of church marketing and branding, exemplified by lauded church pollster George Barna's (1988) Marketing the Church. The trend toward church marketing was visible enough to attract scholarly curiosity in the early 1990s (Cutler, 1991). Later in the decade, the Evangelical embrace of marketing and branding methods would attract a backlash of criticism (Kenneson & Street, 1997). Wrenn (2011) sought common ground between marketers and critics by acknowledging the differences between consumer marketing and church organizations and setting forth the elements of a church's

mission that are marketable, and how to go about doing so without devaluing their spiritual identity. Receptivity to branding in a church context may have increased along with the larger consumer marketplace. A pilot study investigating perceived benefit orientation suggests that church branding communications are viewed positively by both regular and non-regular attendees, measured as perceived benefits defined by Rational Choice Theory (Casidy, 2013)

Despite the broad considerations of church branding and marketing, only and a handful of specific research studies specific to advertising have been conducted since McDaniel's work (1986). Percy (2000) contrasts church advertising with secular advertising that uses religious symbols and ideas, raising questions by comparing the marketplace as a religion with the notion of religion as a marketplace. In other words, Percy grapples with whether churches are differentiating from other church competitors or if a market model able to express something more essential: "It has plenty to say about style, content and social expression…. Little can be said, however, about theology and divine substance when using the model, which is surely what the churches think they are ultimately about?" (Percy, 2000, p. 117). Considering research into an ecumenical advertising campaign, the "God Speaks" religious, social marketing campaign, which functioned as a set of PSAs for religious ethics in society, was found by Lancendorfer and Reece (2010) to have a negligible impact on attitudes and behavior. The most recent example in the church marketing, branding, and advertising arena, Stolz and Usunier (2019) provide an interdisciplinary account of the rise of religious consumer society, its effects on the individual consumer expectations of churches, and its effects on church organizations manifested in the increasing use of branding and marketing techniques which further accentuates a consumer mentality toward religious faith and practice.

Churches and Social Media Marketing

Literature investigating social media advertising specific to churches is even rarer than the broader church advertising research already noted. For the purpose of the focused research objective, a selected set of studies provide guidance and context. From the non-church related research, an empirical study focused on social media advertising content found that information value and creativity were both related to social influence behaviors and consumer intent (Lee & Hong, 2016). Relative to digital media advertising on social media from churches re-opening after COVID-19 lockdowns, Lee and Hong (2016) is informative as to how social media advertising content may be received by the audience in terms of how an advertisement's creativity and information value translate into social currency. This prompts the question as to whether the creativity and information value of the advertising messages would positively impact adherence to health and safety measures being instituted or comfort level with attending in-person services.

The present study limits the artifacts to the Facebook platform, making Lee's (2018) study of church Facebook adoption useful in gauging the likelihood of social media advertising being used to communicate church re-opening messages. Lee (2018) found that urban churches with more staff and larger congregations are correlated with wider adoption of social media. The contribution of the mediatization of religion theory perspective is also helpful (H. A. Campbell, 2017), especially where it engages the shifting views of religious authority as aspects of religious life and practice become digitally mediated (H. A. Campbell, 2007, 2012, 2021; H. A. Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Facebook video advertising messages will be perceived as messages from traditional church authorities, such as pastors, making the impact of digitally mediated religion pertinent to how members of church congregations respond. Social media messages promoting the re-opening of in-person church services are occurring amid a huge shift to online live stream

worship services that occurred during the lockdown phase of the pandemic (Heilweil, 2020).

Churches and Pandemic Response

Communication from church leaders to their congregations concerning the resumption of in-person worship services takes place against a backdrop of political polarization, the changing nature of scientific knowledge about the virus and the most effective public health recommendations, mediatization processes, and religious liberty concerns. A number of studies and polls provide insight into the resulting context that should shape an analysis and the researcher's interpretation of thematic findings.

During the pandemic, behavioral responses to the risks of COVID-19 have become politicized with a corresponding polarization of liberals embracing cautious and precautionary behaviors, and conservative Christians more likely to resist them (Perry et al., 2020; Schnabel & Schieman, 2021). This is pronounced amongst those holding to a Christian Nationalist worldview, rather than those holding strong religious commitments. Christian Nationalism (defined as an ideology that defines America as God's chosen, protect people and is characterized by distrust of news media and disregard of science and education) is significantly and positively correlated with incautious behaviors such as eating in restaurants, visiting family/friends, or gathering with 10+ persons, and also correlated with eschewing precautions such as wearing a mask (Perry et al., 2020). High religious commitment has the opposite effect of Christian Nationalism in relation to COVID-19 precautions (Perry et al., 2020). This paradox is consistent with other findings. A Gallup 2020 poll found Americans were significantly more likely to say religion was increasing its influence on American society during the pandemic, while there was no evidence to support a corresponding increase in religious commitment by individuals (Newport, 2020).

Attitudes towards COVID precautions by churches are visible in more recent comparative survey measuring major religious groups and political leanings. Evangelical Protestants were more in favor of opening up than those in other groups, with 35 percent saying their churches should be operating in the same way as before the outbreak by March 2021—in increase from 18 percent in July 2020 (Smith, 2021). Evangelical Protestants were also shown to have the lowest percentage of people in favor of requiring masks and limiting communal singing (corresponding with similar attitudes by Republican leaning or affiliated respondents (Smith, 2021). These trends follow American Christians outside the confines of church worship, where they are 13 percent less likely to wear masks in public, and are 9 percent less likely report that they are "somewhat" or "very" worried about catching the virus (Burge, 2020).

Churches in the Digital Context, Pre and Post Pandemic

The technological progression of churches online was well underway prior to the pandemic (H. A. Campbell & Dyer, 2022). The various forms of digital *ekklesia* described by Dyer (2022) have become more clearly defined within studies of the Mediatization of Religion: Online Church, whereby believers establish and maintain relationship with others in the church through digital media; Broadcast Church, an earlier mediatization context of a one-way medium now facilitated online; Interactive Church, with church services and interactions via two-way interactive mediums; Virtual Church, where a faith community meets and practices via an immersive virtual reality platform; and Hybrid Church, whereby a local church maintains both in-person and digital modalities. Media technology has also altered in-person services, with the incorporate of smart phones and the video projection of music lyrics and images on increasingly large screens changing the worship experience of a typical American parishioner (Roso et al., 2020).

While the lockdown and shuttering of in-person services during the pandemic interrupted the media technology of in-person worship, it accelerated church. adoption of digital media as both leaders and parishioners laid hold of live-streaming weekly services as a way to maintain a measure of continuity in worship practices. As reopening to in-person services was planned and communicated after the initial lockdown phase, the churches included in this study all fit the category of Hybrid Churches seeking to continue to meet the needs of all their parishioners, even if they preferred not to meet in-person: "In some sense, churches in the digital era have been somewhat hybrid as their people use media to connect with one another and move between online and offline contexts" (Dyer, 2022). This has been perpetuated by COVID-19 variant outbreaks since the initial phase, making movement between online and offline forms of worship the new normal for many parishioners (K. Rogers, 2021).

Relevant Theories and Models

This analysis of Facebook video advertising messages from churches to promote post-lockdown re-opening will utilize The Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) as a theoretical perspective (K. Rogers, 2021). EPPM reintegrates emotional fear responses with the cognitive framework advanced by Rogers (1975, 1983) and builds on the parallel danger and fear control framework established by Leventhal (1971). While the advertising messages themselves are not likely to incorporate overt fear appeals, the pandemic context is one in which aspects of fear and risk are extrapolated from the messages, making the EPPM processing model highly applicable to potential audience messages appraisals and responses. EPPM defines a message appraisal process in response to fear that begins with threat assessment (gauging threat severity and vulnerability) and an appraisal of one's ability to respond to the threat (either contained in the message or drawn from one's experiences and beliefs) (Witte, 1992). If the perceived threat is

low, the fear is dismissed. If the perceived threat is high, and the efficacy of response is also

high, there is higher cognitive engagement and motivation to respond in accordance with the

message. However, if efficacy is low, people tend to engage in emotionally-driven fear control

processes such as defensiveness, denial, and even message manipulation in order to reduce their

level of fear.

EPPM continues to have a high degree of heurism for researchers in public health

communication studying how fear impacts message receptivity and efficacy. A recent study of

breast cancer prevention information on mobile-based social media used content analysis to

apply EPPM to social media content, finding a majority of the material contained threat or

efficacy messages (Chen et al., 2019). The EPPM model was also included in a very recent study

of consumer purchase behavior in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which found that fear

appeals promote higher engagement between online sellers and buyers (Addo et al., 2020). This

was reasoned by the authors to stem from increased information seeking to help control or deal

with fear and perceived risk of the disease (Addo et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique challenge for church congregations, who

now find that their religious practices are risk factors in the spread of the disease. Subsequently,

any messages to return to in-person worship services are casting the rituals of singing,

communion, and the human contact of the worship gathering itself into areas of perceived risk

never considered before. The ritual view of communication provides the backdrop for this issue

(Carey, 2009). While a transmission view would support the easy replacement of in-person

worship services with a digitally mediated substitute, the very nature of a church service defines

the ritualistic view as a "sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and

commonality" (Carey, 2009, p. 15).

The pandemic has prompted higher engagement with social media platforms as lockdowns and closures over safety concerns cut people of from traditional forms of regular social interaction (Dias, 2020). Facebook Live is among the primary digital platforms of religious engagement, along with YouTube and Vimeo, hosting virtual church services and providing an official and interactive communication channel between churches and parishioners. Social media engagement by churches and their congregants can also be characterized in a ritualistic sense, adding another dimension to consider in the analysis. Social media platforms subject users to preset forms of symbolic communication and protocols for interactions (Sen, 2017). Communicative activities in these realms are ritualistically cultivated in audiences (Sen, 2017). As Churches establish and connect their institutional social media presence to their congregants, these ritual interactions can be correlated toward the training and maintenance of the church's audiences relative to the social reality and ideology of the church community (Hutchings, 2017; Sen, 2017). At the same time, social media platforms open individual congregants to a myriad of other influences that form their assessment of risk and the efficacy of their church's response as their digital networks of relationships and information extend outward (H. A. Campbell, 2012). The plurality of sources of religious authority and influence online has implications for how varied responses may be to centralized messages from their church community, evident in the polarized responses of Evangelicals with regard to the risks inherent in the COVID-19 pandemic (Schnabel & Schieman, 2021).

In the health communication field, the ritual view of communication has been useful for understanding ritualistic human behaviors that carry health risks (Wolberg, 2012). In light of the pandemic, churches face a conundrum of being the center of ritual behaviors that now carry high levels of disease transmission risk when performed in person, while also facing concerns that the

lack of in-person services will weaken their ability to maintain their faith communities. Churches have been able to mitigate this in certain ways by bringing certain rituals into digital spaces and making revisions to those rituals, such as livestreaming church services and interacting with parishioners on social media through posting and sharing content (Kapoor et al., 2022). While this shift was already underway with churches of all sizes and religious ideologies—harnessing livestreaming and social media to extend and serve their church communities online as opposed to "online church" (Hutchings, 2017, p. 8), the pandemic has made these practices more of a necessity in order to maintain connection as religious communities.

Sampling and Methodology

For the purpose of this initial study, a list of the largest churches in the United States was compiled by referencing the 2015 Megachurch Database compiled by The Hartford Institute for Religion Research (HIRR) and maintained by lead researcher Scott Thumma since 1992 (Database of Megachurches, 2015). Given the date of the most recent HIRR reporting, the selection of largest churches was cross-referenced with the *Outreach 100* list, an annual survey-based list of the largest churches, most recently updated in 2020 (Outreach 100, 2020). The list was further sorted to include non-denominational churches to eliminate any denominational policy influence on church re-opening strategies or communications. Regional COVID condition information was gathered from *The New York Times* interactive website tracking national and state re-opening plans in response to COVID conditions (See How All 50 States Are Re-opening, 2020). *The New York Times* provides a state-by-state assessment that is regularly updated and includes whether houses of worship are free to open or restricted from opening due to state or county guidelines. Churches located in California were eliminated on this basis. In the process of sampling, other churches were eliminated if they were not re-opened to in-person worship

services by their own choice as of October 2020. Additionally, a small number of churches did

not have video messages posted on Facebook about resuming in-person services.

As in initial study, a purposeful sampling approach was used to ensure information-rich

results (Patton, 2015). Development of a quota of artifacts drawn from large non-denominational

churches ensured a pragmatic starting point for content analysis. The researcher acknowledges

that the Facebook platform and video production of messages are digital forms engaged by

churches of all sizes and types. Anecdotally, there were case examples outside of the

megachurch strata that prompted this research inquiry. The megachurch databases used to define

the sample quota also create a limitation by their focus on the largest churches. This essentially

cuts off available data once churches no longer fit their defined criteria as "megachurches."

While this limitation must be noted, the databases are also the only sources found to allow non-

denomination churches to be identified and sorted to remove denominational intervention in

COVID-19 response and church re-opening decisions. The method of quota sampling

unavoidably results in an analysis centered on megachurches, and future researchers should

account for this gap in order to obtain findings that are more representative of the spectrum of

Evangelical churches. A study of denominational churches would also make an interesting

comparison of policies and decisions that are centralized above the local church level.

Aside from the limitations noted above, an additional rationale helps justify a narrow

focus. Congregations in this stratum are highly visible in culture with regards to issues of public

opinion and news media interest. COVID-19 and the in-person nature of church worship have

been elevated to issues of public opinion and debate, with mega-churches receiving notoriety for

their response to public health mandates (Cosgrove, 2020). The sampling approach may provide

a better sense for communication strategies of megachurches to resuming their in-person worship

practices beyond the headline-grabbing cases highlighted by news media. Furthermore, the megachurch sample gives a better sense than the outliers for how willing these congregations are to openly address resistance to governmental public health recommendations and mandates in the return to in-person worship.

The researcher looked for Facebook video messages addressing the re-opening of in-person services after mandatory closures that began and March and lasted through April throughout the country. The search for videos and the quota sampling process culled down the initial list of the 34 largest churches to a sample of 20 video messages—all posted by non-denominational churches with more than 10,000 regular attenders. The researcher downloaded and transcribed the videos from church Facebook accounts, producing a text output corresponding to each video. The videos were reviewed, and a descriptive visual summary was written to denote the type of video and visual information content corresponding with the research methodology. The transcripts, descriptive commentaries, and a still image were compiled in a single document in numerical order by size and church name. A preliminary perusal of videos helped define broad genre types to apply at the outset. Video type was identified based upon the four general formats the videos take: 1) A visual montage with music and screen text and voiceover, 2) A direct message from pastor or church leader directed toward the congregation, 3) An animated video message with text, voiceover, or both, or 4) A hosted video tour of the church facility and COVID safety protocols. In addition, videos were found to combine these forms. Notes were also made with regard to the production value, ranging from an informal vlog or selfie-format to a highly scripted and carefully produced video.

The ensuing qualitative thematic analysis (Patton, 2015) involved determining the frequency of words, phrases, ideas, and items in the transcripts and visual descriptions.

Practically this process follows Dey's (1993) circular process of describing qualitative

phenomena, classifying, and then analyzing for interconnected concepts. Themes emerged by

comparing the relative frequency and salience of the items to Extended Parallel Process Model

(EPPM) as the core theoretical perspective (Witte, 1992), centering on elements of the videos

that address COVID risk and the efficacy of the church's response to risk. Of course, the analysis

of church video messages can only consider the message content and not assess individuals'

appraisal processes. Instead, EPPM was used as the "sensitizing concept" (Patton, 2015, p. 545)

to analyze message content in terms of how it addresses the threat of COVID-19, the risk level of

attending in-person services, and the efficacy of health and safety measures taken by the church.

In the case of church reopening videos, it is assumed that messages directly engage the parallel

threat and response efficacy appraisal processes in the mind of the congregant. The challenge

posed in this context for the church communicators is the variation in how people perceive the

severity threat, which can range from a negligible risk to extreme vulnerability. Subsequent

literature suggests that Evangelicals were less likely to assess the risk of COVID-19 as highly as

other groups in the early stages of the Pandemic (Schnabel & Schieman, 2021).

  Along with EPPM, the analysis was sensitized by ritual communication theory (Carey,

2009) to explore the notion that church worship practices could now be considered health risks in

the messages being studied. Carey (2009) used religion as an analog to distinguish between

communication as message transmission and communication as ritualistic practices

encompassing sharing, participation, and fellowship. In the case of religion itself, ritual is a

direct component of the social reality in conjunction with more transmission aspects such as

sermons, teaching, and musical texts (Jennings, 1982). Facebook as a social media platform

technologically extends the ritualistic and transmissional nature of religion as individuals engage

their churches online through church and pastoral accounts enacting digital practices and

mediated messages. However, the shift to digitally mediated religious practices such as

livestreaming services could be viewed as a transmission-heavy concession to the risks of

infection during the early stage of the pandemic. The researcher looked for themes in the textual

and audio-visual content of the Facebook re-opening videos promoting the return to in-person

practices and affirming their predilection for ritual over transmission, yet in an entirely new

context where these rituals incur health risks.

Additionally, the inductive content analysis approach allowed additional conceptual

frameworks arising from the data to be incorporated (Patton, 2015). Subsequently, "security

theater" (Schneier, 2007) became another concept added to the analysis framework. Bruce

Schneier, a well-known security expert and author, coined the term in the wake of the September

11, 2001 terror attacks as he observed the level of money and resources allocated to airport

security screenings. Such performative measures were designed more to satisfy emotional needs,

consistent with EPPM's fear control measures than they were to have a material impact on the

threat (Schneier, 2007). The concept has since been applied to certain health and safety measures

in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Rappoport, 2020).

Findings

Of the 20 largest non-denominational churches in the U.S. included in this study, 18 re-

opened to in-person church services with certain restrictions in the period after the lockdown that

commenced in March through April 2020. Willow Creek Church in Chicago, IL, and North Point

Church in Alpharetta, GA, announced they would remain online only until 2021 (North Point

Community Church, 2020; Willow Creek Community Church, 2020). In all 20 cases, videos

were posted to Facebook discussing the re-opening plans or explaining the decision to remain

online. All churches in the study have been conducting online services through 2020 and plan to do so on an ongoing basis. In every case, these churches were live-streaming their church services before the pandemic with high-quality video production techniques. In some cases, services were carried by broadcast television channels and networks.

The videos' formats varied from direct messages from the lead pastors (11) to unnamed presenters (seven), often hosting a tour of the church worship facility and demonstrating how things would be when worship services resumed. The quality of the video production was generally high across these formats. However, there were four examples where video quality was less than professional and two examples where the message was improvised. The more professional-quality videos seemed to take advantage of existing video production capabilities consistent with the regular live-streaming or television broadcast of their services. Quality was gauged by considering the presence of professional lighting, camerawork, set design, and a likely scripted and practiced message delivery by the presenters.

An analysis of the visual and spoken content of these Facebook video messages yielded a number of themes with regard to the issues faced by churches in safely resuming in-person services (Table 1).

Table 1

Analysis Themes by Frequency of Reference

Video References	Themes		
	Masks	Cleaning/Sanitizing	Liability
Spoken	61	8	73[a]
Visual	39	14	0
Total References	90	22	73

[a]Spoken words and phrases referring to liability used to calculate frequency included: at-risk

people, risk, you know what's best, you're responsible, precautions, your decision, your choice,

and safe.

Mask-wearing was the most consistently referenced safety protocol, with different approaches to

requiring or requesting compliance with mask-wearing. Cleaning and sanitation were frequently

referenced subjects in the videos. There were also statements that addressed the risks of in-

person worship and interactions and whether that was a liability of the church or the individual

congregant. Overall, the analysis reveals the different ways churches are striving to manage

expectation and establish the new normal for congregations that extended from mask-wearing

practices to socially distanced seating, limited greeting and interactions, use of hand sanitizer,

temperature checks, and seating by appointment. At the same time, the promotion of in-person

services in the form of Facebook videos reveals that church organizations see online

transmission-only approaches more as stop-gap measures, showing a preference for in-person,

analog gatherings and tangible worship practices (Kim, 2020).

Theme I: Mask Mandate or Request

The most frequently discussed theme in the re-opening videos, apart from a re-opening

announcement itself, is mask-wearing and the mask protocols each church will have in place.

Masks are referenced 61 times in text and 39 times visually (Figure 1). The finding is not

surprising given the politically contentious nature of the practice during the pandemic. Church

services have been a focal point of the public conversation due to the unique nature of Christian

worship practices that include public gatherings and singing. Evangelical political views have

been sharply divided along party lines in 2020, with former President Trump and some

conservative political voices in culture positioning mask-wearing as a question of personal liberty versus a public health necessity (Achenbach & Rozsa, 2020). The result has been a growing contentiousness over masks within church circles, something some of the pastors in this study appear to be keenly aware of based on their video remarks. Churches with broad constituencies must navigate the political issue masks have become in requesting or requiring mask-wearing for in-person services.

With 18 of the churches resuming their services in a modified format, 14 videos make mention of masks, with five clearly requiring masks for people attending, and nine strongly recommending or showing staff and people in the church setting wearing them to encourage the practice. Those making the requirement plain, apply it to everyone "at all times" (Church of the Highlands, 2020, 0:45) and "you are going to be needing to wear a mask entering our facility" (Abundant Living Faith Center, 2020, 0:56), and even stating that "masks will be mandatory for everybody" (Community Bible Church, 2020, 4:31). The other churches that mention or show masks use somewhat more equivocal yet earnest requests with visual suggestions of mask-wearing, mask availability, and spoken references, such as, "Please wear face masks as much as possible" (Gateway Church, 2020, 0:39) and "If you don't have a face covering, we've got one for you" (Christ the King Community Church, 2020, 0:24), and "Facemasks available for everyone" (Christ Fellowship Church, 2020, 2:23). Some of these requests emphasize personal choice: "You are free to wear your mask and gloves" (Family Christian Center, 2020, 0:42) and "We're going to encourage that you wear a mask…we won't body slam you if you don't have a mask" (Lives Changed By Christ, 2020, 0:44).

Across the 14 churches requiring or requesting mask-wearing in their videos, a sub-theme emerged having to do with personal and social responsibility. Several messages urge their

congregants to consider their individual actions in light of the Christian principle of serving and

caring for others:

- "Out of consideration for the health and safety of others" (Gateway Church, 2020, 0:36).

- "Be concerned about people around you" (Lives Changed By Christ, 2020, 0:53)

- "In order to demonstrate love and respect for others. We'll ask everyone to wear a face

  covering" (Northview Church, 2020, 1:13).

- "Because we love our neighbor, because we love people in our city. And we want to be

  seen not as negligent, but actually cautious and careful and very thoughtful" (Community

  Bible Church, 2020, 4:21).

- "Somebody that doesn't know Jesus that feels more comfortable now, because the church

  is making the mask mandated, that maybe they would come to know Jesus" (Community

  Bible Church, 2020, 6:13).

- "That's what it means to love our neighbor" (Community Bible Church, 2020, 6:30).

This theme can be considered from the perspective of EPPM in two ways. The first is the

threat of COVID-19 infection that people perceive from attending an in-person service and the

efficacy of the mask practices at their church as portrayed in these videos. A mask requirement

has the potential to increase the perception of the efficacy of the risk response. The video

medium gives churches the potential to provide a visual way to address people's fears by

showing mask use by staff and volunteers, as well as mask availability.

The second consideration rooted in EPPM is the level of fear people may have about their

personal liberties being at odds with the principles of Christian service and sacrifice. In short,

will the fear of losing personal liberty override the dissonance of resisting the personal and social

responsibility called for in the video messages? Paradoxically for pastors and church leaders, the

risk of creating disgruntled congregants must be weighed against the risk and liability of

gathering people in large groups during the pandemic, and the desire to create a safe

environment. While EPPM's risk and efficacy assessments are operative, this theme indicates

that masks may place individuals in the same congregation direct opposition to one another

based on what each perceives is at risk—health or personal liberty. Subsequently, messages

about mask requirements or lack thereof may lead to opposite efficacy assessments. Churches

advocating for a mask requirement to attend services do so by referencing the sacrificial and

evangelistic nature of the faith. Personal liberties are positioned as secondary to the ritual

practices of gathering, collective worship, and fellowship, while masks are given religious

meaning in the scope of the mission of the church. Churches without a mask requirement lean

toward the language of personal choice and responsibility instead of religious justification.

Theme II: Worship Sanitized for Safety

As an invisible a potentially deadly illness, COVID-19 has led to new cleanliness

practices, both at home and in public places. The high apparent communicability of the virus has

led to a high degree of fear about the risks inherent in public spaces and personal contact.

Businesses, schools, and churches have adopted the new cleaning and sanitizing practices in their

facilities to allow for operations during the pandemic. Even with CDC guidelines and

recommendations, there is a degree of variability in these practices, leading to increased

uncertainty relative to efficacy in addressing the risks of contracting COVID-19 for people that

venture outside of the home.

For church organizations, communication of these performative practices can become

"security theater" (Schneier, 2007) designed to assuage the fear of the COVID-19 threat in

attending in-person church services. EPPM holds that people facing a threat where they deem

themselves vulnerable will seek information on the efficacy of the response to that threat. Scripted and visual messages about cleaning and sanitizing speak to that efficacy and may serve to assuage those concerns, even if they are more theater than reality.

Across the videos in this study, there are 22 references to practices of cleaning and sanitization with regard to safety in resuming in-person church services (Figure 2). Most of those are visual in nature, with 14 visual examples and eight scripted references to cleaning and sanitizing. The visual references tend toward showing people cleaning and sanitizing surfaces in the church space, with a few notable examples of chemical sprayers being used in meeting rooms and on seats in the auditoriums. Verbal references frequently refer to sanitizing, cleaning, and promises of safety:

- "We've sanitized the entire campus in between services. I can assure you, everything is so fresh and so clean" (Gateway Church, 2020, 1:43).

- "Every building in every campus location is continually being sanitized from top to bottom; we have pursued the highest standard of cleanliness for all of our campus locations." (Christ Fellowship Church, 2020, 1:01).

- "We have been diligently cleaning and sanitizing the sanctuary" (Cornerstone Church, 2020, 1:39).

- "Our team cleans to ensure you have a great and safe experience. We've been professionally sanitized" (Family Christian Center, 2020, 0:12).

- "And our restrooms will be sanitized every 15 minutes" (Abundant Living Faith Center, 2020, 2:26).

- "All of our seats and touch points are sanitized before every service" (Seacoast Church, 2020, 1:03).

- "Our staff and dream teamers are preparing by sanitizing and cleaning, leaving all of our facilities for a safe return" (Covenant Church, 2020, 0:08).

Throughout the pandemic, the science concerning the risks of COVID-19 transmission has shifted somewhat from surfaces to human exhalation and overall air circulation in spaces of human contact. While hand-washing is still an emphasized precaution, the primary vector of transmission has been airborne particles and proximity. Enhanced air purification is only mentioned by one church: "We have upgraded the filtration system of our H-VAC system. We have four-ply microbial treated—the highest quality filtration system we can to circulate the air" (EPIC Church International, 2020, 1:33). Another church had their cleaning and sanitizing practices certified by an outside standards organization: "First church to seek GBAC Star™ Facility accreditation. The gold standard for facility cleanliness and sanitation" (Christ Fellowship Church, 2020, 1:06). Mentioning these non-visual safety measures is another indication of performative security theater in some aspects of the videos.

The sanitization emphasis extends to the personal level with 13 additional references to hand sanitizer stations and the use of hand sanitizer. Most of these references are specific to helping people find and use hand sanitizer dispensers in the church spaces, with several visual depictions of the stations and people applying sanitizer. Unlike masks, hand sanitizer and hand-washing protocols are not addressed as something that needs to be treated carefully in light of congregational differences over the practice.

There also was no intentional connection made in the videos between sanitation practices and evangelism or worship practices. While there was the potential to cast such practices as meaningful new rituals that are folded into other aspects of in-person worship, the closest the

Facebook videos come is the visual and textual references made to creating a safe environment and what people can expect when they return to church.

Theme III: Come at Your Own Risk

As the pandemic has progressed throughout 2020, questions have been raised about churches and liability for spreading the virus upon re-opening for in-person services. The Insurance Board, a nonprofit insurer that works with a handful of denominations in the U.S., noted in a COVID-19 liability overview that churches face liability and potential legal consequences if they do not follow recommended guidelines from the CDC along with state and local health guidelines (Insurance Board, 2020). While there have been a patchwork of guidance and restrictions put in place at the state level in recent months, most church insurers are adding liability coverage, underscoring the issue for church leaders as they re-open their doors for public gatherings.

In the re-opening video messages posted to Facebook, there are 18 instances of church pastors or spokespeople addressing risk and liability in reference to people deciding to attend in-person services. In addition, there are seven references to at-risk people being asked to consider not attending services, with most of these messages asking people to continue to worship with them online (Figure 3). Most of the references made to the risks of attending in-person services placed the liability on the individual attendee with reference to personal and family responsibilities:

- "I'm just going to trust you to make a wise decision for you and your family. I think you're smart people, and you know what's best for your family" (Flatirons Church, 2020, 0:34).

- "Whether you decide to join us in person or from home this coming weekend" (Christ Fellowship Church, 2020, 3:13).

- "The first thing you got to do is decide, do I even want to come or not?" (Lives Changed By Christ, 2020, 0:23).

- "If you choose to come, great. If you choose to stay home, great" (Christ the King Community Church, 2020, 2:28).

- "And again, your call. We realize there may be a risk. And so as you come, come at your own risk" (Lives Changed By Christ, 2020, 6:04).

There also are seven references to following safety guidelines external to the church in order to express due diligence and reduce liability. Many of them name the CDC or refer to other governmental authorities:

- "We're going to follow the safety guidelines given to us by the authorities and the CDC" (Willow Creek Community Church, 2020, 1:54).

- "We're also going to be following all of the social distancing guidelines established by the communities where our churches are in" (Christ Fellowship Church, 2020, 1:58).

- "Follow the guidelines of the county where your campus is located" (Christ Fellowship Church, 2020, 2:19).

- "They're also there to ensure that we're able to be seated to comply with the CDC guidelines" (Cornerstone Church, 2020, 0:40).

- "As we follow guidelines that are given to us by the state" (Lives Changed By Christ, 2020, 4:23).

- "We're following all CDC guidelines, including social distancing, wearing masks, sanitizing, and utilizing contactless interaction" (Free Chapel, 2020, 0:18)

While less frequently referenced than elements of the other themes, messages that aim to reduce the liability of churches and invoke external authorities may work against building the trust and confidence of parishioners normally granted to pastors and church leaders. The study looked at videos from a time in which trust in public health institutions was in decline (Latkin et al., 2020). Appeals to such authoritative sources may backfire as an attempt to assuage the fears of parishioners given the information environment.

Discussion

The perceived urgency to re-open churches to in-person services in the summer and fall of 2020 after the initial wave of infections, deaths, and lockdowns was an underlying driver of creating and posting the Facebook videos in this study. As reported at the time, churches were responding to needs for congregational ministry, religious freedom concerns, and financial pressures resulting from empty pews (Kaur, 2020). The Facebook re-opening videos can be interpreted as invitations to regather in person. While the sample in this study showed several different approaches to that message, the complex and evolving information environment of the pandemic meant that church communicators had to localize and tailor their messages to their congregations against a backdrop of science disinformation, confusion, and distrust in the broader community (Belardinelli & Gili, 2022; León et al., 2022). The themes that emerged in this study through an EPPM lens highlight that overall challenge even though none of the videos directly address the information environment or attempt to challenge prevalent misconceptions.

The theme with the highest visibility in the study was mask-wearing as a requirement or request. Other videos either did not address the protocols, such as the two churches that moved their re-opening to 2021, or the topics covered in the message did not address expected safety protocols. The theme illustrates how mask-wearing laid bare the intensifying ideological

divisions within church congregations that pastors were navigating at the time (Shepherd, 2020). This also points to the ever-present potential that COVID-19 anxieties within subsets of the congregation may form an opposition between those desiring public safety measures and those concerned with personal liberty. Based on this study, it seems pastors may feel caught between these competing views. While one congregant may attribute mask requirements or visual evidence of mask-wearing to an effective risk response under EPPM, others may interpret that same evidence as a threat to their individual political ideologies. In short, different risks are being assessed, leading to different potential outcomes from viewing the videos. This creates a paradoxical challenge for church leaders in direct communication about the necessity and efficacy of their safety protocols. Where mask requirements are potentially too contentious to address directly, images of mask wearing in the videos indirectly instruct audiences through their ritual engagement of social media.

Regular engagement with the local church on social media also places information about the pandemic in a relatively new ritualistic context through the localization and personalization of the drama playing out on a national and global scale. Additionally, the video messages inviting people to return to church unintentionally position the online, socially mediated interactions and experiences of church as being less meaningful, even while they are valued for transmitting church messages to a digitally connected congregation. At the early stage of the pandemic this research covers, the push to regather indicated a lack of pastoral reflection on how congregations mediatized by digital worship under pandemic lockdown have been changed by the experience (H. A. Campbell & Dyer, 2022; H. Campbell & Shepherd, 2021).

The descriptions and depictions of cleaning and sanitizing practices in some of the videos qualify as public health "security theater" (Schneier, 2007, Para. 6) designed to communicate the

efficacy of each church organization's response to COVID-19 transmission risks. While the cleaning of surfaces and other measures has a likely positive effect in mitigating some risk of transmission, "security is also a feeling, based on individual psychological reactions to both the risks and the countermeasures" (Schneier, 2007, Para. 5). The airborne particles carrying coronavirus may be best mitigated by masks, social distancing, or participating in online services, but the concrete visual awareness of cleaning and sanitizing protocols have a larger effect on one's anxiety level. Under EPPN, such depictions speak to how congregants assess the efficacy of their church's response to the pandemic and making church attendance safe again. Yet, for some, the depictions could be emblematic of where their church diverges from their individual views of the pandemic response. On the other hand, these views on safety protocols vary widely with inconsistent logic. One more recent return-to-in-person-worship survey found that instead of both mask wearing and social distancing, most of the congregation favored either having a mask requirement without social distancing or social distancing without a mask requirement (Rothrock et al., 2021).

Another danger is that these performative elements distract people from fully embracing practices that are proven effective, such as the contentious topic of mask-wearing: "If these things divert attention and resources from the simple public health measures we all know work, and provide a false sense of security, they could actually do more harm than good" (Rappoport, 2020). Case in point, for all the emphasis on sanitization and COVID safety protocols, the risk of communal singing in worship is not addressed in any of the videos, now a high-risk ritual behavior every church engages in each time they worship in person. While livestreaming can replicate church worship to some degree, congregational singing is a crucial component of embodied religious practices for Evangelical Christians. Online streaming can replicate

preaching and provide a discarnate spectator experience. The impetus to re-open supports the notion that pastors are not satisfied with a transmission view of communication, but seek to return to the rich experience of in-person ritual practices and experiences, such as singing corporately, that are placed at the center of church worship (Kim, 2020).

The risks factors of singing are not directly engaged in any of the videos, even though there are a few instances where singing is visually depicted more as a persuasive element than informative of the risks of communal singing or what precautions the church will take to address them. Freedom to worship may be taken by some to be freedom to sing, which is the most common ritual of participatory worship in Evangelicalism. When perceived of as an issue of religious liberty, the conflict over masks restrictions could spill over into divisions within congregations, which may help explain avoidance of the topic, along with the fact that it is more difficult to ameliorate the COVID risks of collective singing.

The videos depicted Church leaders as eager to re-open, providing assurances of safety through efficacy messages and aspects of security theater in some cases; however, they stop short of taking on liability by placing the responsibility to attend on the individual and deferring to public health authorities. As with messages about masks, more promotional messages of safety and security assurance are carefully tempered by deflecting the risk of attending in-person away from the church institution. Additionally, the messages invoke national, state, and local safety guidelines as a way to externalize liability and provide some legal protection. This also pins the blame on public authorities instead of the church in cases where congregants perceive the safety restrictions to be a threat to their personal liberties. While pastors and church leaders' personal views may fall on either the side of requiring precautions or allowing more freedom, in the Facebook videos churches stay away from overtly partisan perspectives. Shifting ultimate

responsibility to individuals may be one way to attempt to avoid any perception of bias and avoid conflict. On the other hand, the five congregations requiring masks to attend worship in person are the most direct in addressing their position and offering a rationale in the videos.

While a preference for in-person worship may appear resurgent, the lack of conclusion to the pandemic with continuing waves of infections means that COVID-19 is truly "an inflection point" (Bryson et al., 2020, p. 370) that will have a transformational impact on both worship practices and churches as institutions. While blurring the lines between sacred and secular spaces physically and digitally, online livestream church attendance provides a safe option for parishioners during outbreaks while weakening ties to the local church by making competing digital options for church worship easily accessible. Livestreaming during COVID-19 has most often taken the form of a video-recorded, in-person service. For the new digitally transient congregation, their church experience is "now layered onto the home, and the experience of social media is layered onto religious services" (Bryson et al., 2020, p. 370) as these technologies have become essential facets of their everyday life. The hybridization of church, as defined by Dyer (2022), is well underway, while the corresponding decline in in-person attendance (Wang, 2022) raises concerns that the livestreaming video may increasingly consist of an in-person service on camera as an element of mise en scène for the streaming video production.

Directions for Future Research

The theme of mask-wearing as a requirement or request points to a need to study congregation members' responses to messages from their churches that concern mask-wearing and other safety protocols being required or requested for church attendance. Research is needed to determine how these messages are received and interpreted from the standpoint of EPPM's

attribution of vulnerability and efficacy. Such data could also be cross-referenced by the congregant's perspective on COVID-19 safety protocols as to whether they fear contracting COVID-19 or having their personal freedoms violated. Another avenue of research stemming from the mask-wearing theme would be to query church leaders about their experience navigating this contentious issue in their congregations, among other politicized issues as considered by Abdel-Fadil and Årsheim (2019), through large-sample quantitative research, personal interviews, and ethnographic methods. New research could also explore the potential conflict between a pastor's personal views and the policy decisions they feel they must make for their congregation.

While the study was sensitized to ritual communication in the church context both online and offline, there was nothing in the videos that addressed the risks of worship service rituals such as corporate singing or the communion sacrament. The closest the messages came was in addressing how people should greet each other without contact and maintain social distance. More research is needed to explore how church leaders and congregations understand and manage the risks of the common behaviors of Christian rituals that may spread COVID-19 more easily.

As with mask-wearing, new research could be designed to assess congregation members' responses to messages on sanitization and cleaning in the videos rooted in EPPM's appraisals of vulnerability and efficacy. As a relatively new concept for health communication researchers, the COVID-19 pandemic in church contexts elevates the "security theater" concept in importance for new research. There is certainly a significant opportunity to study and theorize further. This specific study points to a need to gain comparative data on aspects of public health "security theater" in terms of message response. This can be rooted in EPPM in terms of how such

elements impact people's assessment of the efficacy of the risk response and their anxiety

reduction. For example, one could study whether the visibility of hand sanitizer stations makes

people feel safer than having a mask requirement. Such findings would be useful in effectively

communicating about necessary safety protocols, especially when scientific evidence prioritizes

certain safety practices over others. As the hybridization of church services becomes the new

normal for parishioners, EPPM could also be useful in assessing how they make ongoing

decisions to attend in-person, stay home and watch the livestream, or even sample other

congregation's livestream programming.

The third theme arising from this study points to a need for more research into the

liability concerns of church leaders and how such concerns affect their communication with

congregants. Conversely, one could study how members of the congregation respond to

equivocality in messages from church leaders that are intended to reduce liability. Church leaders

may be challenged by the desired to generate excitement and positive regard about re-opening to

church services and the need to protect themselves and their church organization from legal

liability for the health and safety of their congregations during the pandemic.

As noted in the methods section, the sampling approach is focused on megachurches,

creating a gap in awareness of large, moderate, and small congregations that must confront the

same challenges and are engaging their parishioners using the same communication and social

media technology. At the same time, two years have passed in the pandemic timeline, and

churches may have much more experience navigating the potential conflicts. Valuable

perspectives can be gained by those probing those experiences retrospectively. Since

introduction and rollout began in late 2020, vaccinations have been politicized along the same

divide as masks wearing. When combined with the waves of the COVID-19 Delta and Omicron

variant infections, many congregants have been making renewed assessments of their risks of attending in person, while churches weigh decisions on staff and attendee vaccination requirements and safety protocols. Unlike mask wearing that is more easily construed as interfering with in-person worship rituals such as collective singing, COVID vaccination prompts many individuals to make an ideological and political assessment in an environment rife with misinformation (Romer & Jamieson, 2020). This issue has intensified among Evangelical congregations to the point the pastors are afraid to address it, even though recent research indicates religious leaders have more influence that political leaders or medical experts (Viskupič et al., 2022). For example, a pastor interviewed by *U.S. News* (Pulkkinen, 2021) indicated that while sharing his congregation's vaccination level would ease the fears of people reluctant to return to in-person worship, doing would intensify division within the congregation. Comparatively a requirement for vaccination is much more imposing, and church leaders may want to revisit their messages used to position mask-wearing as sacrificial and evangelistic to make a similar case for vaccination.

Conclusion

A thematic analysis of post-lockdown re-opening videos on Facebook from non-denominational megachurches shows that the eagerness of church leaders to re-gather their flock in person is tempered by contentious issues and potential conflict. Mask-wearing has become emblematic of the politicization of health and safety measures, making careful communication about each church's requirements or requests for mask-wearing more challenging with regard to different viewpoints within congregations. At the same time, church leaders are striving to allay congregational anxiety by portraying a safe environment for re-gathering, in some cases employing aspects of security theater in describing their cleaning and sanitizing efforts. The

enthusiastic promotion of these efforts to safely re-gather is mitigated by liability concerns over the risks that are still present for in-person church gatherings, with some messages emphasizing individual risk responsibility while externalizing liability through references to their adherence to local and federal guidelines. With the recent delta wave of infections, and resistance to vaccination and mask protocols among a sizeable percentage of Evangelical Christians, the findings of this study provide early indications of a persistent and evolving problem of managing risk, anxiety, and conflict in congregations with regard to attending church services as the nature of the pandemic and its social effects continue to evolve.

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Figures

Figure 1

Visual Reference to Masks

Note: From "Welcome Back Weekend is happening THIS SUNDAY," 2020, September 9

(https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1613441772181901). Image from public Facebook profile

and used under Fair Use.
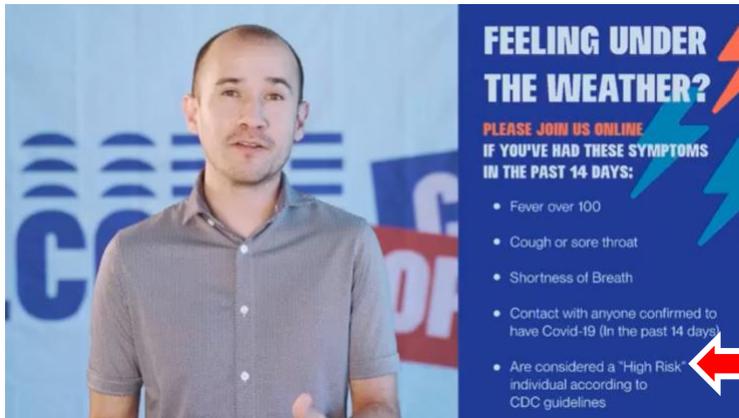
Figure 2

Visual Reference to Cleaning and Sanitizing

Note: From "Church family update," by Christ Fellowship Church, 2020, July 27

(https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=601800780762053). Image from public Facebook profile

and used under Fair Use.

Figure 3

Textual and Spoken Reference to "At-Risk" Individuals

Note: From "Church is open tour," by Abundant Living Faith Center, 2020, June 13

(https://www.facebook.com/alfcelpaso/videos/261521828253856). Image from public Facebook

profile and used under Fair Use.