

The Branding and Commodification of Christianity:

How Christian Worship Music Has Shifted the Religious Arena

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ABSTRACT:

Contemporary Worship Music has transformed the religious and cultural landscape of Christianity. In this research, careful observation is made towards the branding and commodification of Christian worship music, particularly through Hillsong Church. Furthermore, this paper investigates how Hillsong has used branding, digital media, streaming platforms, and licensing to distribute its music throughout the globe. Using the theories of Sarah Banet-Weiser, this paper considers how branding has transformed aspects of Christian worship into products that can be consumed and commercially distributed. Attention is also given to the concerns surrounding this commodification, particularly regarding accessibility, theology, and authenticity within Christian communities. Through previous scholarly literature and examples from the Contemporary Worship Music industry, this paper attempts to understand how branding and commodification have influenced the ways contemporary Christianity is experienced and practiced.

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The music was blasting, lights were strobing, and thousands of people were jumping crazily in the stadium. No, this is not a reference to the latest Justin Bieber concert, but rather a church service at the globalized church known as Hillsong. While people may not be attending this church to see Justin Bieber perform, he once did attend this church with his wife—thus proving the extent of influence and cultural capital this church maintains (Aniftos, 2021). Hillsong church has created a unique approach to Christianity, where branding tactics that are often seen in the secular world are being utilized in sacred spaces. All of this leads to the Hillsong church becoming widely successful throughout the globe, especially considering the statistics Hillsong themselves shares—they have locations in 30 countries in the world, with 150,000 weekly worshippers globally (*Fact sheet*, 2022). Despite the branding, many in the Christian community have speculated whether the Hillsong church is authentic—particularly due to its massive size (Talbot-Howard, 2018). By borrowing heavily from Banet-Weiser, this paper seeks to understand how megachurches, such as Hillsong, have used branding to commodify aspects of their worship services. particularly their music, to the public.

The Branding of Hillsong Church

Although churches such as the Hillsong church, based in Australia, has significantly influenced the Christian community, they have done so by creating a specific brand. While some of these megachurches have grown due to the music they release and others grew due to the preaching in churches, a specific brand in mind was utilized to communicate these values and approaches to the

public. Banet-Weiser reminds us that a “brand is the perception, the series of images, themes, morals, values, feelings, the essence of what will be experienced, a promise” (Ouellette et al., p. 26, 2017). It is important to consider this when attempting to understand the brand of the Hillsong church, both at the local setting and the global setting. The Hillsong church in a local setting becomes understood because the global brand of the Hillsong church is understood and accepted in much of the Christian community. A simple brand description of the Hillsong church would be a church that seeks to target younger people with contemporary music, pastors delivering topical preaching, and a laid-back approach to Christianity. Moreover, as this is such a large church, anyone may come and go as they please without being noticed—which may appeal to many people.

Moreover, it is important that these churches take consideration of the role that people who come and visit the church have in worship services. The branding involves the parishioner just as much as it involves the church. This is because it is vital for organizations to brand themselves with the person in mind, as “individuals weave their own stories” within circumstances, and people themselves must “position themselves as the central character in the narrative of the brand (Ouellette et al., p. 26, 2017). Therefore, in the instances of these megachurches, they must consider the visitors of the church and how they will experience a worship service. This becomes critical to the branding success in these megachurches, as it is what they have built their branding with.

Creating a brand goes further than simply selling items, but rather to create a brand means to sell an experience to people (Ouellette et al., 2017). This is clearly what the Hillsong church does, as the experience that they sell is the opposite of the traditional church experience, which was the hegemonic norm in Christian communities, regardless of denomination, prior to the 1980s. The

Hillsong church sells itself as being a place where people do not need to dress up, sing traditional hymns, or similar actions that characterize the traditionalism of the Christian faith.

Moreover, because of the Hillsong church's foundation as a church, much of the work that they do can be potentially viewed as commodity activism. We are reminded that "contemporary commodity activism positions political action as part of a competitive, capitalist brand culture, so that activism is reframed as realizable through supporting particular brands" (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Ultimately, this is clearly what the Hillsong church is doing when they have branded their music as a product that can be sold, and mass distributed throughout the globe. In one perspective, it can be viewed as a consumable piece of media. In another point of view, the songs from Hillsong church can also be viewed as worship songs that are sung in church services. Therefore, the lines between the capitalist and sacred works are blurred. However, it is important to recognize that using tactics such as selling religious music, art, or texts is nothing new, as the *Bay Psalm Book* was one of the first means of selling religious works for profit (McGinnis, 2023).

However, it is also important to recognize and remember that commodification, whether it be commodity activism or turning religious works and spaces into a commodity can be done by brand platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Therefore, it is important to recognize the significance that branding has on the Hillsong church. The branding of the church is one of the main attributes that determine success or failure in terms of financial profit of how people experience the church and the worship services. This is not to say that the branding is what determines the success or the failure of the church as a religious institution or as a faith-gathering location, as these attributes should be viewed in a separate lens.

A Case Study: The Commodification of Worship Music

One major aspect of the Hillsong aesthetic is the original music their band sings during the worship service. In this church, no longer are hymns sung with traditional choirs or music played on an organ, but rather electric guitars, drums, and powerful vocalists. While many enjoy the contemporary genre of the music these churches use, Hillsong also benefit from it as many of the songs are widely distributed and used in smaller churches throughout the globe. In fact, the Contemporary Worship Music genre has become an industry that makes considerable money for churches, as the Bethel church which is a megachurch in Redding, California, has sold the rights to a package of songs for \$900,000.00 in 2020 (*Publishing royalties: Contemporary christian + worship*, n.d.). Although this may sound astonishing for such a niche genre of music, the fact is that this is a growing genre among people—with over 37 percent of the market share of the music industry in 2022 (Rys, 2023). As a result, churches are benefitting considerably from creating music for their congregations, but also for the distribution of these songs throughout the globe.

Although these churches once distributed their music on cassette tapes, then CD's, followed by mp3s, many of these churches have arranged deals with record companies that allow them to publish their music on platform such as Spotify and Apple Music. Moreover, it is precisely this history of relationships between physical copies of music files to streaming that has allowed for the wide distribution of Hillsong church's music—which is all part of their branding tactics (Zantal-Wiener, 2017). Moreover, many would argue that it is precisely these technologies—those of media and communication—that enable these churches to create a unique brand that sees wide success across the globe, in juxtaposition to the smaller churches that serve local communities (Ouellette et al., 2017).

Without these forms of technology, many of these megachurches would have remain localized and not functioning in a global sense, albeit, they probably would have remained as bigger churches in their local areas.

In fact, many attribute the success of churches like Hillsong with the success of their music departments. Although the preaching in these churches is enjoyed by the parishioners, the music has captivated the attention of the globe, both with individual people and other smaller churches. While many of these churches will gain profits from having their songs published on platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music, there is additional financial incentive for churches to release these songs. Many smaller churches will sing these songs during their worship services. However, for members of these churches to sing the songs, these churches display the lyrics on a screen through a projector for the congregation, resulting in the need for a Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) license (McGinnis, 2023). This license pays for the royalties of the song. In fact, a recent report indicated that \$100,000.00 a year could come to the authors of Contemporary Worship Music through the Christian Copyright Licensing International license (McGinnis, 2023). Therefore, this becomes an addition means for megachurches to secure funding and generate revenue, particularly on a global sense.

However, this significant source of revenue for churches, which is being generated through the Christian Copyright Licensing International licenses is not surprising for some, as the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the number of overall churches livestreaming their services (McGinnis, 2023). Therefore, because many of the smaller churches were obligated to livestream, they needed to purchase add on licenses to sing those songs written by bands of the Hillsong Church and similar churches.

Therefore, while many of the smaller churches were forced to pay higher costs for licenses during the pandemic, the larger churches were afforded more income as not only were their services livestreamed, but they were also receiving royalties from the smaller churches that were incorporating their songs in worship services. Had churches decided not to incorporate livestreaming to conduct a worship service during the pandemic, one could argue that the members of the church would have sought after other churches that would provide these services to people. Therefore, to purchase a more costly livestream was not only a consideration, if churches did not do this, they most likely would have dissolved as parishioners would seek other churches that would provide the services online. As a result, not only does the Hillsong brand promote the church's growth of people, but it also promotes the music which helps subsidize the costs necessary to run such a large organization.

As previously mentioned, to maintain a brand to the eyes of the public, it is required that companies use communication and media technologies (Ouellette et al., 2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that many of these larger churches used their branding and increased their revenue through channels of music and licensing. Moreover, it could almost be anticipated or expected that this would have occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. People were obligated to remain at home and social distance, and as a result, were left with significant down time that allowed them to increasingly explore and engage on online platforms (Pandya & Lodha, 2021). Therefore, access to Hillsong church music, particularly during times of trouble such as the COVID-19 pandemic, may have alleviated people's anxiety and stress during these times.

Nevertheless, while branding has played a significant role in developing Christian music into a commodity, it is important to remember that branding has significant differences from a commodity,

as a commodity means “to make commercial something that wasn’t previously thought of as a product” (Ouellette et al., 2017). Since this genre’s inception in the 1980’s, the industry has been one of the fastest growing areas of music, with sales over 500 million dollars from 2010 to 2013 (Gutierrez, 2015). Prior to the 80s, one may have barely thought to have the idea to commodify this area of Christian worship; however, it is the branding of some churches—specifically the Hillsong church—that has contributed to the significant growth. The branding of the Hillsong church has enabled them to dominate the Contemporary Worship Music genre. This branding, that consists of loud, concert-like music, has engaged with many people throughout the globe. As a result, they have successfully managed to release and sell music that is being distributed through online streaming platforms. Although the Hillsong church is not like the average community church, it does also serve those communities by providing the music that is used in worship services. Because of the digital-orientation this church maintains, many of these areas the church involves themselves in have grown significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic because of the limited access of in-person church, thus resulting in more digitally oriented people. Given their long history with media communications, the Hillsong church was well poised to position themselves to see success during the pandemic. Overall, the commodification of worship music has resulted in a high-revenue industry that generates significant amount of profit for churches, artists, and those who buy the rights of such media.

Hillsong seems to have reached a point where their worship services and the music they sell has become indistinguishable, which is similar to what Banet-Weiser describes what would happen. Banet-Weiser says “...there is also a continuing blurring of distinctions between and within “products” and “services” so that the dynamic of commercial exchange is increasingly understood within a

framework of affective relationships, engagement, and sociality” (Ouellette et al., 2017). This is clearly what has occurred in the instance of the Hillsong church. They have commodified their music that is used in their worship services, and as a result, their worship services have become indistinguishable from their products. Nevertheless, the church still claims to be fulfilling their mission through these new approaches, but these new approaches are given the label as a new method of evangelism.

Concerns of Commodification in Religious Arenas

On top of selling their music, the bands of the Hillsong church and other similar churches such as Bethel Church and Elevation Church travel the globe and go on tour to perform in large arenas. Similarly, to their secular counterpart, many of these shows will sell out, and unfortunately, these shows may see significant inflated resale, with one church band have a \$1,000-plus resale ticket listing for front row seats (McGinnis, 2023). Therefore, the question of accessibility to such performances becomes a factor to consider. How does accessibility to Christian music affect how people practice their faith? Are only those who can afford tickets those who can worship collectively as churches have done historically?

While many would argue that the smaller churches still offer a place for people to worship and practice their faith, it seems somewhat bizarre that people would need to pay significant money to attend such shows, particularly if the show is sold out. Moreover, this is a circumstance that is somewhat new in modern times, as faith-based organizations are often nonprofit; therefore, they seek to provide accessibility to all. Moreover, even people in the Christian community question how this affects people, as these successful tours “illustrates the increased blurring of the distinction between performative Christian music (like radio hits) and worship music” (McGinnis, 2023).

Moreover, there are also concerns from theologians that people are forgetting the reality of their faith and welcoming a capitalistic version of Christianity. A professor at Asbury Theological Seminary worries that the “people are getting their theology from music” and because of music driven by the industry and market forces, they are receiving a false impression, or a limited view of doctrines, presented by the Christian faith (McGinnis, 2023). Therefore, many traditional churches uphold the practice of singing hymns to ensure that the songs that are being sung in worship services that are doctrinally true, intentional, and an accurate representation of the Bible; however, proponents of Contemporary Worship Music argue that the contemporary songs gain profits only if they are theologically sound, as pastors must select them (McGinnis, 2023). Regardless, of whether the songs used in contemporary Christian songs are theologically sound or not, the use of them in sacred spaces is disrupting the Christian communities. Many pastors are now faced with the task of determining if a particular song is appropriate simply because it is played on the radio instead of being printed in a hymnal. A major difference in the commodification of Christian contemporary music is that traditional songs were commodified and sold to churches, as each visitor needed a hymnal. However, nowadays, they have commodified and sold the music to individual person instead of churches. If anything, this truly represents the evangelical approach to Christianity, releasing the power of knowledge from the religious leaders and disseminating it among the people of the church, as which is what happened during the Protestant Reformation.

Conclusion

Overall, the commodification of Christian-based works seems to cause disruption among the community. In one instance, Christian artists and influencers are pleased to see that their works are

becoming popular and seeing success. However, in another sense there is a question of how does commodifying a faith impact its purpose in the community. As previously mentioned, to sell Christian music, artwork, and merchandise can be viewed as a means of evangelism and therefore, many people who support such missions would be more than glad to participate in the transactions. However, it is this idea, which has truly captivated the Christian consumers perspective. It is this idea that is the crux of the brand identity that many evangelical Christians maintain in the act of commodifying the many aspects of their faith. Therefore, the increased participation of selling Christian works—particularly music—has seen an increase among artists because of this reason (Rys, 2023). The author of this paper does not attempt to determine whether this is a good or bad choice for the Christian community; however, this paper simply sought to analyze these details of the commodification of Christian culture.

The importance of branding of churches, and creating an experience that feels genuine, regardless of the size of the church, has played a considerable role in the commodification of Christianity. Banet-Weiser reminded us several times throughout this paper of the importance of branding and the considerable impact the results that branding has on commodifying any area of contemporary life. Ultimately, it is the success of this branding that has helped in the success of the Contemporary Worship Music genre. With figures that appear to be continuously rising in that genre, it is necessary for churches to maintain their brand. Uncontrollable circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, also seemed to have positively impacted the Contemporary Worship Music genre, as more people were forced to engage with church services through online technology. This helped share the music genre to more people, as people sought encouragement and support from faith institutions during the pandemic.

However, while many of these churches find success in the Contemporary Worship Music industry, other continuously express their concern for the future of the Christian faith. Regardless of whether the concerns are simply hesitations of a faith to approach societies in a new way, or whether they believe it will taint the authenticity of the faith, there are many who are in support of this movement of commodifying the Contemporary Worship Music genre for the sake of providing additional revenue to pursue additional missions of the church. Ultimately, as the church continues to function in a late-stage capitalist society, they will continue to face challenges and questions of how to engage with capitalism, and ultimately, they will need to come to a conclusion on how they wish to engage with it. Regardless, it is vital to recognize the impact that branding and commodification has left on the church, and the impacts that are currently being made within the Christian community.

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