

## Exploring the Impact of Social Media on the Religious and Spiritual Beliefs of Emerging Adults

Mark Ehlebracht – January 2020

Electronic and social media is changing the way people, organizations, and communities communicate and interact with each other. The statistics are remarkable. The internet has 4.2 billion users and there are 3.03 billion active social media users. Internet users have an average of 7.6 social media accounts, social media users grew by 121 million between the second and third quarters of 2017 (that's 1 every 15 seconds), and Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp handle sixty billion messages a day.<sup>1</sup> Facebook, originally designed to connect students at Harvard University, now has more than 200 million users who upload 850 million photos and eight million videos every month.<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada reports that nearly all of Canadians use the Internet every single day, with the province of Alberta having the highest percentage of Internet users, and that 76% of all Canadians own a Smartphone, 71% own a laptop, and 54% own a tablet.<sup>3</sup> Further, when asked how they perceive technology, 77% of Canadians feel that it helps them communicate with others, 66% said that it saves time, 52% use the Internet to make more informed decisions, 36% feel the Internet helps them to be more creative, and over 60% of Canadians aged 15 – 64 believe that life is better as a result of technology use.<sup>4</sup> By any account, those statistics are worthy of paying attention to, especially as they relate to how we experience community and how the culture of community can be shaped.

Paul McClure notes that despite the immense popularity, there may be unintended consequences to the use of internet technology.<sup>5</sup> Pornography and gambling industries have increased and internet use may underwrite antisocial behavior.<sup>6</sup> Declining participation of the younger generation in the Christian church is already well documented (Smith and Denton 2005; Smith and Snell 2009)<sup>7</sup> as is “the reliance on one’s own conscience to guide behaviour rather than religious rules, the importance of friends and family, and the increasing significance of social media and popular culture (Catto 2014; Beaudoin 2000).”<sup>8</sup> Based on a literature review, despite the abundance of research on religious and spiritual beliefs, and social networking and our well-

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<sup>1</sup> Kit Smith, “121 Amazing Social Media Statistics and Facts” BrandWatch.com (October 2, 2018), accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/amazing-social-media-statistics-and-facts/>

<sup>2</sup> Ameer Khan, “Ethical Issues in Social Networking” (October 2015):3, doi: 10.13140/RG.2.1.4289.6080, accessed January 18, 2018. Referenced in TH664H, Professional Ethics, Winter 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada, “The Internet and Digital Technology,” Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, November 14, 2017, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2017032-eng.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> P.K. McClure, “Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age: The Effects of Social Networking Sites on the Religious Beliefs of Emerging Adults,” *Sociological Perspectives* 59, no. 4 (2016): 818, doi:10.1177/0731121416647361.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Catto, “What Can We Say About Today's British Religious Young Person? Findings from the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme,” *Religion* 44.1 (2013): 5, doi:10.1080/0048721X.2013.844740

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

being,<sup>9</sup> limited research has explored how these might converge. Thus, it is critical to explore the connection between participation in social networking and a person's religiosity and spirituality.<sup>10</sup> Further, exploration of said connections through the lenses of identity, the philosophy of being, power, knowledge, semiotics, decision making, and theology are paramount.

As a PhD candidate at Martin Luther University College, I am excited to formally begin my research this year alongside a superb faculty and staff. My study will explore participants' belief systems and begin to understand how social media disrupts, promotes, or interacts with religious and spiritual beliefs. This study will explore the impact of social media on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults in Canada.

This will provide some context for faith communities, including in the ELCIC, to think through how to shift behaviors to deal appropriately with social media and online interaction while tending to the spiritual and religious needs of peoples in addition to helping navigate how to apply traditional rules to new technologies.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately I hope that this research will add to the developing conversation about our changing contexts and how faith communities might engage a particular and vital demographic amidst rapid social and technological change.

I value continuing education immeasurably and I am grateful to have the full support of the congregation that I serve; I could not do this otherwise. In a recent letter, my Board noted that "we have already benefitted from the fruits of this time of learning and we look forward to continuing to support people in ministry, lay and ordained, as we journey towards becoming a more fully missional church." I am mindful that every time a lecture, presentation, or research project comes to life in my current program and others, it bears the mark of generous supporters, faith communities like St. Peter's in Kitchener, and grant programs such as the ELCIC's *Advanced Study Grant* and stands as a testament to a people of faith and vision who empower and enable people like me to continue with research that is relevant to our common life. I look forward to sharing my research with you. I am filled with hope and excitement and hope that you are too.

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<sup>9</sup> Initial findings indicate this is the research of Bargh and McKenna 2004; Hampton et al. 2011; Kross et al. 2013; Nie and Ebring 2002; Wellman 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Initial findings indicate this is the research of Beaudoin, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Beaudoin, 2010.