EXPLORING THE USE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF MEDIATED COMMUNICATION BY CHURCHES

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies

School of Professional Studies

Gonzaga University

Under the Supervision of Dr. Alexa Dare

Under the Mentorship of Dr. Carolyn Cunningham

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

By

Christine Syptak Hinrichs

December 2011
ABSTRACT

In an era categorized by a decline in traditional religious participation, Protestant church leaders in the United States are utilizing computer mediated forms of communication to attract and retain members. Research shows, however, that many churches lack the resources or knowledge to communicate effectively online. To aid in a greater understanding of webbed communication tools, this thesis looks at the ability of dialogic mediated communication to contribute to satisfaction with communication in the church as well as overall organizational satisfaction and involvement. Rooted in the phenomenological tradition and in relationship management theory, the study focuses on mediated communication as a tool to build organizational-public relationships and achieve organizational growth. Results indicate that while digital communication use by churches does not directly affect church attendance rates, it does contribute to a healthy relationship between the church and its attendees, creating positive perceptions of the organization and resulting in positive relational outcomes, including satisfaction. Further research is needed regarding how webbed communication tools can best build church-attendee relationships as well as in the role digital communication plays in attracting visitors to a religious service.
SIGNATURE PAGE

We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

[Signature]
Thesis or Project Director

[Signature]
Faculty Mentor

[Signature]
Faculty Reader

Gonzaga University
MA Program in Communication and Leadership Studies
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION
- Statement of the Problem 4
- Definition of Terms 6
- Organization of Remaining Chapters 7

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW
- Philosophical Assumptions 8
- Theoretical Foundations 9
- The Literature 11
- Rationale 18
- Research Questions 20

## CHAPTER III: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY
- Scope of the Study 24
- Methodology 25

## CHAPTER IV: THE STUDY
- Introduction 34
- Data Analysis 34
- Results of the Study 35
- Discussion 48

## CHAPTER V: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS
- Limitations of the study 53
- Recommendations for Further Study 54
- Conclusions 55

## REFERENCES

## APPENDIXES
- Mentor Agreement Form 61
- Survey Instrument 62
Chapter I: INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Statement of the Problem

Over the last few decades, a significant trend has emerged within the United States: a trend of declining participation and membership in churches and other religious organizations. While 76% of Americans self-identify as “Christian,” they are increasingly turning away from traditional concepts of organized religion. The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey compared data gathered in 1990, 2001 and 2008 and found the greatest growth occurred in the portion of the population that did not list or refused to reveal a religious identification (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009).

Church attendance, along with the level of importance placed on belonging to a religious community, continues to decrease as well (Campbell, 2004; Owen, 2006). While one recent Gallup poll showed that about 42% of Americans attend religious services in a given week, another survey conducted by Hadaway and Marler (2005) placed weekly attendance levels at about 21% of the United States population. Denominational identity has seen the steepest decline as mainline Christian churches struggle to maintain market share. Findings indicate that more Americans are choosing no religious identity or a more generic “non-denominational Christian” identity. Other non-Christian religious groups appear to be growing as a proportion to the population but at a slow pace (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009).

In an effort to combat this trend, many church organizations are attempting to reach people through the Internet. The 2006-2007 National Congregations Study found that 74% of those polled attended a church that had a website (Tropf & Moore, 2010). More churches are turning to social networking tools as well. According to a study commissioned by LifeWay
Research, of 1,003 Protestant churches polled, 47% used Facebook. Larger churches and churches near population centers were more likely to use the social networking tool (Roach, 2011).

Current research, however, indicates that churches are struggling with how to use communication technology effectively (Tropf & Moore, 2010). Church websites often suffer from poor design (Dolan, 2007) and are underutilized (Smith, 2007). Limited research has focused on how to effectively use available technology. As Tropf and Moore (2010) point out, if churches wish to remain relevant and sustain existence, it is vital to understand and effectively use technology as a communication tool.

**Importance of the Study**

Given that the Internet has become deeply imbedded in the lives of Americans, digital communication tools have become widely used by individuals and organizations alike. These mediated forms of communication have changed how Americans communicate with one another and how they define community. Research within business organizations indicates that use of online communication tools enhances organizational communication, collaboration and organizational growth (Santra & Giri, 2009). Within the role of public relations, computer mediated communication has created new ways for organizations to build relationships and communicate with various publics.

Use of CMC to achieve goals within religious organizations, however, has not fully been explored. Most of the existing data regarding online communication by religious organizations has focused on the descriptive – what types of CMC are currently being used and for what purposes (Baab, 2008; Barna, 2008; Caswell, 2007; Cheong et al., 2008; Roach, 2011; Sturgill,
2004; Tropf & Moore, 2010). Few researchers have explored how use of digital communication
technologies can aid churches in relationship building with current and prospective attendees.

This study will explore the use and effectiveness of computer mediated communication
by churches. While all religious groups in the United States face the challenge of responding to a
declining emphasis on religion, given that the majority of Americans self-identify as “Christian”,
this thesis will explore Protestant Christian churches in the United States. Based on extant
research regarding CMC and organizational growth, I hypothesize that when used in an effective
manner, church use of digital communication technologies will contribute to a growing, active
church.

**Definitions of Terms Used**

**Relationship Management** – A perspective in Public Relations research that places emphasis on
the relationship between the organization and its publics. The goal of this approach is to build
relationships to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes (Ledingham, 2003).

**OP-R** – An abbreviation for Organizational-Public Relationship. It refers to the relationship that
exists between an organization and its various publics. Measuring this relationship has become
important to understanding the value of communication efforts by organizations (Hon & Grunig,
1999).

**Dialogic Communication** – Communication in which a relationship exists. The goal of such
communication is relationship (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Dialogue involves the concepts of
mutuality, propinquity, risk, empathy and commitment (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Engaging in two-
way symmetrical communication allows for dialogue to take place.

**Computer Mediated Communication** – Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) refers to all
forms of communication that take place via networked computers (Santra & Giri, 2009). These
forms of communication either take place at the same time, in a synchronous mode where individuals respond to messages in real time, or in an asynchronous mode, where parties do so on their own time without receiving an immediate response. Common forms of CMC include websites, email, Facebook, text messaging, and video chat.

Social Media – Forms of digital communication that involve collaboration and social interaction. Social media is often used with the term ‘Web 2.0’, referring to a shift in digital media from an information distribution model to an emphasis on interactivity and user-driven content (Cheong, 2011). The term primarily refers to applications that allow for the creation and exchange of content, such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

The remaining chapters provide an exploration into the effectiveness of digital communication for church organizations. Chapter two is a literature review divided into four sections. The first section explicates a relationship management approach to organizational interactions with various publics, the theoretical foundation on which this study is built. The second section describes the literature that has already been written about digital communication and religious organizations. The rationale is explained in the third section. The fourth section describes how the research questions were developed and the hypotheses that resulted from these questions. Chapter three details the quantitative methods used in this study and the survey construct. Chapter four presents the results and includes a discussion of the findings regarding mediated communication and relationship building in church organizations. Finally, chapter five focuses on the limitations of conducting such a study and suggests areas for future research.
Chapter II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Philosophical Assumptions

Communication is an inherent part of who we are as humans. Communication allows us to interact with others and, in doing so, gain understanding of the world around us. This understanding, combined with our experiences and influences, establishes a worldview – a specific lens through which we see the world. This worldview continues to evolve and expand as we expose ourselves to new experiences and develop relationships with others. Although effective communication takes effort, it can lead to deeper relationships and greater mutual understanding. It is through these relationships, built on a foundation of intentional communication, that we are inspired to positively impact our world.

The idea that personal and relational growth is possible and essential to the study of communication derives from the phenomenological tradition of communication theory (Craig, 1999). This tradition acknowledges the consequentiality of communication (relationships), while emphasizing dialogue and the importance of building authentic human relationships. Drawing from the works of Martin Buber and Carl Rogers, among others, communication is theorized as experience of otherness. Interactions with others allow us to experience both commonalities and differences. Through these interactions we learn to treat one another as persons and not things. In this tradition, dialogue is the ideal form of communication. This dialogue satisfies the basic human need for companionship and community.

The phenomenological tradition has influenced researchers interested in the relationships between organizations and their publics and how communication can inform and impact these relationships. Specifically within the field of public relations, it has helped bring about a shift in perspective – from communication as a means to manage public opinion to an emphasis on the organization and its publics as co-creators of meaning and the importance of the relationship between the two (Botan & Taylor 2004; Bruning & Ledingham, 1998; Ledingham, 2003).
Theoretical Foundations

Relationship Management Theory

This emphasis on the relationship between organizations and publics has become known as the relationship management perspective, with the goal of public relations being to build and sustain relationships to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes (Ledingham, 2003). The perspective is rooted in interpersonal relationship theory and applies interpersonal relationship principles to organization-public relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Waters, Friedman, Mills, & Zeng, 2011). The relational approach was first advocated for in a conference paper by Ferguson (1984), however it was several years before the idea became a part of public relations theory (Botan, 2004).

The definition of organization-public relationships was explored by Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997), who argued that the development of a relationship is a process of mutual adaptation and response. Building on this idea, Ledingham (2003) offered a theory of relationship management, which states: “Effectively managing organization-public relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics” (p. 190). The impact of public relations, then, is measured by the strength of the organization-public relationship. It is the state of the relationship that can predict public perceptions and behaviors and it is the relationship that impacts the satisfaction a consumer will experience with an organization (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998). Thus the focus becomes the behavioral outcomes of the relationship (Ledingham, 2003; Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Ledingham (2003) asserts that it is this relationship perspective that can clarify the role of communication within the function of an organization and provide a process for determining
whether goals have been attained. While building mutually beneficial relationships involves more than communication alone, communication is a strategic tool in the building and maintenance of organization-public relationships. The importance of communication lies in its ability to “impact the achievement of relationship objectives” (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000, p. 59).

The invention of digital communication technologies has impacted many aspects of organizational life, including organization-public relationships. While vast amounts of information lie at our fingertips and the methods for communicating with others are numerous, this does not necessarily result in deep relationships and better communication. Indeed digital communication technology is often seen as a poor substitute for physical human interaction. Still, in organizational research the use of mediated communication tools has been shown to increase organizational communication, collaboration, idea generation, and organizational growth (Santra & Giri, 2009).

The idea that digital technologies can be used as a communication tool to achieve relationship objectives can be traced to the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. This model, one of four public relations models developed by Grunig and Hunt, emphasizes dialogue and two-way communication as imperative to organizational success (as cited in Smith, 2007). Because feedback is part of the process, this model is more likely to result in balanced communication (Adria, 2005).

Building on this idea, Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) argued that the Internet provides an ideal location for creating dialogue and building organization-public relationships. Beyond using the web as simply another vehicle for information dissemination, they saw the potential for engaging in dialogue and a focus on mutual understanding and benefit for organizations and their publics. According to Naude, Fronman and Atwood (2004), it is the interactivity of the web that
leads to relationship building and dialogue creation. Interactive messages are available on demand, consist of multiple information follows, and lead to a richer communicative experience. Additionally, this medium affords more opportunities for resolving problems, addressing needs and collaboration. To assist organizations in fully utilizing the capabilities of the Internet, Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) proposed five principles for organizations wishing to engage in relationship building via the Internet. These include a dialogic loop (allows for audience feedback), usefulness of information (information must be of some value to viewer), generation of return visits (include elements that encourage repeat visits), ease of interface (easy to understand and use), and retention of visitors (only include essential links to outside sites).

This thesis will approach the use of digital communication by churches from this relational perspective. As use of digital technologies by both individuals and organizations has increased rapidly over the last couple of decades, the need for research to understand the use and impact of these technologies has increased as well. This thesis will bridge the gap in information about the role of effective CMC in relationship building for churches and other non-profit religious organizations attempting to communicate online.

**The Literature**

**A Wired Culture**

Digital technology has become an integral part of society in the United States. According to a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 77% of American adults report being Internet users (Rainie et al., 2011). While Internet use is more prevalent among young people, every age segment is becoming more reliant on this medium (Barna, 2009). Mainstream technologies, identified as Internet activities used by at least half of all computer users at least once per week, include email and web searches. Among those under the age of 43, text
messageing and maintaining a social network page, such as Facebook, are considered mainstream (Barna, 2009). Other technology uses include listening to podcasts, blogging, downloading music online, making online purchases, streaming video content, and subscribing to news services or RSS feeds.

Organizations have adopted use of digital technologies to aid in their communication efforts as well. These technologies serve to facilitate communication within and among organizations, coordinate work processes, manage knowledge and provide a platform for strategic use of such technologies (Conrad & Poole, 2005). In addition, these technologies can aid in an effective communication environment that ultimately contributes to organizational effectiveness (Taylor, 1997).

The Church

Hadaway and Marler (2005) estimate that there are approximately 331,000 religious congregations in the United States, including roughly 300,000 Protestant, 22,000 Catholic and 12,000 non-Christian congregations. According to the 2006 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, there are approximately 216 Christian denominations, along with a number of churches that do not consider themselves affiliated with any denomination (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2006).

Protestant Christian churches in the United States are a part of the worldwide Church, the title often given to refer collectively to all individuals who identify themselves as followers of Christ. Although local churches within the United States differ in size, location, and denomination and may differ slightly in beliefs and goals, the overarching mission of the Church remains consistent. The Lausanne Movement, a movement of thousands of Christian leaders from around the world, recently published an article on the mission of the global Church. “The
church exists to worship and glorify God for all eternity and is commissioned by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in the transforming mission of God within history” (Tearfund Statement of Faith as cited in Lausanne Theology Working Group, 2010).

In order to help accomplish this mission, local church bodies have been established. These church congregations offer a sense of belonging and community for members, while providing avenues for worship, teaching, and evangelism. Gallup’s 2007 poll of Protestant Christians who attend church services at least monthly found that the most important reason for attending was for “spiritual growth and guidance” followed by “community”, “keeps me grounded” and “to worship God” (Newport, 2007).

The Evolution of Church Computer Mediated Communication

The Church by its very nature is communicative. For the last 2000 years, the Church has been using various communication mediums to promote the message of Christ. While many churches have embraced computer mediated communication technologies, others have resisted (Babb, 2008). Whereas churches have historically not been categorized as “trend-conscious”, the nature of online communication is one of constant evolution and change (Dolan, 2007).

In the early days of CMC, many church leaders feared that the Internet would appeal to those looking for alternatives to conventional religion. They worried that individuals would use the Internet to supplant traditional religious ties and be lured away from local churches, losing a sense of community and creating an inauthentic faith experience (Campbell, 2004).

In her 2004 study, Campbell found that individuals use the Internet to supplement, not supplant, current religious practices. Indeed, online spiritual exploration is increasing. Sixty-four percent of Internet users have accessed the Internet for religious purposes (Hoover et al., 2004). The Pew Internet & American Life Project also found that the Internet provides opportunities for
interaction outside of a formal religious setting. Rather than seek alternatives to religion online, individuals are using the web to personally express faith: reading and writing blogs, participating in religious forums and downloading podcasts to enhance their beliefs.

Concerns over the effects of online technology on the church reflect a centuries old debate. Each technological communication evolution or revolution has, to some extent, changed the nature and practice of the Church. The development of the printing press and moveable type assisted in putting the Bible in the hands of laymen and helped usher in the Protestant Reformation (Armfield & Holbert, 2003). It challenged current authority structures and led to a change in the participation of church rituals (Lamoureux, 2007). The introduction of radio and particularly television changed the nature of religion as well. Media assumed the role of the Church – providing a sense of community and making sense of the world (Curran, 2002). To feel a connection to society and fulfill social needs, one simply had to turn on the television (Caswell, 2007). Religion became a cultural resource rather than a critical component of life (Caswell, 2007; Lamoureux, 2007).

The decreasing relevance of the Church in society perhaps contributed to the decline in church attendance, particularly among mainline denominations. Whether the Internet will continue this trend, or whether it can be used to reach individuals in new ways is yet to be determined. Studies of the effects of this technological revolution on religious organizations have yielded mixed results. Religion on the Internet has contributed to a destabilization of authority relations (Lamoureux, 2007). It has challenged traditional concepts of religious community and changed relationship patterns (Campbell, 2004). At the same time, it has helped religious groups stay connected. According to Cheong, Poon, Huang & Casas (2009), it adds to a sense of community and contributes to a more participatory process.
Religion Online

Current literature has conceptualized online religious activity as either *religion online* or *online religion* (Smith, 2007; Cheong, et al., 2009; Lamoureux, 2007). Online religion focuses on the individual activities and the interpersonal religious interaction on the web (Cheong, et al., 2008; Cheong, et al., 2009) while religion online refers to attempts by organizations to provide religious information, services or communication online (Cheong, et al., 2009; Smith, 2007). Religious activities on the web typically fall into one of these two categorizations, although some activities involve a combination of these two approaches (Lamoureux, 2007). For the purposes of examining the effectiveness of church use of digital communication tools, this thesis will explore religion online.

Communication technologies and religion have the ability to create meaning, shape relationships and form community. Not only is religion online an avenue for transmitting information, it communicates experiences in a way that engages multiple senses (Cheong, et al., 2009). Church leaders are finding that the Internet provides additional opportunities for connecting with members and for encouraging relationships between church members (Tropf & Moore, 2010). A survey of web use by churches in 2000 found that 83% of churches and temples believed that Internet usage had a positive effect on congregational life (Campbell, 2004). Churches and other religious organizations use many forms of online communication including email blasts, podcasts, live chats, websites, online photo albums, and blogs to reach current and potential members (Throop, 2007; Tropf & Moore, 2010).

While most organizations now consider a website a necessity (Smith, 2007), the purpose organizations ascribe to their websites varies widely. A church website can support the local church, extend ministry opportunities, and communicate the gospel. It can also provide
information to visitors and improve internal communication (Sturgill, 2004). Churches use websites to keep current members involved and to attract new visitors (Baab, 2008).

Much of the available research on religious communication online has focused on the functions of church websites. Sturgill (2004) found that the primary function of church websites was for providing organizational information. A secondary function was evangelism. The type of information most commonly provided was that of the church’s address and service times. Sturgill’s content analysis of 251 Southern Baptist Churches indicated that websites often provided information similar to that of a telephone book or newspaper advertisement. The majority of sites used the web as a one-way communication vehicle and did not make use of interactive features.

Tropf & Moore (2010) expanded this body of research by doing a content analysis on church websites from a variety of denominations. Their results reinforced Sturgill’s findings that the purpose of websites is to promote the church as an organization and attract visitors. While few churches used their website in a social networking function, non-denominational churches had the highest concentration of churches that provided organizational information, as well as the highest concentration of churches that incorporated a social networking function.

Cheong, et al.’s (2009) content analysis of Protestant Christian organization websites in Singapore highlights the multifunctionality of a church webpage. The authors found that and 89% used the site to share information about services, 81% promoted religious programs, 80% of churches posted information regarding organizational background, and 77% provided information about denominational beliefs. Websites were also used to explain church history, provide location information and maps, and direct viewers to community programs. Additionally, some of the sites contained podcasts and/or webcasts, an online photo gallery and
an interactive online forum. In a few organizations, the church pastor had a personal blog linked to the website.

Even fewer studies have focused on the use of other forms of online communication by churches. Facebook provides another avenue for churches to connect with individuals, both inside and outside the church (Throop, 2007). A Lifeway Research survey found that among churches with social networking tools, such as Facebook, 73% used them to interact with the congregation, 70% to distribute news and 52% to foster member-to-member interaction. Sixty-two percent of churches used them to interact with individuals outside the church congregation. Curtis Simmons, marketing vice president at Fellowship Technologies, believes “Social networking tools have become an integral part of most people’s daily lives and relationships. If churches desire to connect with their congregation and community in meaningful ways, then they need to establish a strategy for actively engaging in the social media conversation” (as cited in Roach, 2011, p. 1).

While use of Internet communication technologies is widespread, research indicates that usage far outweighs an understanding of how to use these communication technologies effectively or the ability to do so. In fact many churches do not make use of any interactive features available online (Sturgill, 2004). Smith’s (2007) exploration of nonprofit religious organization websites indicated that organizations often viewed their website as a support to printed material. Site creation and maintenance was left to volunteers and site hits were not tracked or analyzed. This mirrors Cheong, et al.’s (2009) findings that church leaders perceive the Internet as a communication medium suitable for information dissemination.

This failure to take advantage of the Internet as an interactive dialogic communication tool extends beyond religious organizations. McAllister-Greve (2007) examined public relations
practitioner perceptions of Kent and Taylor’s (1998, 2002) principles of webbed dialogue and found that websites are often poorly used dialogic tools. In her survey of New Jersey community college public relations directors, McAllister-Greve found that while the majority of practitioners agreed it was necessary to offer the dialogic principles proposed by Kent and Taylor, most did not offer the principles deemed important. Reasons for this include the fact that many practitioners did not receive sufficient technical training, conceptual training, monetary support, or did not have sufficient time to devote to web activities.

The challenges to finding relevant research regarding religion online include the short-shelf life of findings and the exploratory nature of much of the research. Sample sizes are often small and results cannot be generalized to a larger audience. More research is needed to assist churches in understanding the use and implications of digital technologies.

**Rationale**

Effective communication is a vital component of any organization, including churches. While many churches have joined the digital media revolution, the use of CMC tends to exceed knowledge of why such tools are a suitable choice for church organizations, how to engage well, and the importance of devoting sufficient resources to such efforts. Research indicates a lack of understanding in how mediated communication tools can help churches in relationship building efforts that help attract new members and retain current ones. In this era of declining emphasis on traditional religious participation, the importance of understanding the use and effectiveness of social media in a religious setting cannot be understated.

As a relationship-oriented medium, the Internet has paved a shift from structures to relationships (Campbell, 2004). Church use of digital communication tools can support the local church, extend ministry opportunities, and communicate the gospel. It can also provide
information to visitors and improve internal communication (Sturgill, 2004). Research has indicated that the Internet helps build community for religious groups and has the capacity to extend the off-line church to an online environment (Cheong, et al., 2009). This sense of community is something that many church attendees are seeking (Newport, 2007).

Digital media can serve to strengthen ties within the organization, facilitate communication within a group, engage members in dialogue, increase the visibility of the organization, and establish credibility. This is important because a sense of trust and credibility is needed for organizations to attract new members and motivate current members. Organizations that are perceived as less credible are more likely to be ignored, while highly credible sources are more effective in creating positive attitude changes (Smith, 2007).

Additionally, having a website may be more than just an asset to an organization; a website may be part of what creates that organization (Sturgill, 2004). The online presentation can often say something about the organization itself. Baab’s (2008) analysis of church websites delineated sites not by denomination, but by type of church. He focused on websites that represented three types of church structures: the megachurch, the emerging church and the traditional mainline church. Findings indicated that the website content and design contributed to the identity of the organization.

Smith (2007) theorized that an effective web site could lead to increased interaction between the organization and its members, increase the credibility of the organization, and potentially lead to an increase in new members or in the activity levels of current members. Richard Reising, author of *Church Marketing 101*, claims, “Currently, 80 to 85 percent of people are finding their church based on websites” (as cited in Dolan, 2007, p. 1). Unfortunately, market research to substantiate this claim was unavailable. A study by Kang and Norton (2006),
however, indicates that Smith might be right. The authors analyzed university websites to determine if and how they were being used to accomplish public relations goals and if correlations existed between site content and organizational traits. Data collected from 129 colleges and universities suggested a relationship between effective use of university websites and high student retention rates. Specifically, simple websites with consistent, helpful language gave students a positive impression about the school and contributed to the high student retention rates.

Given that use of digital communication technologies contributes to the identity of the organization (Baab, 2008), can help build relationships and community among church members (Cheong, et al., 2009), and has the potential to lead to an increase in membership (Smith, 2007) or high member retention (Kang & Norton, 2006), it is important for churches to understand these technologies. As Smith (2007) points out, “without an understanding about the basic use of their websites, it will be almost impossible for these organizations to improve their dialogue with members and visitors” (p.287).

Research Questions

Developing a Way to Analyze Effective Mediated Communication in Church Organizations

The challenge for researchers looking at use of mediated communication in a religious organizational setting is how to measure the effectiveness of such communication. As mentioned previously, when exploring the church organization from a relational management perspective, the emphasis is placed on the relationship created between the organization and its publics.

Ledingham and Bruning (1998) argued that a positive organization-public relationship would predispose consumers favorably toward an organization. They measured the organization-public relationship on five components – trust, openness, involvement, commitment and
investment – and found that perceptions of consumer satisfaction were impacted by the relationship. Two years later Ledingham and Bruning (2000) sought to clarify the role that communication plays in the relationship mix. They conducted a longitudinal study of a telecommunications company in a Midwestern community. A benchmark survey was taken to measure the relationship dimensions between the company and the community. Once the survey was completed, the company increased its communication with the local community. After the increased communication, a follow up survey was conducted. The researchers found that respondents scored the telecommunications company much higher in the areas of trust, openness, investment and commitment. Additionally, survey takers demonstrated an increased level of loyalty to the company. Results indicated that communication can “influence perceptions of the organization-public relationship and, in that way, can impact the behavior of the public members” (p. 65). Effective communication, then, can be evaluated through measuring its effects and looking at the outcomes of a good relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

One way that communication can influence the perception of the relationship and the organization itself is by fostering a sense of trust and credibility. This credibility can impact both membership and revenue. Messages perceived as credible are more effective in creating positive attitude change (Smith, 2007). However, the communication vehicle, along with the message itself, must be considered. Kensicki (2003) explored the relationship between visual elements of webpage design and the credibility of non-profit organizations. She found that visually appealing websites corresponded with increased levels of perceived credibility for an organization and a stronger intent on behalf of viewers to participate in the organization. As mentioned previously, the online presence of an organization contributes to the identity and perception of the organization (Babb, 2008).
Taylor (1997) demonstrated that communication does impact the perceptions and behaviors of public members. She studied the role of communication satisfaction in church membership. Basing her hypothesis on the theory that positively perceived communication environments contribute to organizational effectiveness, Taylor believed that communication satisfaction was a significant predictor of church member satisfaction. She analyzed six Southern Baptist churches in Pensacola, Florida. Findings showed that communication satisfaction was positively related to church membership satisfaction across all ages, genders and regardless of size of church. There was no meaningful relationship between membership satisfaction and church attendance, however there was a positive relationship between membership satisfaction and church participation.

If communication is indeed a strategic tool to help achieve relational goals within an organization-public relationship, as Ledingham and Bruning (2000) posit, then according to Kent and Taylor (2002), mediated communication tools are ideally suited for building organization-public relationships and achieving goals. The potential of webbed communication extends beyond the monologic function of information distribution to a dialogic function that encourages a focus on relationships and mutual benefits. Because developing a dialogic relationship involves vulnerability and commitment, choosing to engage in dialogue can result in outcomes of trust and satisfaction for both organizations and members.

**Hypotheses**

Based on extant research regarding mediated communication in organizational settings, it can be theorized that when used in an effective manner, church use of digital communication technologies can contribute to relationship building and has the potential to lead to an increase in attendees as well as retention of current members. This thesis will investigate the impact that
Mediated Communication in Churches

church use of dialogic CMC can have on church members. A greater understanding of effective uses of online communication tools for churches and non-profit religious organizations will provide leaders with information that can assist them in utilizing these online communication tools to achieve maximum benefits.

Given that a relationship has been demonstrated between communication and perception of an organization (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000), between perceived credibility and increased participation (Kensicki, 2003), between communication satisfaction and organizational involvement (Taylor, 1997), and between dialogue creation and satisfaction (Kent & Taylor, 2002) this thesis will explore whether church use of dialogic mediated communication tools contributes to member satisfaction and positive perceptions of an organization, ultimately leading to increased involvement. To further develop this idea, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Church use of dialogic mediated communication will be positively related to communication satisfaction.

H2: Church use of dialogic mediated communication will be positively related to organizational satisfaction.

H3: Organizational satisfaction will be positively related to church involvement.

For the purposes of this research, mediated communication will refer to the following forms of communication: websites, Facebook and other social networking sites, blogs, Twitter and podcasts or webcasts.
Chapter III: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Study

This thesis focuses on the use of mediated communication tools by church organizations to build relationships with their publics and achieve beneficial outcomes. The body of research available to date has primarily focused on describing the use of webbed communication by churches using methods such as content analysis. Thus, information available on the impact of using digital communication technologies in a religious setting remains small. This study attempts to bridge the gap in research by exploring how specifically CMC can benefit churches and why use of such communication is important in a religious setting.

Religious organizations are still not fully utilizing the dialogic capabilities of their web presence (Waters, Friedman, Mills & Zang, 2011). If a relationship can be demonstrated between digital communication and church member satisfaction and involvement, it should provide additional motivation to organizations looking to adopt an interactive, dialogic presence on the World Wide Web.

While many studies have solely analyzed church websites, this study looks at other forms of digital communication as well. An organization’s digital presence today is comprised of more than just the organization’s website. It includes the whole spectrum of digital communication tools used to communicate with various publics. This study analyzes satisfaction with online communication tools in general – including Facebook, Twitter, other social networking sites, websites, blogs, emails, online worship services, and podcasts – as well as asking specific questions about church websites, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. One goal of this preliminary study is to encourage more research in the area of social media use by religious organizations.
Participants in the study were limited to those over the age of 18 that attend, at least occasionally, a Protestant Christian church in the United States. To better gauge the impact of CMC, the focus was limited to current church attendees. Although little research exists regarding how digital communication impacts someone’s decision to visit a church, this was considered outside the scope of the study since building relationships through mediated communication with attendees and non-attendees could look quite different.

Research within relationship management has indicated that the following measures indicate a successful organization-public relationship: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction and commitment (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Control mutuality refers to the balance of power within a relationship. While most relationships will not have a perfect balance of power, in a successful relationship, both parties will have some degree of control. Trust refers to the confidence that one party has in the other party. It involves vulnerability, integrity and dependability. Satisfaction refers to the level of positive regard that one party has for the other. It occurs when positive expectations are reinforced. Commitment refers to whether the party feels the relationship is worth the time and effort to maintain. Measures of commitment look at the level of dedication to the organization. While this study will briefly look at these indicators, the primary focus will be on measuring the effects of digital communication as it relates to satisfaction with an organization.

**Methodology**

While relationship management theory has roots in the phenomenological tradition, it also reflects aspects of the cybernetic, sociopsychological and semiotic traditions. Johnson and Womack (2011) argue that because public relations involves “managing” relationships, the relationship has a goal other than just experiencing and understanding the other, and thus “the
concept of relationship departs from the phenomenological tradition from which it is drawn” (p. 390). Instead, Johnson and Womack see the organization-public relationship involving into having stronger influences from the sociopsychological tradition. Within this tradition, relationships are seen as transactional and can be analyzed in terms of relationship quality and maintenance strategies. Sociopsychological research has been able to describe characteristics of communication in relationships. Therefore, this thesis will explore the research questions from a sociopsychological perspective, building on existing studies of relational outcomes and communication satisfaction. Much of this research has been conducted using a quantifiable questionnaire format.

Therefore, to measure the effectiveness of digital communication technologies at increasing satisfaction and involvement of church attendees, a survey was conducted of adult Protestant church attendees in the United States. The survey method was used by Taylor (1997) in her study of church member satisfaction as well as in various studies of the perception of organization-public relationships (McAllister-Greve, 2007; Bortree & Waters, 2008). Given that this study is grounded in relationship management theory and looks at perceptions of church attendees, the survey method was chosen as a way to analyze church attendee perceptions of their churches’ dialogic communication efforts, along with their perceptions of satisfaction with communication in the church and the church in general. A quantitative approach is appropriate when measurement can describe what is being studied (Williams, 2002). This method allowed the researcher to go beyond the descriptive and to see if there is a correlation between use of webbed communication and church satisfaction and involvement. This is important because it aids in an understanding of how and why the use of such communication tools is important.
A web survey was developed using the website Surveygizmo.com, a website designed to create and host online surveys. A web survey is beneficial because of its low cost, speed of distribution, and reach (Andrews, Nonnecke & Preece, 2003). The site provided a URL, which linked to the survey. When a respondent clicked on the URL, he or she was taken to the survey.

Responses were first solicited using a snowball convenience sample. This type of sample was collected due to the challenges in obtaining a random sample of all United States church attendees and because responses collected via the Internet prevent random sampling (Andrews et al., 2003). While use of a snowball convenience sample limits the ability to generalize findings to a larger population, it still assists in providing a greater understanding of the issue and allows for responses from a broader cross-section of the population. Once the survey was available online, the link was distributed to colleagues, friends and church leaders around the country through email, Twitter and Facebook. After explaining the project, these contacts were asked to help distribute the survey to other contacts. As surveys were completed, the responses were made available to the researcher.

The survey was available online for a period of two weeks. Data was collected through Surveygizmo. Once all surveys had been collected, the survey site allowed the researcher to run a summary of the data including frequencies and percentages. For further analysis, the data was exported into the statistical program SPSS. There, a series of descriptive and correlation analyses were performed on the data collected.

The survey was divided into five sections. The first section measured church attendee perceptions of how the church does at communicating online. The second section measured perceptions of church communication efforts. The third section measured perceptions of the
relationship between the attendee and the church. The fourth section measured perceptions of the church in general. The fifth section measured the attendee involvement.

**Section I: Dialogic Principles and Satisfaction with Digital Communication**

Questions regarding the use and perceptions of digital media were based on Kent and Taylor’s (1998) dialogic principles for webbed communication. Although Kent and Taylor were primarily concerned with communication via websites, these principles were modified for questions about Facebook and Twitter. While a couple questions focused on the whole spectrum of digital communication used in a church, the remaining questions in the first section were broken out to ask about specific types of media. If the church used any of the following communication technologies – a website, a Facebook page, or a Twitter account – respondents were asked a series of questions about whether that medium was successfully used in a dialogic manner. Although many churches utilize additional online communication tools, Facebook and Twitter were chosen because they are the most common forms of social media used today. Statements about each medium were provided and survey takers were asked to respond on a five-point Likert scale, from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

Two questions asked about the presence of a dialogic loop in webbed church communication. For the website, two questions each focused on the usefulness of information, the generation return visits, the ease of the website interface, and the rule of the conservation of visitors. Additionally, questions were asked about the impression the site leaves and the website’s ability to promote a sense of community and connectedness. Two open-ended questions allowed respondents to leave comments regarding their church’s website. Finally, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with their church’s website on a Likert scale of one to five, from (1) very dissatisfied to (5) very satisfied. Similar questions were asked
regarding the church’s Facebook page and the church’s Twitter account. For Facebook and Twitter, respondents were also asked to state what they felt was the primary benefit of such a tool. Finally, respondents were asked to rate their overall level of satisfaction with digital communication at their church.

**Section II: Satisfaction with Church Communication**

The second portion of the survey focused on satisfaction with overall communication in the church, including verbal, written, face-to-face, and webbed communication. Questions were based on Taylor’s (1997) congregant communication satisfaction questionnaire as well as Downs and Hazen’s (1977) communication satisfaction questionnaire. Downs and Hazen measured eight communication dimensions within organizations. These included (1) general organizational perspective; (2) organizational integration; (3) personal feedback; (4) relation with supervisor; (5) horizontal communication; (6) relation with subordinate; (7) media quality; and (8) communication climate. Taylor (1997) changed four of these categories to reflect the church organization. Her categories included (1) organizational perspective; (2) personal feedback; (3) communication with church leaders; (4) communication with church members; (5) teacher/leader communication; (6) media quality; and (7) communication environment.

In their findings, Downs and Hazen (1977) reported that the most important communication satisfaction components included personal feedback, relationship with supervisors, and communication climate. In Taylor’s (1997) study, the top four categories related to communication satisfaction were communication climate, media quality, communication with church leaders and personal feedback. Taylor argued that the nature of the communication did not matter as much as the specific type of communication. Thus, the dimensions of communication climate, media quality, communication with leaders and personal feedback were
measured in this study. Two questions each were asked about each aspect of communication. Respondents were asked to rate statements on a five-point Likert scale, from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Additionally, respondents were asked to rate their overall satisfaction level with communication at their church.

**Section III: The Organization-Public Relationship**

The third section measured the relationship between the church and its members according to the OP-R scale proposed by Bruning and Ledingham (1998). If an organization utilizes dialogic mediated communication, then according to Kent and Taylor (1998), it will contribute to a positive organization-public relationship. The OP-R scale measures trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment, which Bruning and Ledingham believe contributes to consumer satisfaction. They advised that measures of the relationship should be included in satisfaction research (as cited in Ledingham, 2003). To measure the relationship between the individual and his or her church, survey takers were asked to respond to statements measuring the five OP-R indicators proposed by Bruning and Ledingham (1998). Respondents were asked to score statements on a five-point Likert scale, from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

**Section IV: General Church Satisfaction**

The fourth section measured general church satisfaction for church attendees. Taylor’s (1997) study of general congregational satisfaction used the congregational satisfaction questionnaire put forth by Silverman, Pargament, Johnson, Echemendia and Snyder (1983). This questionnaire measures eight dimensions of the church including (1) church services; (2) church policies, rules and regulations; (3) church members; (4) religious education; (5) church leaders; (6) church facilities; (7) special programs; and (8) ministers. Given that Taylor’s findings
indicated that information about the organization function of the church was relatively unimportant to church members, in this survey respondents were not asked about satisfaction with church policies and regulations. The other seven dimensions of congregational satisfaction were listed with a brief description of each. Church attendees were asked to rate their satisfaction with church services, other church members, religious educational opportunities, church leaders, facilities, special activities, and pastors/ministers, as well as their overall satisfaction with the church. Ratings were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) very dissatisfied to (5) very satisfied.

**Section V: Church involvement**

Finally, attendee involvement was measured through two questions. One question asked how frequently the individual attended church. The other question asked attendees to rate their level of involvement in the church on a five-point Likert scale, from (1) not at all involved to (5) very involved. Participants also provided information about age, gender, race, state of residence, faith, church denomination and size of church attended. A copy of the survey can be found in the appendix.

**Ethical Considerations**

Efforts were made to collect and report data as accurately and precisely as possible. At the beginning of the survey, the purpose of the project was explained along with providing additional information about the length of the survey. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous. Given the nature of digital surveys, the researcher could not identify who took a survey, thus preserving the anonymity of survey takers and reducing the opportunity for ethical dilemmas. Additionally, no questions were asked that could constitute an invasion of privacy.
Validity

Validity refers to whether the study measures what it intends to measure. To prevent problems with validity, the questions asked were based off of previous research studies and established measurements. Careful attention was given to the content of each question in order to avoid any potential bias and increase the internal consistency of the study. As an additional precaution, the survey was first piloted to an active church member. Changes were made before the survey was distributed online.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the internal and external consistency of measurement. To increase the internal reliability of the survey, participants were asked to rate overall measures of satisfaction along with components contributing to overall satisfaction levels. To test the internal reliability of the measurement, a Cronbach’s Alpha test was run. This provides a correlation measure of how well items measure the same characteristic. The results from the church satisfaction subscale provided an Alpha score of .81, the relationship measurement scale provided a score of .85, and the communication satisfaction subscale provided a score of .94, indicating high degrees of inter-reliability.

External reliability refers to whether a measure remains consistent for other populations. In other words, if the measure were to be repeated, would the same results be achieved? Since the data in this study was collected using a snowball sampling technique and was not a true probability sample reflective of the population size, it is likely that this data does not accurately reflect all Protestant church attendees in the United States. Therefore the external validity of this study remains a concern. Since an accurate sample size could not be determined, tests of confidence level and confidence interval were not run. The use of an Internet survey provides the
researcher with increased capabilities to reach individuals, however it also generates problems such as not reaching those that do not have access to the internet and the fact that respondents self-select, skewing the data to reflect populations that are more likely to use the web.
Chapter IV: THE STUDY

Introduction

This study looked at perceptions of church use of mediated communication tools from the perspective of church attendees. A survey was used to gauge opinions of and feelings toward how the church uses these tools as well as the relationship between the church and its attendees. Based on relationship management theories in public relations, results were analyzed to see if a relationship existed between use of such communication tools and attendee satisfaction and if that satisfaction led to a change in behavior – increased attendance or involvement. These findings have the potential to impact how churches use CMC as well as expand the body of research regarding organizational-public relationships for religious organizations.

Data Analysis

A total of 167 responses were collected. After filtering out surveys where the respondent did not reach the end of the survey, those taken by individuals under the age of 18 and surveys where the respondent did not attend a protestant Christian church, a total of 111 usable surveys were generated. Respondents were from 20 states across the United States, with the majority of responses coming from the southern part of the country. The sample consisted of 72 females and 37 males. Almost half of the survey respondents were between the ages of 25 and 34 (N = 58, 52.3%). However, responses came from every age group (18-24: N = 5, 4.5%; 35-44: N = 8, 7.2%; 45-54: N = 9, 8.1%; 55-64: N=15, 13.5%; 65 and over: N = 16, 14.4%).

Ninety-four respondents listed their denomination, representing a total of 15 types of religious affiliations. The largest number of respondents came from Baptist churches (34), followed by nondenominational (24), Methodist (8) and Bible church (7) attendees. Responses were fairly evenly divided among the size of church attended. Thirty-six percent attended
churches with less than 500 members, 26.1% attended churches that had between 500-1000 members, and 37.8% of respondents attended churches with more than 1000 members.

The self-identified denominational affiliations reported by survey respondents accurately reflect the current size of religious traditions in the United States. As of 2008, Baptist denominations were the largest Protestant religious tradition, followed by non-denominational and generic self-identifications (including nondenominational and Bible church attendees). The largest mainline Christian denomination was Methodist (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009).

**Results of the Study**

**Use of and Satisfaction with Computer Mediated Communication**

By far the most commonly used electronic form of communication by churches was websites (86.5%), followed by a tie for Facebook and church emails (73%), blogs (47.7%), and Twitter (42.3%). Only one church used the social networking site MySpace, contributing to the idea that this form of social media is no longer seen as a useful method of online communication.

![Computer Mediated Communication Tools Used by Churches](image)

Overall, respondents seemed to be satisfied with the use of digital communication tools at their church. For church websites, 31.5% said they were very satisfied and 41.7% said they were satisfied with their church’s website. Of churches that maintained a Facebook page, 22.8% of
Attendees reported being very satisfied and 31.6% reported being satisfied with the use of the page. Attendees of churches with a Twitter account reported slightly lower measures of satisfaction (very satisfied = 15.1%, satisfied = 20.8%). Overall, 29.4% of respondents reported being very satisfied with digital communication at their church and 47.7% reported being satisfied. Only 9.2% expressed feelings of dissatisfaction with digital communication at their church. The table below shows the mean and standard deviations for satisfaction with mediated forms of church communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction Component</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Satisfaction</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Crosstab reports were run to look at survey data according to age, gender, and size of church divisions. While churches were about as likely to have a website, regardless of size, smaller churches were much less likely to have a Twitter account (22.5%) than large churches (66.7%). Large churches were also more likely to have a Facebook page (90%) than small (62.9%) or medium-sized (62.1%) churches.
TABLE 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Communication</th>
<th>Frequency and Percentage By Size of Congregation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small (&lt;500)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other SNS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcast</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video Podcast</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Worship Service</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Email</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Beyond measuring satisfaction levels, respondents were asked if the various forms of
digital communication contributed to a positive impression of the organization, as well as
feelings of community and connection. Church attendees polled reported that websites left them
with a positive impression of the church (81% positive, M = 4.18, SD = .776). Respondents gave
slightly lower ratings to the ability of the website to help them stay connected (62% positive, M
= 3.76, SD = 1.038) and help them feel like they are a part of a community (54.6% positive, M =
3.5, SD = 1.047). When asked what additions to the website would make them feel more
connected to the church, the most common responses focused on better and more frequent
updates to the website, better site navigation and layout, and more interactivity.
While the majority of respondents indicated that their church had a webpage, numbers for Facebook and Twitter were slightly lower. Respondents were asked to respond to questions about these forms of social media only if their church used the tool. A majority of attendees of churches that had a Facebook account reported that the Facebook page left them with a positive impression of the church (59.5% positive, M = 3.95, SD = .935). Responses regarding feelings of community and connectedness were also somewhat positive. (Helps me feel a part of a community – 55.5% positive, M = 3.59, SD =1.054; Helps me stay connected to church – 55.7% positive, M = 3.61, SD = 1.058). For survey respondents, the primary benefit of the Facebook page was event and program promotion (29%), followed by connecting with fellow church members (21.7%), and finding out information (26.1%). Feedback from individuals who were not satisfied with the current use of their church’s Facebook page included suggestions for updating the page or posting more frequently, updating the amount and type of info available on the page and better utilizing it to reach church members.

Out of the church attendees who responded to questions about a church Twitter account, 44.4% felt it contributed to being a part of a community (M = 3.24, SD = 1.164) and 47.2% said it helped them stay connected (M = 3.3, SD = 1.244). For Twitter, respondents felt the primary benefits of the tool were finding out information (28.2%) and event and program promotion (20.5%). Several commented that while their church may use Twitter, they do not and thus it does not serve as a useful tool to them.

Of greater interest was whether the use of these tools could be considered dialogic, according to the principles established by Kent and Taylor. Data collected used user perceptions to judge if the use of mediated communication met the following five criteria. Table 4.3 shows the findings of the information discussed below.
A Dialogic Loop – A dialogic loop is a feedback loop between the public and the organization, allowing for questions and responses to those questions and concerns. A total of 63.9% of individuals either agreed (36.9%) or strongly agreed (27%) that their church provided a way for members to give feedback and a total of 74.7% felt that attempts to contact the organization received responses. By nature Facebook and Twitter are interactive, creating a dialogic loop and fostering interactivity and community. Still, when used by churches, slightly more than half (62.5%) agreed that church leaders responded to questions left on the Facebook page. While these numbers show a need for continued improvement, they do indicate that some churches are beginning to see the importance of digital communication for more than just monologic information distribution.

Usefulness of Information – Another important dialogic consideration is whether the information provided is of general value and whether a site is content-driven. Respondents overwhelming agreed that their church websites provided information of value (88.2%) and that the information provided was informative (95.2%). Seventy-one percent of Facebook respondents felt that the information provided on Facebook was informative and 65% felt that Facebook was a useful tool. Of those that used Twitter, 55% believed that the information was informative and 48.6% thought that Twitter was a useful tool.

Ease of Use – Ease of use has to do with the layout of a space and how easy it is to figure out and use in an efficient manner. To judge the websites’ ease of use, respondents were asked whether the site was easy to find, easy to navigate and whether the layout was too busy. For webpage users, 93.4% found the website easy to locate, 80.6% that the site was easy to navigate and only 8.7% found the site to be too busy.
Generation of Return Visits – Another key to dialogic communication tools is making them attractive for repeat visits. The idea is to keep individuals returning to the site again and again. One primary way this is accomplished is through frequent updates. A total of 72.3% of respondents believed the website was updated regularly. Responses on whether individuals would revisit the website were mixed. Although 52% of respondents agreed that they would be likely to revisit the site on a regular basis, 32% were not likely to revisit the site and 16% remained neutral. This indicates that perhaps churches still have work to do to make websites desirable for church members to visit again. Facebook users felt similarly about revisiting the website – while 67.6% said the Facebook page was updated regularly, 50.7% said they would be likely to revisit the site on a regular basis. Among Twitter users, 48.6% said the church tweeted regularly.

Retention of Visitors – This is known as the rule of conservation of visitors, meaning that organizations should use links to outside organizations sparingly and should strive to keep the individual at their site. The ability of church websites to do this was measured by asking users if there were many external links on the website and if there were a lot of external advertisements. Few sites had external ads (4.1%), while a larger number of respondents indicated that their church had many external links on the site (24%). For Twitter and Facebook this study looked at the overall retention of visitors within the digital communication experience. Respondents were asked if the Facebook and Twitter pages tied back to the website and included links back to the homepage or to additional information available at the website. Only 49.5% noticed a link from Twitter to the church website and 51.3% reported links to additional information on the website. Facebook users reported much higher numbers of 70.5% having a link to the homepage.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialogic Element</th>
<th>Valid % Agree or Strongly Agree</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Valid N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dialogic Loop</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Place for Feedback</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>1.186</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Receive Response</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Response</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>1.102</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness of information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Valuable Information</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.737</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Informative</td>
<td>95.2</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Informative</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.851</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Useful Tool</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>1.161</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Informative</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>1.158</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Useful Tool</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.259</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of Use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Easy to Locate</td>
<td>93.4</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>0.641</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Easy to Navigate</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>0.975</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Too Busy</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>0.839</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return Visits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Updated Regularly</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.971</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revisit Website</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>1.249</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Updated</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>1.153</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Revisit</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>1.172</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tweet Regularly</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>1.017</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention of Visitors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web External Ads</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.812</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web External Links</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Link to Web</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>0.875</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Link to Web</td>
<td>45.9</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Link to Info</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.214</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Satisfaction with Church Communication

As mentioned previously, satisfaction levels were ranked on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being very satisfied. Mean scores for various aspects of communication ranted from 3.78 to 4.17, averaged to an overall communication mean score of 4.0. Additionally, respondents were asked to provide their overall level of communication satisfaction. This question garnered a mean score of 3.98. This indicates that the aspects of communication present an accurate picture of overall communication satisfaction. The results are similar to Taylor’s (1997) findings of a communication satisfaction score of 4.04.

**TABLE 4.4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction Component</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthy Communication</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>1.152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Communication</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>1.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timely Communication</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>1.088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Communication</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication with Leaders</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>0.999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Communication</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>1.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback Mechanisms</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>1.163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Listens to Members</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>1.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Communication Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>1.095</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

General Church Satisfaction

Descriptive statistics were run on the elements contributing to general church satisfaction. Mean scores for elements of church satisfaction ranged from 4.01 to 4.45, with a total mean of
4.25. A measure of overall satisfaction of the church provided a mean of 4.44, closely related to the elements of overall organizational satisfaction with the church. Taylor’s (1997) finding provided a mean score of 4.15.

**TABLE 4.5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction Component</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekly church services</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>0.818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other church members</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>0.824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Education</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Leaders</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Facilities</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>0.725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Events</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastors/Ministers</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Satisfaction</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>0.849</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Running correlation analyses provided additional information about the relationship between communication and satisfaction levels. According to the Pearson r correlation, communication satisfaction is positively related to organizational satisfaction ($r = .439, p < .001$). Satisfaction with online communication is positively related to communication satisfaction ($r = .530, p < .001$) and overall church satisfaction ($r = .307, p < .001$).

**Measures of the Organization-Public Relationship**

To measure the perception of the health of the relationship between church attendees and the church organization, questions were asked about the relational indicators of trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment. Trust ($M = 4.49$, $SD = .645$), investment ($M = 4.41$, $SD = .849$),
Mediated Communication in Churches

SD = .779, commitment (M = 4.5, SD = .773), involvement (M = 4.36, SD = .748) and openness (M = 4.24, SD = 1.002) were all skewed negatively, indicating a positive perception of the relationship with the church. Additionally, according to the Pearson r correlation, the relational indicators were all statistically significant. While not a high correlation, the results indicate a substantial relationship between the OP-R indicators and overall church satisfaction.

**TABLE 4.6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OP-R Dimension</th>
<th>Pearson r</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>0.517*</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment</td>
<td>0.469*</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>0.522*</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>0.520*</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>0.439*</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

**Hypothesis 1: Dialogic Mediated Communication and Communication Satisfaction**

Hypothesis 1 predicted that use of dialogic mediated tools would be positively related to communication satisfaction. To test this hypothesis, a Pearson r correlation test was run between questions about the dialogic nature of webbed communication and communication satisfaction. Additionally correlations were run between the specific communication mediums and overall satisfaction levels. The results are reported in Table 4.7 and Table 4.8. There is a definite correlation between the dialogic nature of webbed communication and digital satisfaction. A relationship is also indicated between dialogic webbed communication and communication satisfaction, particularly in the areas of usefulness of information, ease of use and return visits. A
relationship was also demonstrated between the satisfaction with a particular form of digital communication and overall satisfaction with digital communication tools and with overall communication satisfaction. Finally, a link was demonstrated between the use of social media tools (Facebook and Twitter) to boost connection and community and overall communication satisfaction. Thus, hypothesis 1 was proved to be true.

**Hypothesis 2: Dialogic mediated communication and organizational satisfaction**

Hypothesis 2 predicted that use of dialogic mediated tools would be positively related to organizational satisfaction. While the elements contributing to the dialogic nature of webbed communication were not as directly tied to overall organizational satisfaction, as stated earlier, there is a positive relationship between satisfaction with digital communication tools and organizational satisfaction as well as between overall communication satisfaction and organizational satisfaction. Given that a link has been established between the dialogic use of webbed communication and communication satisfaction and between satisfaction with the communication tools themselves and communication satisfaction, it can be determined that dialogic mediated communication tools are positively related to organizational satisfaction. Thus, hypothesis 2 was proved to be true.

**TABLE 4.7**

<p>| Correlation Between Dialogic Elements of Mediated Communication and Satisfaction |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|                                 | Digital Communication Satisfaction | Communication Satisfaction | Overall Church Satisfaction |
| Dialogic Element                | Pearson r (2-tailed) | Sig. | Pearson r (2-tailed) | Sig. | Pearson r (2-tailed) | Sig. |
| Dialogic Loop                  | .294** | .002 | .168 | .088 | .046 | .646 |
| Web Place for Feedback          |                    |      |        |       |      |      |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Value</td>
<td>p-Value</td>
<td>Value</td>
<td>p-Value</td>
<td>Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Receive Response</td>
<td>.288**</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.188</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Response</td>
<td>.409**</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.509**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness of information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Valuable Information</td>
<td>.458**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.292**</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.218*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Informative</td>
<td>.402**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.188</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>.150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Informative</td>
<td>.501**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.483**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Useful Tool</td>
<td>.467**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.463**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.249*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Informative</td>
<td>.580**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.435**</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.456**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Useful Tool</td>
<td>.475**</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.501**</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.463**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of Use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Easy to Locate</td>
<td>.436**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.271**</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Easy to Navigate</td>
<td>.467**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.398**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.226*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Too Busy</td>
<td>-.254**</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>-.080</td>
<td>.421</td>
<td>-.194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return Visits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Updated Regularly</td>
<td>.506**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.340**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.229*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revisit Website</td>
<td>.488**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.345**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Updated</td>
<td>.474**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.456**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Revisit</td>
<td>.318**</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.394**</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tweet Regularly</td>
<td>.470**</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.448**</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention of Visitors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web External Ads</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.874</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>.415</td>
<td>-.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web External Links</td>
<td>.201*</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>.885</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Link to Web</td>
<td>.430**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.372**</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Link to Web</td>
<td>.390*</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.285</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>.258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Link to Info</td>
<td>.448**</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.354*</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.457**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).**
*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

**TABLE 4.8**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Digital Communication Satisfaction</th>
<th></th>
<th>Communication Satisfaction</th>
<th></th>
<th>Overall Church Satisfaction</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pearson r</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>Pearson r</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>Pearson r</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>.530**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.406**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.231*</td>
<td>.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>.611**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.579*</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.265*</td>
<td>.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>.576**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.515**</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.399*</td>
<td>.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of Connectedness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>.401**</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.451**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.178</td>
<td>.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>.519**</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.552**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.504**</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of Community</td>
<td>.519**</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.552**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.504**</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>.376**</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.394**</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.158</td>
<td>.197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>.448**</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.476**</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.443**</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).**
*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

**Hypothesis 3: Church Involvement and Organization Satisfaction**

Church involvement was measured on frequency of attendance and level of involvement. Results showed that 37.8% of individuals were involved and 48.6% of individuals were very involved. Only 5.4% of respondents taking the survey did not consider themselves to be involved in the church. The overall mean of involvement was 4.3, with a standard deviation of .86.
Respondents were overall very likely to frequently attend religious services. A total of 93.6% of respondents reported attending services three or more times per month.

The hypothesis predicted that organization satisfaction would be positively related to church involvement. Each element of church involvement was measured separately. Correlation analyses were run to determine the existence of a relationship between the variables. The Pearson r correlation indicated that organization satisfaction is not significantly or positively related to church attendance ($r = -0.063$, $p < 0.516$) and not significantly related to church involvement ($r = 0.048$, $p < 0.618$). Of interest, while overall satisfaction did not predict level of involvement, the Pearson r indicated that the OP-R measure of investment (my church invests in its people) was statistically significant and showed a correlation with the level of involvement ($r = 0.234$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, the use of a church blog ($r = 0.224$, $p < 0.05$) and mass emails ($r = 0.391$, $p < 0.01$) showed a correlation with the level of involvement.

### Discussion

Findings indicate that communication and relationship building do play a role in church satisfaction and involvement. The use of digital communication tools can have an affect on the attitudes and behaviors of church attendees. As Hon and Grunig (1999) proposed, the measure of a relationship can be evaluated in the outcome of the relationship and the role of communication can be evaluated through “measuring their effects and correlating them with the attributes of a good relationship” (p. 11). Church attendees surveyed demonstrated satisfaction, a positive relational outcome, both with communication and with the church organization. Moreover, the organizational-public indicators suggested a healthy relationship between church attendees and the organization. These indicators were also significantly correlated with overall church satisfaction. As communication has the ability to impact relational outcomes, findings suggest
that use of digital communication tools by church organizations contributes to satisfaction and facilitates a positive impression of the church.

Questions about specific digital communication tools indicated that respondents were more satisfied with the church websites than with the use of social media. Facebook and Twitter were seen primarily as a way to find out event information. While attendees most likely feel they receive the most current information this way, this also indicates that these mediums are not being used to their full dialogic potential. Indeed, only about half of Facebook users and slightly lower numbers of Twitter users felt that the social media tools contributed to feeling a part of a community and better connected to the church. However, results demonstrated a positive relationship between the ability of these tools to foster connectedness and community and levels of satisfaction with communication in a church. Thus, there is more churches can do to cultivate community, connection and dialogue.

Previous studies indicated that religious organizations are not fully utilizing the dialogic capabilities of the web (Waters et al., 2011). According to the dialogic principles put forth by Kent and Taylor (1998), progress has been made in the areas of usefulness of information, responding to feedback, and ease of use. There is still room for improvement, however, especially in the area of generating return visits and offering more fulfilling ways to connect with the church organization and other church members online.

Findings demonstrate that satisfaction with digital communication is positively related to both communication satisfaction and organizational satisfaction. Results from this study also support Taylor’s (1997) findings that communication is positively related to organizational satisfaction. However, Taylor found that the most important aspect of communication contributing to overall church satisfaction was the communication environment. In this study, the
most important component of communication was whether the church listened to the concerns of members. This was followed by the importance of church leaders being accessible and church leaders communicating openly and honestly with members. These results place a greater emphasis on the relationship between church leaders and attendees than on the quality of the communication. Digital technology tools, such as Facebook and blogs, allow for increased dialogue between church leaders and attendees that may be harder to achieve in face-to-face communication.

Additional analyses revealed that satisfaction with digital communication tools, overall communication and with the church organization were not dependent on the age of survey respondents, their gender or the size of church attended. While large churches are more likely to have digital forms of communication and to have various types of webbed communication, findings indicate that a number of small and medium churches are at least making progress in adopting communication tools such as websites, Facebook and email. This suggests that digital technology is not something limited to large church bodies and reflects an overall change in churches attempts to embrace the digital age.

The largest number of responses came from the 25-34 age segment (52.33%). While Internet usage is highest among young adults, the web is used by every age segment (Barna, 2009). This is reflected in the fact that survey responses came from every age division. In fact, today there are more technology users over the age of 25 than under. While social networking sites are most popular with those under the age of 30, in the last two years use of social networking sites for Internet users between the ages of 50-64 has doubled and among Internet users over the age of 65 has tripled (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011). In this study, the second and
third largest number of respondents came from the 65 and over (14.4%) and 55-64 (13.5%) age groups.

Overall, the majority of respondents in the survey expressed feelings of satisfaction both with digital communication and with the church organization. It is interesting that the sample reflects respondents from growing segments of the Christian tradition. While overall church attendance remains in decline, the Baptist population (the largest number of respondents in this study) has grown in the last decade. Individuals that self-identify as non-denominational Christians have grown in the last couple of decades as well. According to the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, between 1990 and 2008 the number of Americans favoring this term rose from 200,000 to over eight million (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009), indicating a move toward a more generalized form of Christian identity. While the sample included a few Methodists, the largest of the mainline Christian denominations, there were relatively few responses coming from those who attended other mainline denominational churches, including Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican/Episcopalian and United Church of Christ denominations. Since mainline denominations have experienced the largest loss of market share, particularly over the last decade, it is difficult to judge whether these traditions are using digital communication tools effectively and whether use of such tools can help trim the growing decline of these denominations.

Use of mediated communication and feelings of organizational satisfaction were not related to levels of church attendance. Use of digital communication tools, however, was related to involvement in the church. This suggests that once people choose to attend a church on a regular basis, digital media can help keep them satisfied and involved. In this way, communication is influencing the perceptions of the relationship and impacting the behavior of
its publics. If church organizations wish to further develop relationships with church members and promote community and connectedness, then utilizing mediated communication tools is a great place to begin.

Ultimately, however, it is important to keep in mind that a church is a unique establishment. It is not the organization itself that is important, but the people that make up the church. As one respondent pointed out, “I’d rather be connected with the individuals rather than super connected online with the organization.”
Chapter V: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Study Limitations

This study analyzed dialogic mediated communication and the relationship between the church organization and church attendees based on the perceptions of attendees. As this measures the perception and not the relationship itself, it does not accurately describe the entire relationship dynamic. To gain a better understanding of the relationship itself, it is important to investigate the perspective of both the organization and its publics. Still, measuring the perceived quality of relationships can help explain the forces that impact an organization’s reputation (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Information on the dialogic nature of digital communication at these churches was also based on attendee perceptions. To better judge the ability of these organizations to engage dialogically, both perceptions would be taken into consideration as well as establishing a reliable scale for measurement and having a third-party analyze the content and use of mediated tools at the churches.

This study only looked at Protestant Christian churches in the United States. It did not look at other Christian organizations around the world. Nor did it analyze mediated communication use by Catholic churches, the largest religious tradition in the United States. Future studies could explore the application of this study for these organizations as well as for other religious sects such as Mormon, Jehovah’s Witness, Jewish, Muslim and Eastern Religious traditions.

The sample size for this study was relatively small and, given that results were collected using a snowball sample, did not provide an accurate representation of all Protestant church attendees in the United States. As such the results cannot be generalized to a larger population.
More reliable results would have been obtained by using a probability sample and by having a statistically significant sample size.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

This study provided a foundation for future research in the areas of dialogic mediated communication and organizational-public relationships within religious organizations. As little research exists in these areas, there are a number of areas for further study. To further build on the findings of this study, research could repeat the survey, focusing on specific denominations or regions of the country. A qualitative case study analysis of church use of digital technology tools would aid in a more complete understanding of why people are satisfied or dissatisfied with use of computer mediated tools. As this was a general overview of use of mediated communication tools, additional study into the purposes and use of each online communication tool could assist religious organizations with a better understanding of how to utilize these forms of communication to build relationships and reach out to members.

Other areas for additional research include conducting a comparative analysis of churches that do and do not utilize social media. Additionally, based on the literature reviewed, many churches do not devote sufficient resources to developing effective online communication tools. What are the reasons for this? Finally, this study focused only on the use of CMC to build relationships with current members. There is a lack of research in the role that CMC plays in attracting visitors to churches. Discussions with colleagues and friends lend support to the idea that websites play a significant role in the decision to visit a church, however, research is still needed to investigate the relationship.
Effective communication is indeed a vital component of any organization. The development of computer mediated communication has brought about new ways for organizations to communicate and to engage in dialogue. According to the phenomenological tradition, this dialogue satisfies the human need for companionship and community. Through dialogue, relationships are formed and lives are changed. And thus, it is through communication that behavior is impacted and perceptions are influenced. This study, along with previous studies, indicates that there are advantages for churches that choose to utilize electronic communication methods. Not only does it facilitate communication and community building, but it also creates a positive impression of the organization and helps build the strength of the relationship between the organization and its members. This, in turn, results in positive relational outcomes such as credibility, trust and satisfaction.

In today’s digital world, mediated forms of communication play a key role in developing positive relationships between organizations and their various publics. For churches looking to retain current members, using mediated communication to build relationships can not only influence the perceptions of members, but can also lead to increased levels of satisfaction and involvement. However, it is important to keep in mind that the goal of this communication must be the relationship itself and not the relational outcome. It is important to church attendees that church leaders are authentic and accessible and that the church cares about and invests in its people.

The initial problem of declining religious attendance in this study was not solved through use of and satisfaction with digital communication components, suggesting other motivations for church attendance. However, for those individuals with whom the church already has established
a relationship, digital communication can affect their level of involvement. As the literature showed, churches still struggle with how to effectively use computer mediated communication. It is particularly challenging for organizations to go beyond the use of these tools as information distributors and utilize them in ways that are truly interactive. The findings from this study indicate that there is still much room for improvement. At the same time, the results indicate hope that more churches are beginning to see the need for mediated forms of communication and are looking for ways to improve in this area.
REFERENCES

Adria, M. (2005, January). *E-mail as a dialogic element in the symmetrical two-way model of public relations*. Presentation to the Research Refresher series, Faculty of Extension, Edmonton, AB.


Throop, J. R. (2007). Church 2.0: Use the Internet to boost your community-building efforts. *Your Church, 53*(6), 34-38.


APPENDIX A: MENTOR AGREEMENT

MENTOR AGREEMENT (To be submitted with Thesis Proposal)

You have been asked to serve as a Mentor for Christine Hinrichs, who is completing the requirements for her Masters Degree in Communication and Leadership Studies. As a mentor you are asked to share ideas with this student and read the next to final draft of their thesis. You are not expected to directly supervise this student’s work but rather meet with them as a “young colleague.” If you are willing to serve as a Mentor for her, please sign this agreement.

I am willing to serve as a Mentor for Christine Hinrichs as she completes her thesis. I realize I do not need to supervise their work in any direct fashion and will only serve as a more experienced colleague with a younger colleague. I will provide help in the way of suggestions, ideas and resources and am willing to review drafts of their written work. I also agree to read the next to last draft of the student’s thesis and will sign my name on the title page of their final draft. My signature on the thesis only indicates that I have read it and is no indication of the quality of the work. I will not be asked to assign a grade or make any evaluative comments to the course convener.

Signature __________________________

Title Assistant Professor

Email and telephone number cunninghamc@gonzaga.edu

Date 9-13-11
APPENDIX B: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The following survey looks at web communication and social media use by American churches. Responses to the following questions will assist me in collecting data for my graduate-level communications thesis through Gonzaga University. Participants should be at least 18 years of age and should attend, at least occasionally, a Protestant Christian church in the United States. Please answer each question as accurately as possible. This survey is completely anonymous and your participation is voluntary. It will take approximately 13 minutes to complete. You may stop at any time. Thank you for your participation.

1. Age:
   __ under 18
   __ 18-24
   __ 25-34
   __ 35-44
   __ 45-54
   __ 55-64
   __ 65+

2. Race/Ethnicity:
   __ Asian
   __ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   __ Black or African-American
   __ White
   __ Hispanic or Latino
   __ American Indian or Alaska Native
   __ Decline to Respond
   __ Other/Multi-Racial ______________________

3. Gender:
   __ Male
   __ Female

4. What state are you a resident of: ________________________

5. I classify myself as:
   __ Protestant Christian
   __ Catholic
   __ Member of Another Faith
   __ None/Other Please enter an 'other' value for this selection.

6. What denomination of church do you attend: ________________________
7. Church size:
   __ Small (1-499 members)
   __ Medium (500-999 members)
   __ Large (1000+ members)

8. Which of the following forms of online communication does your church have: Please check all that apply.
   __ Facebook __ Myspace __ Twitter __ Website __ Church or Pastoral Blog __ Podcast
   __ Other Social Networking Site (e.g. The City) __ Video Podcast __ Mass Emails
   __ Online Worship Service __ None __ Don't know __ Other ____________________

9. Online communication at my church provides a way for members to respond or give feedback.
   __ Strongly Disagree __ Disagree __ Neutral __ Agree __ Strongly Agree __ Not Applicable

10. Attempts to contact the organization via electronic methods receive responses.
    __ Strongly Disagree __ Disagree __ Neutral __ Agree __ Strongly Agree __ Not Applicable

11. Please rate the following statements about your church’s website. If your church does not have a website, skip to the next page.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The information provided on the website is valuable to most people.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The information provided on the website is informative.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The website is easy to find.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The website is updated regularly.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I am likely to revisit the website on a regular basis.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The website is easy to navigate.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The layout of the website is too busy.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. There are many external links available on the website.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. There are a lot of external ads on the website.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Visiting the website leaves me with a positive impression of my church.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Visiting the website helps me feel like I am part of a community.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Visiting the website helps me stay connected to my church.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12. I am satisfied with my church’s website.

__Very Dissatisfied __Dissatisfied __Neutral __Satisfied __Very Satisfied __Not Applicable

13. What changes to your church’s website might help you feel more connected to the church?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

14. Are there any comments you would like to add about your church's webpage?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

15. Please rate the following statements about your church’s Facebook page. If your church does not have a Facebook page, skip to the next page.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The information provided on the Facebook page is informative.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. It includes a link to my church's homepage.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. It is updated regularly.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am likely to revisit the site on a regular basis.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Visiting the Facebook page helps me feel like I am part of a community.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Visiting the Facebook page helps me stay connected to my church.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Church leaders or staff respond to questions left on the page.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. My church’s Facebook page is a useful tool.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Visiting my church’s Facebook page leaves me with a positive impression of my church.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16. I am satisfied with my church's use of their Facebook page.

__Very Dissatisfied __Dissatisfied __Neutral __Satisfied __Very Satisfied __Not Applicable
17. What do you think is the primary benefit of your church's Facebook page:

__ Finding out information
__ Communication with church leaders
__ Connecting with fellow church members
__ Viewing photos of church events
__ Discussion of ideas
__ Event/program promotion
__ Giving visitors information about the church
__ Other ________________________________

18. What could your church do on Facebook to help you feel more connected to the church?

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

19. Are there any comments you would like to add about your church's Facebook page?

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

20. Please rate the following statements about your church's Twitter account. If your church does not have a Twitter account, skip to the next page.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The information provided on Twitter is informative.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. It includes a link to my church's website.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My church tweets regularly.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tweets include links to additional information or opportunities available on the church website.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. My church's Twitter account helps me feel like I am part of a community.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. My church's Twitter account helps me stay connected to my church.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. My church's Twitter feed is a useful tool.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21. I am satisfied with my church's use of Twitter.

__ Very Dissatisfied __ Dissatisfied __ Neutral __ Satisfied __ Very Satisfied __ Not Applicable
22. What do you think is the primary benefit of your church’s Twitter account:

- Finding out information
- Communication with church leaders
- Connecting with fellow church members
- Receiving inspirational messages
- Discussion of ideas
- Event/program promotion
- Other _____________________________

23. What could your church do on its Twitter account to help you feel more connected to the church?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

24. Are there any comments you would like to add about your church's Twitter account?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

25. Overall, what is your level of satisfaction with the digital communication at your church?

- Very Dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Neutral
- Satisfied
- Very Satisfied
- Not Applicable

26. Why did you give this rating?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
27. Please rate the following statements about communication at your church. For these statements, communication refers to all forms of verbal, written, face-to-face and digital communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication at my church is healthy.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My church does a good job of communicating with members.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Communication at my church is timely.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My church communicates information clearly.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Church leaders and ministers are accessible to members.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Church leaders communicate openly and honestly with members.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. My church has a way for members to provide feedback.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The church listens to the concerns of its members.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

28. Please rate your overall satisfaction with communication in the church.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Very Satisfied</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

29. Please rate the following statements about your church.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I feel I can trust my church to do what they say they will do.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My church invests in its people.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I believe my church is committed to its people and to reaching the community.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My church is involved in meeting the needs of its members.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. My church shares its plans for the future.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

30. Please rate your overall satisfaction with your church.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Very Satisfied</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
31. Please rate your level of satisfaction with the following aspects of your church.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Very Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Very Satisfied</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Satisfaction with weekly church services. (Services are interesting, fulfilling, informational, full of variety, and easy to understand).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Satisfaction with other church members. (Fellow church members are kind, friendly, helpful, and involved in the church).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Satisfaction with religious educational opportunities (small groups, Sunday school, life groups, etc.) (Educational opportunities are well-organized, meaningful, interesting, challenging and relevant to everyday life).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Satisfaction with church leaders. (The leadership of the church is creative, available, flexible, well-informed and dedicated).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Satisfaction with church facilities. (The building(s) and grounds are safe, comfortable, provide space and are kept in good condition).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Satisfaction with special activities. (Special events are exciting, easy to get involved in, well-publicized, well-attended, and meet the needs of members and/or the community).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Satisfaction with Pastors/Ministers. (Ministers are available to members, have good speaking skills, provide biblical teaching, are strong leaders, make wise decisions and help solve problems).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

32. How often do you attend a church or other religious service:

- [ ] 1-2 times a year
- [ ] Every other month
- [ ] Once per month
- [ ] Twice per month
- [ ] 3-4 times per month or more

33. Please rate your level of involvement in your church.

- [ ] Not at all Involved
- [ ] Barely Involved
- [ ] Neutral
- [ ] Involved
- [ ] Very Involved
- [ ] Not Applicable

Thank you for taking our survey. Your response will help us analyze church use of digital communication technologies.