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Swedish Local Free Churches' Use of Instagram: A Negotiated Approach to Social Media Engagement

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Abstract

This study examines how local Swedish Free Churches use the social media platform Instagram. It builds on data from nine local churches' Instagram accounts gathered between February and April 2024, encompassing 952 individual posts (including stories) and accompanying captions. Drawing on Adrienne Shaw's (2017) work, the study not only investigates the technical affordances these congregations employ but observes what these platforms afford religious institutions. It thus challenges the technological determinism often prevalent in previous research, which tends to equate successful social media use with two-way communication and views its absence as a failure. The findings show that, rather than conforming to dominant platform norms, these churches take a *negotiated* approach, adapting their use of Instagram to serve their values and goals. The analysis highlights how these religious institutions translate their core values onto the platform by emphasizing congregational commitment, personal piety, and biblical authority in their posts, thus bridging their offline and online identities. The local churches included in the study belong to the Uniting Church in Sweden, the Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches, and the Evangelical Free Church.

Keywords*: Free Churches, Sweden, social media, Instagram, digital religion, local churches*

In recent decades digital transformation has profoundly affected how public, including religious, institutions operate in society. This transformation has influenced how religious institutions communicate and interact with their congregations and the wider public (Campbell 2010; Sircar and Rowley 2020; Klaver 2021; Frahm-Arp 2018; Cheong 2017). Social media platforms especially have opened new possibilities for religious institutions to connect with members outside specific physical spaces and times, and maintain a

presence in their members' daily lives (Cavalcanti de Arruda et al. 2022; Kuhlin 2022; Mahan 2020; Golan et al. 2021). Furthermore, social media platforms provide religious institutions new opportunities for visibility and participation. While religious voices were often marginalized in traditional media environments, these digital spaces allow churches to transcend the boundaries these media structures impose, facilitating direct participation in broader societal conversations (Golan and Martini 2020; Morehouse and Saffer 2021; Åhman and Thorén 2021; Lee 2018). Social media platforms thus offer more than just a new medium for communication; they provide a possible means for religious institutions to restructure their relationship with members, as well as an opportunity to be part of public debate. This shift raises important questions about how religious institutions operate in a digital society, and how they utilize the architecture and affordances of social media platforms to engage with their members and the broader public.

This study aims to examine how local churches belonging to the Swedish Free Churches navigate social media. It focuses on the visually oriented platform Instagram. It is driven by the research question: How do local Free Churches utilize Instagram as a communication channel for their ministry? The concept of *affordances* is used to discuss both the platform affordances the churches use and what the platform affords the churches as users. The study builds on data from 952 individual posts from nine local churches' main Instagram accounts (including posts in Stories), containing 1,533 images and their accompanying captions.[1] The data were collected between 1 February and 30 April 2024. The local churches included in the study belong to the Uniting Church in Sweden (Equmeniakyrkan),[2] the Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches (Trossamfundet Pingst), and the Evangelical Free Church (Evangeliska Frikyrkan).[3]

Religious institutions in a digitalized age

Since the rise of the internet in the 1990s, there has been an ongoing discussion about how religious institutions are adapting to an increasingly digital-

1 The discrepancy between post and image counts is due to the inclusion of carousel posts, which feature multiple images within one post.

2 Equmeniakyrkan, formed in 2011, is the result of a merger between Metodistkyrkan (the Methodist Church), Svenska Baptistsamfundet (the Swedish Baptists), and Svenska Missionsförbundet (the Swedish Mission Covenant Church).

3 EFK took its current form in 2002 as a result of a merger between Helgelseförbundet (the Swedish Holiness Union), Örebromissionen (the Örebro Mission), and Fribaptisterna (the Free Baptist Union).

ized society. *Mediatization* has been an anchoring concept in this debate. It refers to changes in the media environment caused by the increased spread and integration of technology-driven communication tools and platforms into all spheres of society (Hepp 2013; Lundby 2014). A consequence of this large metaprocess (comparable with individualization, globalization, and digitalization) is that religious institutions are increasingly shaped by and dependent on digital media, including in how they operate and communicate in society (Hjarvard 2011; Campbell 2017; Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019).

It has recently been argued that we have entered a new stage in this process, referred to as deep mediatization (Hepp et al. 2018). According to Andreas Hepp et al. (2018) several key trends in the current media environment characterize this stage. First, there has been significant media *differentiatio*n, with a marked increase in the number and variety of media platforms and their functionalities over recent decades. Second, *connectivity* has surged, driven by digitalization and the expansive infrastructure of the internet, which has interconnected various media systems and platforms. Third, *omnipresence* has become prevalent, facilitated by mobile communication technologies that allow constant connectivity, regardless of location. This trend also includes an acceleration in communication speed. Fourth, there is a *rapid pace of innovation* within the media landscape, constantly introducing new technologies and platforms. Finally, *datafication* has emerged as a trend, leading to enhanced surveillance capabilities and the collection of vast amounts of data.

While these trends may characterize the present media landscape, previous research has demonstrated that the attitudes to, adoption of, and use of digital media tools vary significantly among religious groups (Gelfgren 2022; Morehouse and Saffer 2021). Some religious communities embrace digital platforms as powerful outreach and community-building tools, leveraging social media to engage with their congregants and spread their message (Klaver 2021; Cavalcanti de Arruda et al. 2022; Golan and Martini 2020). Others, concerned about the potential dilution of sacred practices or the erosion of in-person connections within their communities (Gelfgren 2016; Kühle and Larsen 2021; Suslov 2016), adopt a more cautious stance. This diversity in approach reflects the complex interplay between technology and faith traditions. Heidi Campbell (2010, 19–22) has sought to explain this variance, suggesting that it may be explained by examining a combination of (1) history and tradition, (2) organizational structure, (3) core beliefs and values, and (4) internal negotiation processes.

However, religious institutions' internal structure and values only partly explain the variance in digital media use. Previous research highlights significant differences between geographical regions, underscoring the impact of societal and cultural contexts on how religious institutions operate (Morehouse and Saffer 2021; Lee 2018; Gelfgren 2015). This geographical variation should not be reduced to a matter of technological infrastructure: it depends on a complex interplay of cultural and social factors. For example, a comparison between research findings from African countries with significant Christian populations and the more secularized Nordic region in Europe reveals distinct differences in how social media platforms are utilized. In the Nordic region it seems local churches use social media primarily for in-group communication and community building (Knudsen and Nielsen 2019; Hodøl 2021). Meanwhile, local churches in Nigeria and South Africa, for example, approach social media platforms as powerful outreach and evangelization tools, strategically aiming to reach a wider audience (Ayeni 2021; Frahm-Arp 2018). The contrast in religious engagement may partly be explained by Nordic societies' greater secularization, leading churches to focus on maintaining existing congregations and keeping a lower profile, while many African societies have a more openly religious culture, encouraging active evangelization.

With only a few exceptions (Hodøl 2021; Gelfgren 2016; Knudsen and Nielsen 2019) the main objects of research on churches and digital media in the Nordic region have been the majority churches (Moberg 2018; Kokkonen 2022; Gelfgren 2015; Johnsen 2023; Kühle and Larsen 2021; Åhman and Thorén 2021). These studies of the majority churches primarily analyse how they operate at the national organizational level, often overlooking local perspectives. Moreover, the data mainly come from websites, Facebook, and Twitter, along with interviews and surveys. There is therefore a significant gap in research concerning more image-centric platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. This focus highlights a need for research that encompasses a broader range of social media platforms and at different organizational levels.

Previous Norwegian and Finnish research on local minority churches in the Nordic countries suggests they tend to adopt digital media rather slowly, often struggling to tailor their communication style to specific platforms (Hodøl 2021; Knudsen and Nielsen 2019). They primarily use social media for information purposes such as 'digital event calendars' or 'digital billboards', with limited interactivity beyond views, likes, and occasional comments. Hans-Olav Hodøl views the lack of two-way communication as 'unexploited potential' (2021, 138), and Gry Høngsmark Knudsen and

Marie Vejrup Nielsen interpret it as an insufficient 'understanding of the affordance made available by digital media' (2019, 115). In contrast with the majority churches, which act as folk churches reaching a wide audience (Åhman and Thorén 2021; Kokkonen 2022; Johnsen 2023), the target audience for these local churches is predominantly existing members. According to Knudsen and Nielsen (2019) this slower adoption than the majority churches at the national level may be attributed to resource constraints and minority churches' greater precarity as religious institutions, resulting in more cautious online behaviour. Stefan Gelfgren's (2016) study of Laestadian churches illustrates a more conservative approach to digital media, demonstrating that their deliberately restricted use maintains a clear separation between the offline and online spheres. His interviews also highlight the challenge of operating online due to the negative press surrounding the movement.

Thus far no study has examined how the Swedish Free Churches utilize social media platforms for communication. This study therefore contributes specifically to understanding how these minority churches navigate an increasingly digitalized society, and how churches at a local level use image-centric social media platforms in the Nordic region.

Affordances

This study employs the concept of *affordances* to better understand and discuss how local churches use the social media platform Instagram. In simple terms affordances refer to the potential actions available on a given platform, both in the type of action they enable and the constraints they impose (Lindgren and Eriksson Krutrök 2024, 212–13). This framework recognizes that a technology's design shapes but does not deterministically dictate its use.

However, as Adrianne Shaw points out, research can become one-sided if we focus too strongly on a platform's technical affordances, overlooking what the platform affords different users (Shaw 2017, 597). Following this, and building on Stuart Hall's work, she maps three general use positions: *dominant*; *negotiated*; and *oppositional* (Hall 1991, 598). Users who predominantly engage with social media use the platform as intended by designers and programmers. A 'negotiated' approach means users partly use the platform 'correctly' but also adapt and modify it to suit their own needs and wishes. Finally, oppositional use means the user deliberately subverts a platform's dominant use to disrupt the designers' intention. Moreover, Shaw stresses that we should not understand a non-dominant use or 'misuse' of a platform as a 'failure' but simply as a variance. Shaw's

understanding of affordances thus challenges technological determinism, highlighting technology's social construction. In departing from studies that highlight churches' limited platform utilization, this research, inspired by Shaw, explores how churches actively adapt platforms to meet their specific needs and desires.

The Swedish Free Churches

The churches traditionally labelled as 'Free Churches' in Sweden are principally the Christian communities that emerged from the revival movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Cedersjö 2001).[4] During this period the Church of Sweden, previously the state church, held a dominant position in the Swedish religious landscape and had close ties with the state. Revivalist preachers emphasized the importance of a personal faith and an experience of Jesus, advocating the autonomy of congregations that should consist of dedicated 'believers' [*troende*] rather than individuals automatically included by birth, as was the case in the Church of Sweden (Cedersjö 2001, 41–42). Historically, the term 'free' in 'Free Churches' can therefore be understood in two senses, referring to their independent position in relationship to the state and the voluntary nature of individual membership, which was 'freely' chosen.

Although the Swedish Free Churches are not a uniform Christian tradition, it can be argued that they depart from a common theological foundation (Cedersjö 2001), a hallmark of which is their Jesus-centric orientation. The person and work of Jesus Christ (his incarnation, teachings, example, crucifixion, resurrection, etc.) are given prime importance in the churches' theology and preaching. This Jesus-centredness also entails a call to 'follow Jesus' by developing a lifestyle that translates into Christ-like behaviours, attitudes, and priorities (though precisely what this looks like has, of course, varied between denominations and churches, and over time). As mentioned above, the need for a personal decision to accept Christ's gift of salvation is emphasized (Cedersjö 2001, 53–56).

Another keystone of the Free Churches' theological foundation is the understanding of the congregation as a community of believers, following an emphasis on participation and fellowship. As 'brothers and sisters in Christ', members are called to love and serve one another and bear each other's burdens (Cedersjö 2001, 56–57). The ideal is thus a form of community that

4 However, a few churches have been added during the twentieth century, including the Vineyard and World of Life.

goes far beyond merely gathering for Sunday worship. A third distinguishing feature of these churches is their emphasis on the Bible as the authoritative guide for both the church and the individual believer. This involves not only personal engagement with the Bible but also fostering a congregational identity as Scripture-saturated communities (Cedersjö 2001, 57–58).

The relationship between the Free Churches has shifted and has been characterized by both consensus and tension. Much of the disagreement has revolved around the degree to which one should remain open to society and culture while preserving one's integrity and distinct identity as Christian communities (Cedersjö 2001, 49–53). These debates often hinge on differing interpretations of the Bible, with some denominations adopting more liberal views and others adhering to a more conservative approach. A current issue is same-sex relationships and marriage (Carlström 2023). It should be noted, however, that differences in position exist between denominations, as well as within them. Another area of tension has been ecumenism. Some of the Free Churches were quite early proponents and have been part of the wider ecumenical movement; others have long positioned themselves outside it. The general trend, however, has been that the Free Churches have drawn closer to each other and the wider Christian community (Erixon 2007; Fahlgren 2014). Regarding fundamental faith doctrines, the differences have been more about variations in emphasis than holding divergent doctrinal positions.

The Swedish Christian Council (SKR) currently includes six Free Church denominations as 'members' and three 'observers' [*observatörer*]. The member denominations are the Uniting Church in Sweden (Equmeniakyrkan), the Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches (Trossamfundet Pingst), the Evangelical Free Church (Evangeliska Frikyrkan), the Salvation Army (Frälsningsarmén), the Swedish Alliance Mission (Svenska Alliansmissionen), and Vinyard Noden (Vinyard) (Sveriges Kristna Råd 2024). The observers are the Seventh Day Adventist Church (Sjundedags Adventistsamfundet), the Faith movement (Trosrörelsen), and the Quakers (Kväkarna). The largest Free Church denominations in Sweden are Pingst, Equmeniakyrkan, and Evangeliska Frikyrkan, which are also the denominations to which the local churches in this study belong.

Research design

Instagram is a photo- and video-sharing platform with around two billion active monthly users, making it one of the most popular global social media platforms (Dixon 2024). The platform was launched in 2010 and was bought

by Facebook Inc. (now Meta Platforms) in 2012. Instagram has undergone a significant transformation since its launch in 2010, evolving from a platform focusing primarily on individuals sharing personal photos with family and friends into a public arena and highly commercialized space used by a wide range of public institutions and businesses (including influencers) for outreach (Laestadius and Witt 2022). Among the various public institutions active on Instagram are political parties, governmental agencies, NGOs, and religious institutions. Religious institutions in the Nordic countries use the platform at both national and local levels.

As discussed above, many churches today use various social media platforms to connect and communicate with their members (Farquhar 2019). These platforms allow them to announce events, circulate religious content, and foster a sense of community with their digital followers. Although Facebook seems the most popular platform among churches, both YouTube and Instagram, focusing on visual content, are widely used. While YouTube is mainly used to stream and post worship and other religious events, Instagram's architecture and affordances allow more varied use. Previous research (Laestadius and Witt 2022) has highlighted this, and it is further discussed in this study. However, it should also be noted that Instagram's platform limitations – such as shorter video lengths than YouTube, less robust community features than Facebook, and fewer dynamic editing tools than TikTok – inevitably shape how local churches utilize the platform and the content it generates.

This study examines nine local churches from the Free Church denominations, the Uniting Church in Sweden, the Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches, and the Evangelical Free Church. To enhance dataset uniformity and facilitate the analysis of local characteristics, churches were selected from three medium-sized Swedish cities, Umeå, Västerås, and Jönköping. The selection process ensured a balanced representation by including one local church from each denomination in each city. The study's focus on local churches that had integrated Instagram into their communication schemes meant another key criterion for inclusion was the church's level of engagement on Instagram. For this study an 'active' church was defined as one that consistently posted a minimum of eight individual posts per month. This threshold also ensured the collection of sufficient data for analysis. The churches' follower counts varied significantly, with four churches having between 97 and 404 followers, and five 723 to 1,779. Pentecostal churches consistently had higher follower counts than other denominations, while Uniting Church of Sweden churches had fewer followers in each city. It

should be noted, however, that these follower counts do not directly represent church membership, as the accounts are also followed by non-members and other church accounts, for example.

The study's dataset consisted of all content posted in the nine local churches' main Instagram accounts between 1 February and 30 April 2024. This collection included single photo posts, carousel photo posts (posts including multiple images), video posts (including Reels), Stories (ephemeral content that disappears after 24 hours), and accompanying captions. To make offline access available for further analysis, a digital copy of each post, including Stories, was captured using the Toolzu software and then downloaded. The dataset comprised 952 individual posts containing a total of 1,533 images. This discrepancy between post and image counts was due to the inclusion of carousel posts, which feature multiple images within one post. Beyond comparing basic differences like post frequency and post types, the data were analysed collectively rather than through a comparative lens. The study's intention was not to compare the different denominations or the nine studied churches but principally to identify and explore more general tendencies and patterns observable across local Free Churches' Instagram use. Given this research aim, the study does not conduct a detailed contextual analysis of individual posts. This methodological approach prioritizes broader patterns above granular examination, focusing on aggregate insights rather than detailed post-level interpretation.

The dataset was coded in NVivo using two distinct approaches. The first coding round involved categorizing each post according to its main purpose. This process resulted in a classification system with five main categories, which, in order of occurrence, were: (1) providing information about upcoming worship/events or the church; (2) invitations to worship and events; (3) encouraging personal religious engagement; (4) circulating religious content; and (5) sharing images from worship and events.

Content analysis was conducted in the second coding round to examine the use of various technical affordances and visual elements within the posts. This analysis encompassed Instagram-specific features such as tagging, linking, reposting, and hashtags, providing insights into how churches leveraged these tools for engagement and visibility. Simultaneously, the visual content was categorized based on its form and origin, including photographs and videos featuring church activities, generic stock images, illustrations, and emojis. The study also explored the relationship between images and their accompanying captions in regular posts, offering a deeper understanding of how these churches constructed meaning through the interplay of visual

and textual elements. This multifaceted approach allowed a thorough examination of the churches' communication on Instagram, encompassing both technological use and visual techniques.

Before starting the data collection the study was reviewed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Board (number 2023-07413-01). I also sent a direct message (DM) through an Instagram account set up for the study in which I briefly described the project and asked the churches to contact me if they did not wish to be part of the study. All the churches included in the study had public accounts, meaning anyone with an Instagram account could follow the account and see photos and videos in the profile and in the search results, for example.

Swedish Free Churches' Instagram use

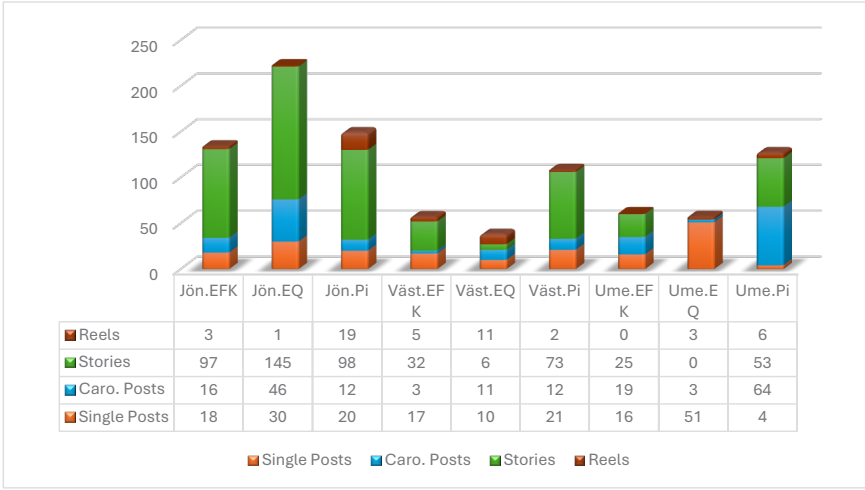
In the following section I describe and discuss the general trends in the local churches' Instagram use, including post types and frequency, the use of visual elements, and ways of engaging followers.

Post types and posting frequency

While all the local churches in this study can be classified as active on social media, there were significant differences in their activity levels. The least active church published 38 individual posts during the three-month data collection period; the most active shared 222 individual posts. As Figure 1 shows, most churches posted between 60 and 130 times during the study period, corresponding to between four and nine individual posts per week.[5] This finding suggests that followers of these churches' Instagram accounts encountered posts from their religious communities regularly and weekly. This consistent presence in followers' social media feeds may reinforce religious identity by strengthening followers' sense of belonging and community connection.

Figure 1 also shows that Stories were the most prevalent form of post, accounting for more than half the content shared. Whether this was a deliberate strategy or not, it enabled these churches to maintain a frequent posting schedule. Stories do not need to be as polished as feed posts because they disappear after 24 hours and are visible only to followers. In contrast, Reels, a more time- and resource-intensive content form,

5 The average number of posts during the study period was 106, with a median of 108.



	Jön.EFK	Jön.EQ	Jön.Pi	Väst.EFK	Väst.EQ	Väst.Pi	Ume.EFK	Ume.EQ	Ume.Pi
Reels	3	1	19	5	11	2	0	3	6
Stories	97	145	98	32	6	73	25	0	53
Caro. Posts	16	46	12	3	11	12	19	3	64
Single Posts	18	30	20	17	10	21	16	51	4

Figure 1. Post type.

were the least frequently used post among the churches studied. Stories allow more informal and personal content that is likely to resonate with church members. These posts' temporary nature may also encourage more frequent engagement from followers, who check in regularly to avoid missing content. The popularity of Stories in this context is particularly significant because most previous studies of church Instagram use have not included these data. By overlooking Stories, studies may have missed crucial insights into how religious institutions utilize the platform. Specifically, they may have failed to capture the full extent of churches' social media activity and the more casual everyday communications between churches and their followers.

The total number of single and carousel posts was approximately equal, though preferences varied slightly among the nine local churches studied. Carousel posts served primarily two purposes: preparing followers for Sunday services; and sharing photo dumps from worship and events. Statistics show that carousel posts generally receive many more interactions than single-image posts, as they encourage swiping and increase user engagement time (Bagadiya 2024). Although this study cannot determine whether the use of carousel posts was an intentional strategy by the churches, it did reveal that photo dumps generally gained the most likes among all post types. However, this higher engagement can be attributed to multiple factors, including the presence of people whom the followers recognized in these images and their often more emotionally resonant content.

Figure 1 also shows that churches in the city of Jönköping stand out as the most active on Instagram. This is unsurprising given that Jönköping is the 'capital' of Sweden's primary Bible Belt. This observation suggests that not only the national context but also the local environment may influence churches' presence and activity on social media platforms (Gelfgren 2015; Morehouse and Saffer 2021; Lee 2018). The higher concentration of Christians in this region, coupled with broader societal acceptance of religious expression, may foster an environment in which churches operate with greater confidence online than their counterparts in other regions. This local variation in social media engagement highlights the complex interplay between religious institutions and their sociocultural environments. It also underscores the importance of considering regional factors when studying religious organizations' digital online presence and activity, as these local dynamics may shape their online content's quantity and nature.

Use of visual elements

Among the 1,533 images in this study's dataset the most common visual elements were photos or videos showcasing activities within churches or featuring members of congregations. As many as 799 images/videos contained such content. The large number of such images, however, is due to the posting of 'photo dumps', where a single post could include up to 16 photos. Through these posts churches enhance a sense of shared experience, enabling the reliving of such moments.

Illustrations, generic photos, and the use of a single background colour featured in around 200 images. Illustrations and generic photos both quickly conveyed the post's subject. As Figures 2 and 3 show, the post about an open preschool includes a generic picture of a toddler's hand playing with Duplo blocks; the post about this week's prayer topic includes an illustration of hands clasped in prayer. These visuals help followers quickly identify the type of information being shared, even though the text conveys the key message. This approach suggests an adapted use of the platform that prioritizes textual information above visual content.

This tendency is even more pronounced in posts where the primary visual element is a single colour or a background pattern (around 100 images each). While colours and patterns are visual elements that can attract attention and make information posts more visually appealing, they diverge significantly from the spontaneous snapshot sharing for which Instagram was originally designed. Yet, as previously mentioned, Instagram has

Figure 2. *Translation:* Open Preschool: WEDNESDAY FUN 10AM–1PM (Pingst Västerås 2024).

Figure 3. *Translation:* This week's prayer topic: the Homework Club (Equmeniakyrkan Hovslätt 2024).

evolved into a multifunctional platform, with users employing it in diverse ways. Given Instagram's image-oriented nature, the heavy reliance on text and text-centred posts observed in some local churches represents an almost subversive use, however. The least used visual element was formal profile photos, which is unsurprising given that they are primarily associated with events featuring an invited speaker.

Ways of engaging followers

A key metric used to measure the effectiveness of one's communication on social media is engagement, which refers to the level of interaction, participation, and connection users have with content (Laestadius and Witt 2022). It is argued that the level of engagement reveals how well the content reso-

nates with followers, and on Instagram it includes likes, comments, shares, reposting, mentions, direct messages (DMs), and clicks. Apart from creating a connection between a posting and its followers, engagement generates increased visibility on the platform.

The most common strategies the churches used to encourage engagement were likes, links, tagging, hashtags, and carousel posts.[6] The use of interactive features varied significantly among the nine local churches. While some employed engagement strategies in almost every post, others relied solely on the default options for likes and comments. This disparity suggests differing levels of awareness or willingness to engage followers on the platform. However, given that the content was generally directed at existing members rather than achieving a broad reach, these churches may have lacked strong incentives to use more advanced technical engagement tactics.

It is notable that the comment sections were utilised infrequently. With only a few exceptions none of the churches actively encouraged people to comment on their posts, and comments from followers were rare. As previously mentioned, it has been argued that local churches in the Nordic region fail to fully leverage social media platforms because they do not exploit opportunities for two-way communication (Hodøl 2021; Knudsen and Nielsen 2019). While this study confirms that these local churches do not use social media for conversations and discussion, a problem with this argument is that it assumes any use unaligned with the platform's intended design is somehow 'wrong', reflecting failure. As Shaw (2017) argues, given the diverse range of users on social media platforms, we should expect different types of use. When these platforms first emerged, they were expected to revolutionize communication and foster a broad participatory culture (Jenkins et al. 2015). While certain types of engagement have increased, however, the enthusiasm for these technical possibilities has often outpaced how people actually use the platforms. Nevertheless, it is clear that these local churches had no intention of using the comment section as a forum for feedback or discussion.

When examining the posts from these local churches, it becomes evident that their social media engagement strategy diverges from conventional platform interaction metrics. Rather than focusing on increasing likes, comments, or shares, the churches aim to foster a different type of engagement. Their primary objective is directed at motivating followers to engage more deeply with their faith. This involves attracting people to services, encourag-

6 These posts create engagement, as the viewer needs to click on the post to see the images.

ing involvement in the church's work, living out one's faith in practice, and engaging with religious content such as Bible verses, music, and podcasts. This approach reflects a broader value within the Free Church tradition, which emphasizes active participation in faith rather than passive membership (Cedersjö 2001). In this context social media is not just a tool for enhancing online presence but a means to further nurture committed and engaged Christians. This also suggests a negotiated form of use in which these churches have adapted the platform to suit their own needs and desires.

Post types and their purposes

As mentioned above, the coding of posts by their primary purposes resulted in five main categories. Below is a brief description and discussion of each category.

Information and invitation

Figure 4 illustrates that the largest category of posts consists of updates providing information about upcoming worship and events. These posts typically include details such as date, time, location, and additional relevant information – for example, the preacher's name or if children's activities are planned. Accompanied by visual elements that complement the written content, these posts give the impression of being digital posters. The primary intention appears to be to assist members to keep informed about the church's activities and schedule, and plan their participation.

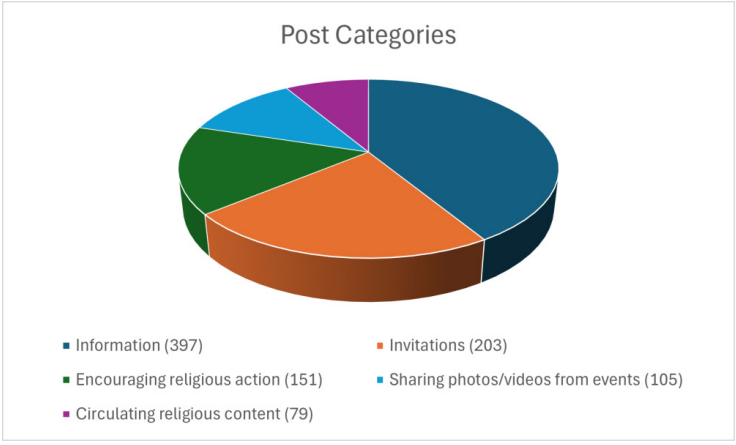


Figure 4. Post categories.

Another category closely related to information posts was invitation posts. The key difference between them is that invitation posts explicitly encourage participation and make greater use of Instagram's technical affordances, including the possibility to post videos, add links, and tag people. Typically posted in close proximity to services and events, such posts exploited the opportunity to be timely these communication channels provided. Overall, invitation posts exhibited a more creative and personal approach, with churches aiming to make their invitations more fun, welcoming, and time-appropriate.

A striking aspect of the information and invitation posts is the broad range of activities these local churches organize. They include open preschool sessions, family days, lunches for the elderly, musicals and concerts, community outreach programmes, afterwork gatherings, film nights, faith-based courses, running competitions, brunches, LAN parties, and flea markets. This variety underlines the churches' commitment to engaging all-age groups and catering to a wide range of interests. It also reflects an intention to extend their involvement in people's lives beyond the Sunday service. However, information and invitation posts also play a crucial role in shaping the churches' public identity, portraying them as dynamic spaces that embody culture and social responsibility.

Nevertheless, the content these churches post reveals that Sunday worship remains the week's most important event. Every church provided weekly information or invitations related to it. Some churches also used carousel posts to help followers prepare for the Sunday service. This could include encouragement to read a specific Bible passage, reflect on particular questions, or engage in family discussions about a theme. Furthermore, some churches posted photo dumps from Sunday services, accompanied by captions describing how great the event had been, offering followers an opportunity to remember and relive the experience as a new week began.

Encouraging personal religious engagement

The posts in this category were often text-heavy and encouraged various ways to embody one's faith, such as engaging in prayer, performing acts of love and kindness, inviting friends to church events, donating items for those in need, and supporting parents in raising their children within the Christian tradition. However, this category's prevalence points to an interesting

finding: these local churches use Instagram as a platform for encouraging personal religious engagement among their members. Accordingly, these channels serve a purpose beyond mere information dissemination or invitations to church events: they aim to inspire members actively to practise their faith in their everyday lives.

This category's posts reflect the Free Churches' understanding that being a Christian involves more than merely identifying as one or attending Sunday worship; it encompasses a commitment to a lifestyle driven by Christian values (Cedersjö 2001). This approach embodies a view of religious identity as active and integrated into every aspect of life rather than being compartmentalized in a specific place and at a particular time on Sundays. In thus using Instagram, these local churches provide consistent gentle reminders to their followers throughout the week about faith's practical aspects, reinforcing the idea that religious engagement extends beyond the church's walls into every facet of a believer's life.

Circulating religious content

A fourth content category identified in the coding process was posts circulating religious content. This category represents Instagram's use in disseminating spiritual material and resources to its followers. The most common type of religious content circulated was Bible verses, reflecting scripture's central role in these churches. However, the range of circulated content extended beyond just biblical text (Cedersjö 2001). These posts also included links to podcasts, music, educational content, and videos of personal testimonies. They thus offered content in various media formats and used their Instagram channels as a platform to direct followers to their other digital channels, creating an interconnected online presence.

A notable tendency in the Bible verse posts was the absence of captions providing an explanation or context for the verses shared. This practice suggests these local churches expected the Bible to speak for itself and be readily understandable to their audience. While some of the shared verses were more inspirational and may have had broad appeal, like 'Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it' (Prov. 4:23), others were more complex and potentially difficult to understand without previous knowledge of the context, like 'So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others' (Rom. 12:5).

This practice is notable for two reasons. First, it implies that these churches expected a certain level of biblical literacy of their followers, sug-

gesting that their target audience was primarily Christians. It could also be seen as empowering followers to engage directly with the text and form their own interpretations. However, it also risks excluding those less familiar with biblical language or concepts, potentially limiting these posts' reach and impact to those already well versed in Christian theology. Second, it demonstrates a trust in scripture's power to convey meaning independently, without human interpretation or contextualization. This in turn reflects the Free Churches' understanding of the Bible as God's powerful word, capable of speaking directly to readers. These posts thus make a statement about scripture's authority and accessibility.

Sharing images from worship and events

A fifth category of posts was the sharing of images and videos from events and worship. These posts often took the form of carousel posts and tended to gain the most engagement, typically ranking among the most liked content in the churches' feeds. The images and videos primarily consisted of snapshots capturing moments of worship, preaching, and fellowship. Another common type of image showcased the children's ministry in the form of fun and comic programme elements during services, highlighting the church as a family-friendly environment. The churches occasionally shared shots from special events such as children's and youth camps or baptisms. The posts in this category generally portrayed people positively as happy, joyful, peaceful, and devoted in worship. These posts depict the churches as more than mere places of worship, emphasizing the strong communal aspect of congregational life. They portrayed these local churches as warm, welcoming environments where people engaged in spiritual practices but also genuinely enjoyed each other's company in a relaxed atmosphere.

However, these posts may come across as presenting a somewhat curated and one-sided representation of church life. A common critique of social media content is its tendency to inauthenticity, often showcasing an idealized version of reality where everything appears picture-perfect (Laestadius and Witt 2022; Jenkins et al. 2015). In the context of these local churches' Instagram posts this is manifested by an overemphasis on devoted moments and joyful interactions, potentially obscuring the more challenging aspects of faith and community life. Churches using social media in this way must therefore strike a delicate balance. While it may seem natural and often beneficial to highlight positive aspects of community life, it is a representation that may quickly come across as inauthentic – even fake.

What is not there?

Although present, some content types typically associated with religious organizations were notably underrepresented in the examined local churches' Instagram channels. For example, posts related to evangelism, life's hardships, and rites-de-passage such as marriages or funerals appeared infrequently. Given that the Free Churches are often characterized by their emphasis on outreach compared with other churches in Sweden, the scarcity of overtly evangelistic content was unexpected. While the primary reason was likely to be that the target audience consisted of church members, it may also have reflected an understanding that these platforms were more suitable for community building than direct evangelism. Moreover, as both Gelfgren (2016) and Knudsen and Nielsen (2019) have demonstrated in their research on minority churches, these institutions' precarity, in contrast to the more trusted and accepted national churches in Nordic countries, appears to result in more cautious online behaviour.

Equally noteworthy was the minimal representation of themes related to life's challenges, mourning, and loss. Given that churches tend to serve as important institutions of comfort and support during difficult times, the sparse appearance of such content is particularly striking. Similarly, the low representation of imagery depicting significant life events like marriages or funerals fails to showcase the full spectrum of religious practices and community support these churches offer. This curation starkly contrasts with the Church of Sweden's online presence, in which it clearly positions itself as an institution specializing in life-stage celebrations and providing support during hardships and loss (Åhman and Thorén 2021).

During the studied period there were no posts related to political or societal issues (such as the climate crisis or Israel's war in Gaza) or the current debate in the Free Churches regarding LGBTQ topics (Carlström 2023). This absence suggests a deliberate choice by these local Swedish Free Churches to avoid engaging publicly with contentious or polarizing topics on Instagram. Such a decision may reflect a strategic focus on maintaining a neutral or inclusive online presence, prioritizing community cohesion or aligning with a more conservative communication strategy that avoids potentially divisive subjects.

Discussion

Religious institutions' adoption of social media platforms in recent decades has marked a shift in their communication and engagement with their members, as well as with the broader public (Cheong 2017). This study builds on

previous research by examining how ecclesiastical institutions in the Nordic region navigate their online presence, with a focus on local minority churches and the image-centric platform Instagram. Referring to Shaw's (2017) three user positions, the findings suggest these local churches adopt a *negotiated* approach in their use of the platform. While they seldom actively subvert the platform's intended use, they have not adopted a dominant user approach – for example, attempting to maximize their reach or follower engagement online. Instead, they have adapted the platform to foster a different form of engagement aligned with the values typically associated with the Swedish Free Churches: seeking to inspire their followers to cultivate personal piety and active participation in the local congregation's work.

These findings suggest the local churches to some extent resist the media logic (and social media logic) that mediatization theory (Hjarvard 2011) identifies as a shaping force for modern institutional operations. Instead of prioritizing visually dramatic or entertainment-driven content aligned with algorithmic preferences, they appear to adapt social media platforms to serve their distinct needs and values. This approach may partly stem from limited digital competence and insufficient training in online communication among account managers, as well as resource and time constraints. However, confirming these factors would require direct interviews with the digital content creators in these local churches.

Nevertheless, compared with their Norwegian and Danish counterparts, studied by Hodøl (2021) and Knudsen and Nielsen (2019), which primarily used social media for 'information purposes' and as an 'interactive calendar', these Swedish local churches' usage appears to have a broader aim. I would also argue, however, that it is an oversimplification to view information and invitation posts as mere dissemination of information. These posts serve a broader purpose. They not only inform and invite but also contribute significantly to building the church's public identity. In sharing upcoming events and activities, these local churches reveal they are far more than just venues for Sunday services. They are also institutions espousing social responsibility, acting as cultural bearers and providers, and offering a space for *folkbildning*.[7]

Although Hodøl views the lack of two-way communication as 'unexploited potential' (2021, 138), and Knudsen and Nielsen interpret it as an insufficient 'understanding of the affordance made available by digital

7 *Folkbildning* is a Swedish term that lacks an English equivalent. It refers to a tradition of encouraging lifelong learning for the purpose of strengthening democratic participation, increasing equality, and promoting cultural development.

media' (2019, 115), I propose a different perspective. Rather than a shortcoming, it can be argued that these churches' approach to social media represents a negotiated adaptation to the digital landscape. As Shaw (2017) emphasizes, non-dominant use of social media platforms does not need to be interpreted as a 'failure'. Such an interpretation risks falling into technological determinism and normative expectations that users should conform to designers' intentions, overlooking the social construction of technology use. Given modern platforms' complexity, it is natural for diverse users to employ them in various ways to meet different needs. The local Free Churches that are part of this study seem to maintain a digital presence that reinforces their core values. In doing so, they prioritize coherence with their offline practices above expanding their digital reach. Interestingly, this pattern is aligned with what Johnsen found in her study of the majority churches in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway: that these churches' online identities mirrored their offline organizational characteristics (2023, 71). Again, this points to limitations in mediatization's influence on Nordic churches' online operations.

If we approach affordances with a broader understanding – considering not only the technical features of a platform but also what a platform affords a user – we can gain a more nuanced perspective of these churches' social media practices. For example, this approach reveals that the local churches that are part of this study use Instagram to maintain ongoing connections with their members throughout the week, extending their community engagement beyond physical gatherings. Although the posts may not encourage explicit two-way communication, they establish a regular touchpoint between the church and its members. This consistent presence reinforces the church's role in members' everyday lives, potentially strengthening their sense of belonging and religious identity. For the local churches in this study the use of Instagram Stories plays a crucial role in upholding a regular posting schedule, as the content does not need the polish required for the main feed. Moreover, using Stories allows real-time updates and everyday moments to be shared, fostering a sense of intimacy.

This study's findings are aligned with previous research on local churches in the Nordic region indicating a cautious approach to their online presence. These churches generally refrain from using digital platforms as tools for outreach or evangelization. This strategy may reflect the highly secularized nature of Nordic societies, where overt religious messaging is often less socially acceptable. It may also exemplify the precarity of minority churches in operating online, as both Gelfgren (2016) and Knudsen and

Nielsen (2019) have highlighted. Historically, the Free Churches in Sweden have faced critical coverage in the public media, which persists to some degree today. This complex media relationship affords these institutions legitimate reasons to be mindful of their public operations and to manage their social media presence carefully. It is likely this also partly explains these churches' tendency to avoid controversial topics, refraining from taking political stances or discussing contentious social issues. This behaviour suggests a deliberate effort to foster a welcoming and unconfrontational environment in their social media channels, prioritizing spiritual and community-related content. Notably, the content often focuses on positive imagery, frequently depicting individuals in uplifting emotional states. While this approach helps craft an appealing online identity, it can also result in a somewhat one-dimensional representation. By focusing predominantly on positivity, these churches may inadvertently miss opportunities to engage with their audience on more complex and challenging aspects of life. This observation underscores the nuanced challenge that churches face in digital communication: the need to balance creating an attractive online presence and to offer a comprehensive authentic representation of their core services and values.

Conclusion

This study has examined the social media practices of local Free Churches in Sweden, revealing a more complex engagement with social media than previously recognized in studies of local minority churches in the Nordic region. While the churches used the platform as a form of digital billboard, they also used it to encourage religious action and community building, for example. Moreover, although the majority of posts were informational or invitational, they contributed to building a public identity that showcased these churches as multifaceted institutions engaged in social responsibility, *folkbildning*, and cultural providers. By maintaining a consistent online presence that reinforces core values, these churches prioritize coherence with their offline practices above maximizing digital reach or engagement. Rather than focusing on increasing likes, comments, or shares, they aim to foster a different type of engagement. Their primary objective seems to be to motivate their followers to engage more deeply with their faith and become committed and active participants in their local congregation's work. Hence, the study suggests that these local churches adopt a *negotiated* approach to using the platform. The focus on projecting positive imagery

and avoiding controversial topics, however, presents a potential limitation, possibly resulting in a somewhat one-dimensional online representation. This highlights the ongoing challenge for religious institutions in balancing an appealing digital presence with an authentic representation of their services and values. This study contributes to understanding how religious institutions navigate digital spaces in secularized contexts. It highlights the importance of considering diverse user approaches when analysing social media practices, moving beyond normative expectations of platform use.

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