

Decentralization of Religious Discourse in the Covid times: A Case Study on Hong Kong's #DeltaΔMovement

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, most of Christian religious discourse in Hong Kong has been centralized in established institutions, such as churches and seminaries. However, with the changing times of Hong Kong's protests in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic, young believers have turned to social media to engage in religious discourse under the hashtag "DeltaΔMovement". This paper will investigate in what ways #DeltaΔMovement has allowed young people to engage in discourse in a decentralized manner, how established institutions are responding to the movement, and insights as to how people may generalize the process of decentralization in various facets of social justice issues, amplifying the voices of the traditionally overlooked and marginalized.

Keywords: Religion, decentralization, social media.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, Christian religious discourse has been dominated by established institutions, such as churches and seminaries, and Hong Kong is no exception. The presence of Christianity in domains of social service, such as education, has consolidated such domination, extending beyond theological discussions, and entering forms of popular media like movies and comics. However, since 2020, the discourse has become increasingly decentralized, partly due to the rise of #DeltaΔMovement. This paper will outline the development of #DeltaΔMovement, pinpoint the features of the movement from a communicative perspective, and how its legacy is affecting and will transform the landscape of Christian religious discourse in Hong Kong.

HISTORY

#DeltaΔMovement was first proposed by Harold Chan from Hypersonic Lab and Steven Ng from the Instagram page @galut_hk in June 2020 in collaboration with other Christianity-themed Instagram pages (Mak, 2020). Chan invited other Instagram pages to like and share their posts so as to increase the posts' reach, but realized each page has its own target demographic, and as such cross-posting is not a sustainable solution; Ng proposed bringing the pages together under a hashtag. The English name signifies everyone can become the force for change in the Ecumenical Church, the effort to "seek Christian unity by cultivating meaningful

relationships and understanding by and between the many different Christian Churches and Christian Communities" (Archdiocese of Chicago, n.d.). As for the Chinese name, 基督教文化運動 (*Christianity Culture Movement*), Chan and Ng stated:

We decided to use 基督教 (Christianity) rather than 基督徒 (Christians) because we are all stakeholders to the faith, but none of us can represent the religion as a whole... we all own our faith, but we just have different ways to express it. Through sharing our thoughts we are collectively describing what Christianity is as a whole. (Mak, 2020).

Chan and Ng compared #DeltaΔMovement with blockchain technology. The traditional domination of rhetoric has to the dominance of certain leaders of denominations to steer the development of the church, but #DeltaΔMovement has given the chance for young people, traditionally marginalized by local churches, to have a say in their spiritual development (ibid.) Indeed, in another talk, Ng shared his views on the success of #DeltaΔMovement: young believers find their spiritual needs unmet, and are unable to use their talent in places they find interest in. While they have left their own congregations, they still believe in their faith; #DeltaΔMovement has given them the opportunity to find companions through online media, and even providing another platform for them to showcase their talents (Lee, 2021). The movement is greatly enhanced by the lockdown measures enforced by the Hong Kong

government, in which religious premises (i.e. churches) fall under “scheduled premises” and are subject to the lockdown, social distancing and vaccination requirements of the government (Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation, 2020), and thus leaving many youngsters unable to continue participating in traditional religious activities before the pandemic.

CONTENT FEATURES

General Features

Many content creators of #DeltaMovement are active on Instagram, but with their different target audiences, the posts’ content, their formats, and reach can vary greatly. Currently, there are more than ten thousand posts under the hashtag #DeltaMovement and #基督教文化運動 (the Chinese name of the movement) respectively. While some creators have disclosed their identity (Ng, for example, owns @galut.hk as previously mentioned), others have remained anonymous or only leave basic demographic information.



Figure 1. A profile with the demographic information only, with no names

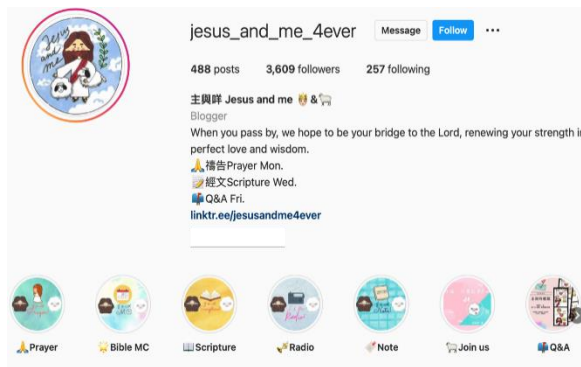


Figure 2. A profile with no demographic information

Many of the posts under the hashtag are produced in carousel format, aggregating up to ten photos and/or videos in one same post. The format has a high engagement rate (Read, n.d.) due to the time people spend on reading and interacting with the post by scrolling through the content. Many of these posts are share-friendly, with each photo having only a few easy-to-read lines (and therefore easy to digest), and readers are often reminded to increase the potential reach to others by utilizing Instagram tools (liking the post, commenting on the post, sharing the post, or saving the post).



Figure 3a. A discussion using carousel format

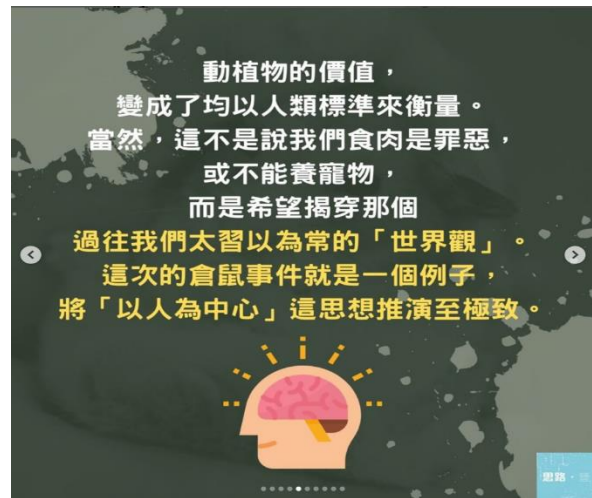


Figure 3b. One of the photos in the same discussion

Theological discussions

Most content creators focus their pages on the interpretation and application of the Bible, the sacred text of the religion. What separates it from the traditional discussion is that such discussion often stems from current events or cultural phenomenon, rather than the applying a set passage to whatever event that would apply to the interpretation of the scripture, a stark contrast to lectionaries, the collection of readings prescribed to occasions or days, a practice employed by certain liturgical denominations.

One of the largest pages within the movement, Crop Circle (@hkcropcircle), attempts to fuse theological discussions in current issues. The page provides its own insights towards such current issues in a lighthearted manner by applying the religious worldview of Christianity, rather than the exact scripture from the Bible. The approach is effective in the sense that the Instagram page has now got a book deal and a podcast, both requiring a substantial amount of rapport from the audience, both financially and practically, to happen.

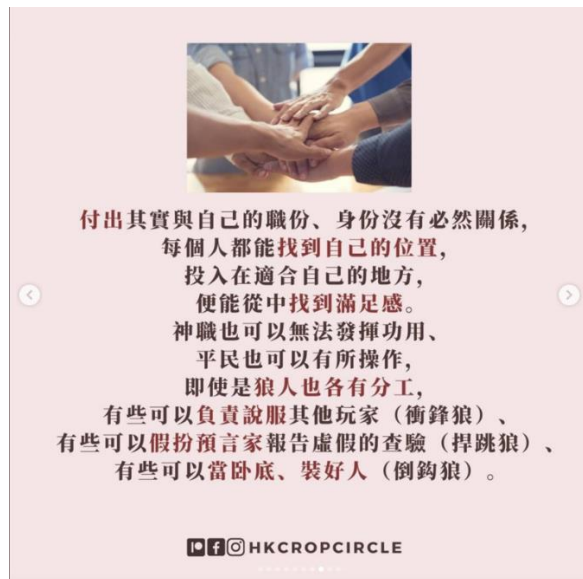


Figure 4. A post on roles in service by @hkcropcircle, using the game Werewolf as example.

Other pages employ a more conventional approach, using the Bible to provide interpretations or insights towards current issues, and would explicitly quote their sources from the Bible. Fox Lo from @hermeneutics_for_the_oppressed uses the page to introduce Biblical concepts not often discussed in local churches, quoting scholarly sources as reference. Lo also connects events in Hong Kong society to the Bible, especially in the times of COVID-19.



Figure 5a. One of Lo's posts on @hermeneutics_for_the_oppressed on Biblical concepts



Figure 5b. One of Lo's post on @hermeneutics_for_the_oppressed, using COVID-19 as a talking point

Music

While the genesis of #DeltaMovement started from Harold Chan's Hypersonic Lab (Hypersonic Lab, 2020), the development of music creation and performance is not confined to Hypersonic Lab's work. Both worship covers and original songwriting exist on the platform. What is significant for music creation is that Instagram is not inherently a good place for sharing music directly, especially before Instagram Music and Reels was introduced in Hong Kong in 2022 (Xianggang 01, 2022), and as such pages have to consider how to funnel their audience from Instagram to other sites, such as YouTube.

Milk and Honey Worship (@milkandhoneyworship) provides a prime example as to how such funneling can be done. By increasing the aesthetic value of its page, the page increases the shareability of the posts, and in turn increasing the reach of their content. Given the main goal of the posts is to send people to other video sharing and music streaming services, the page also includes a link in their bio for followers to click on, which, when clicked, displays a landing page for the reader to choose their preferring service for redirection to the song listening, without asking them to reenter the information in the search query in respective services. This increases the convenience (and thus reach) of the team's products.



Figure 6a. A post on @milkandhoneyworship promoting their new song.



Figure 6b. Music landing page of @milkandhoneyworship

Art

Calligraphy art is one of the most prominent forms of artwork in the movement. This is not surprising, since most of these art pieces seek inspiration from the Bible, which is a sacred *text*. More recently, digital graphic design has entered the scene, interpreting the Bible in another angle. James Wong from @james.crtv incorporates design elements and principles in graphic design into Biblical verses and concepts, creating posts that are chic, feels modern, and has high shareability.



Figure 7. A post by Wong at @james.crtv

Illustrators present the same idea, but through the art of drawing, rather than design. Pages like @ourdiarydays uses character illustrations to discuss their own feelings towards painful topics (e.g., the meaning of death). Another page, @godnoodlehk, uses a recurring character (“Yellow Bean”) as a narrator to encourage followers to follow the teachings of the religion.



Figure 8. A post by @ourdiarydays on helping others



Figure 9. A post by @godnoodlehk introducing their mascot, Yellow Bean

“Unconventional” formats

Some content creators utilize more unorthodox ways to engage in religious discourse. @hinsonfoodhk (n.d.) is a food blogger who integrates food blogging with religious discourse. According to the blogger, he first started the page as an answer to the lack of male food bloggers in general, but he realized “he wanted to do something more for God”, so he “added Bible verses and reflections” in his (n.d.) reviews.



Figure 10. A post by @hinsonfoodhk introducing a restaurant. He starts the post by introducing verses from the Bible, before providing the food review.

Neely, Walton and Stephens (2014) pointed out young people use food to foster social connections and manage relationships; the theme of the page (food review) is applicable for believers and non-believers alike, making the overall delivery of the content relatively more digestible for all.

Other content creators appeal to memes to deliver relatable content, especially for those already devoted in the religion and participates regularly in religious activities. For example, @omg_christianstyle, boasting more than 3000 followers, appeal to its audience by

depicting the lives of believers in a lively manner. With the meme there accompanies a caption regarding the issue, providing personal interpretation and reflection. It is not uncommon for these pages to pose questions to solicit responses from followers, leading to further interaction between the page and its audience.



Figure 11. A meme by @omg_christianstyle on attending physical gatherings, with interaction between followers and the owner of the page

#DeltaMovement AND ESTABLISHED INSTITUTIONS

With the development of #DeltaMovement, to compete with the decentralized forces of individual believers, established institutions are required to update their social marketing strategy to be closer in line with that of #DeltaMovement to reach the target audience – the same target audience as the decentralized efforts of individual content creators in #DeltaMovement. Evangelical Reading Room (@err.fes) is the publishing arm of Fellowship of Evangelical Students, itself an organization that was founded in 1957 (Cheung, 2022). Its first posts lean towards the traditional sense of communication, with elements common in what youngsters would relate to ‘outdated’: clipart, word art, multiple fonts, etc.



Figure 12. Post by Evangelical Reading Room before rebranding

Later, after rebranding of the entity, the page has used a simpler color scheme and design style similar to that used by other pages in #DeltaMovement. They have also used memes to convey the main idea of the post.

They have even step up and used the staff as part of the promotion strategy, increasing the incentive for sharing among those who already knew said staff member.



Figure 13a. A post after rebranding about what devotion is for Christians



Figure 13b. A post after rebranding with a meme with one of the staff members.

Their successful rebranding has helped them transform from the publishing arm of the organization to an entity within an organization that has its unique selling proposition. In fact, given the organization has a diverse audience from secondary school students to university graduates to doctors and nurses according to their website (<https://fes.org.hk>), it is not surprising that the publishing arm targets younger audience rather than that of the whole organization, which is, again, the same target audience of #DeltaMovement.

CONCLUSION

The development of #DeltaMovement has given a voice for young believers to showcase their talents and ideas towards their faith. The author believes providing the young a voice is crucial in ensuring the sustainability of the church. After all, those currently in power will pine away and those who are now marginalized based on their age or ‘experience’ will become those who form the church sooner or later. If we deny them of the opportunity of self-expression, the growth of the church will only stifle even further. #DeltaMovement is not only a moment of transformation of religious discourse, shifting the focus from those currently in

leadership to the younger generation, but also a time for established organizations to reconsider their marketing and outreach strategy. The author believes that, with the resources and reputation of these established organizations, it is possible for them to revitalize their image through rebranding with strategies from #Delta Δ Movement; the ‘new normal’ and the increased reliance of social network presents a prime opportunity to do so.

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