Is Social Media a Digital Pulpit? How Evangelical Leaders Use Twitter to Encourage the Faithful and Publicize Their Work

Ryan P. Burge
Eastern Illinois University
rpburge@eiu.edu

Miles D. Williams
University of Illinois
milesdwilliams15@gmail.com

Abstract

Social media is altering how some religious leaders communicate with their followers and with the public. This has the potential to challenge theories of religious communication that have been developed through the study of traditional modes such as sermons. This study examines how leaders in U.S. evangelicalism take advantage of the public platform provided by Twitter. Using over 85,000 tweets from 88 prominent evangelical leaders, we find that these leaders often use their social media platforms as a natural extension of their current modes of communication. More specifically, evangelical leaders use their account to encourage and inspire their followers, while also conveying information about upcoming personal projects such as tours and book releases. In a small number of cases, evangelical leaders do make reference to political issues, but those individuals are ones who have already built a brand based on political commentary. Speaking broadly, the usage of political language by evangelical leaders is rare. The paper concludes with a discussion of how this analysis advances theories of religion and communication.

Keywords

1   Introduction

While the use of social media by campaigns has been gradually increasing for the past decade, the utility of Twitter has moved center stage following the 2016 election season. Donald Trump, who used Twitter to great effect during his campaign (Hess, 2016), would often take to the social media platform to respond to his critics, often by insulting them (Quealy, 2016). Russell Moore, who serves as president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission for the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote an Op-Ed in the *New York Times* in which he went on the attack against Donald Trump. Moore wrote, "The man on the throne in heaven is a dark-skinned, Aramaic-speaking 'foreigner' who is probably not all that impressed by chants of 'Make America great again'" (Moore, 2016). Trump fired back on his Twitter account three days later, writing, "Russell Moore is truly a terrible representative of Evangelicals and all of the good they stand for. A nasty guy with no heart!"[1] This resulted in a Twitter exchange where Moore likened Trump to King Ahab, who chose to follow false gods and had to be punished by Elijah (Dias, 2016). After Trump's unexpected victory in the presidential election, *Christianity Today* ran a column entitled, "Is It Too Late for Russell Moore to Say Sorry?" (Shellnutt, 2016).

   This event speaks to a larger question of how opinion leaders in evangelical Christianity engage with their followers and potential converts in the world of social media. While prior generations of evangelical pastors such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson were able to communicate with the masses through their televangelism broadcasts (Hadden, 1993), that conversation was almost completely unidirectional.[2] On the other hand, social media has allowed any pastor, regardless of their congregation's size or budget, to broadcast their message to millions and receive instantaneous feedback. This obviously represents a new way of thinking about communication for leaders in evangelical Christianity. Consider this: Joel Osteen's Twitter account had 4.7 million followers in October of 2016; in July of 2018, his audience on Twitter had increased to 8.5 million.

   The tremendous reach that has been afforded to evangelical leaders provides a fertile ground for study among social scientists. Marshall (2010) argued that social media can be used for three purposes by celebrities: self-promotion, as a means to share glimpses into an individual's private life, or as an outlet for the sharing of spontaneous thoughts or ideas. The framework conceived by Marshall provides the structure of the general research question that will guide

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1   https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/729613336191586304.

2   Many of these broadcasts displayed a prayer line phone number, but those calls were handled by volunteers of the ministry, and likely few of them ever reached the pastor themselves.

this inquiry: is Twitter a medium that is merely an extension of an evangelical leader's traditional ministry? Or has this group found new and more effective ways to communicate to their followers on social media? For instance, are some leaders finding success by engaging frequently with their followers, or do they take the same approach as the televangelists and stick with one-way conversations? Has Twitter become a medium to largely promote an individual's projects, as described by Marshall's "public self" theory (2010), or do evangelical leaders use it with other motivations in mind? For instance, do some evangelicals use their Twitter account to express their "transgressive self," which is usually typified by unscripted and often emotional outbursts that tend to go viral? Undoubtedly an evangelical leader commenting directly on politics or political events could fit into this category and have a polarizing impact on social media following. Because of the risk of alienating fans, do evangelical leaders stay away from these political topics?

This work employs an array of cutting-edge statistical techniques, broadly defined as natural language processing, to analyze the contents of over 85,000 tweets that contained well over one million total words. This approach to social science research allows analysts to study vast droves of written data that would be an incredibly time-consuming undertaking if conducting using traditional means. The end result is a picture of social media usage that helps to explain, in broad strokes, how evangelical leaders navigate a social media landscape that is sometimes toxic but always expanding.

2   The Delicate Nature of Clergy Communication

The scholarly community has devoted a great deal of time to understanding the precarious position that exists for clergy in regard to their ability to share controversial messages. Early work indicated that pastors and priests were overwhelmed with the necessity to maintain good relationships with members of their congregation and believed that if they spoke out on political issues that they ran the risk of alienating a significant portion of their membership (Campbell & Pettigrew, 1959; Hadden, 1969; Quinley, 1974). These constraints are so profound that they either force a change in social theology, or at least put restraints on how that social theology is presented to the congregation. Stark writes, "we become convinced that silence is not something imposed on clergy, but something they impose on themselves" (Stark, 1971, p. 97). However, more recent research has concluded that clergy do, in fact, speak out on political issues when they feel mobilized or want to encourage congregants to have their voices heard in the public sphere (Djupe & Gilbert, 2002). While pastors at the congregational level can follow the lead, or advice, of those above them

in their church hierarchy (Campbell & Pettigrew, 1959; Calfano, 2009), how, more broadly, do religious opinion leaders decide what is appropriate or inappropriate when it comes to discussing matters of government and politics online? Do these religious leaders take advantage of the freedom they enjoy on social media to say what is on their mind, or are they, too, constrained by larger factors? In pursuit of providing answers to these questions, this study explores measures of political engagement by religious leaders.

To date, the literature remains largely void of an attempt to examine the social media activity (Twitter activity in particular) of evangelical leaders. The bulk of scholarly work on Twitter focuses, at a general level, on topic and sentiment analysis of tweets (for examples, see Wang, Wei, Liu, Zhou, & Zhang, 2011; Agarwal, Xie, Vovsha, Rambow, & Passonneau, 2011; Neethu & Rajasree, 2013), while, more narrowly, within the context of political sentiment and behavior there have been efforts to identify the political leanings of Twitter users and to extrapolate from these users' political communications their electoral and political behavior (see Tumasjan et al., 2010; Conover et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2012; Ceron et al., 2013). Regarding religious views, studies to date typically have been comparative in nature, focusing on differences in the social media use of religious and non-religious groups and how these differences translate into attitudes and policy preferences (Ritter, Preston, & Hernandez, 2014; Taylor et al., 2016; Pennycook et al., 2017). The few studies that specifically examine the Twitter activity of evangelical leaders rely on a small sample size and further fail to consider these leaders' engagement with political issues (Codone, 2014; Cheong, 2014).

Though little research on evangelical leaders' use of social media as a platform for engaging issues related to politics exists, several studies of celebrity use of social media offer some general clues as to the factors that may motivate and constrain the online activities of prominent evangelicals more generally. There is, for example, an important correlation between attitudes toward fame – namely, a strong desire for visibility – and frequent, active online engagement, such as posting and responding to posts as opposed to passively reading posts (Greenwood, 2013).

3   Marshall's Levels of Self-Presentation

According to Marshall (2010), there are three levels of self-presentation whereby celebrities exhibit their lives to a public audience online. The first is the "public self." The public self is most interested in, what can be put simply as, self-promotion or self-marketing—i.e., ticket sales, public appearances, new book or music releases, etc. The use of social media as a marketing tool by celebrities

has been highlighted by several studies, including Kaplan and Haenlein's (2012) examination of the viral marketing strategy utilized by Britney Spears.

The second form of public self-presentation is what Marshall calls the "public private self" (2010). This is a more personal presentation of self, meant to convey publicly the celebrity's private life (albeit, at times, a choreographed version of it). Twitter is most often the vehicle of choice for displaying the public private self, mostly due to the platform's facilitation of "short textual bursts" that promote immediacy and possess a level of mobile connectivity not readily afforded by other varieties of social networking (Marshall, 2010, p. 45). This particular sort of self-presentation is akin to the fan–celebrity relationship exemplified by Lady Gaga and her "Little Monsters," which is aided by her passionate online engagement with fans (Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013).

The "transgressive self" is the third form of self-presentation proposed by Marshall (2010)—it is also the hardest to measure. Marshall describes the transgressive self as "an accelerated pathway to notoriety and attention both in the wider world of on-line culture for all users and very visibly for celebrities whose behavioral transgressions expressed in interpersonal registers move swiftly into the powerful viral on-line juggernaut" (2010, p. 45). This self is most motivated by emotion, and it is often considered by audiences as the most honest form of self-presentation because it is often visceral and/or highly intimate in nature. The transgressive self is also the most likely to "go viral" and is likely to be picked up quickly by traditional media outlets and entertainment news.

The dimensions of self-presentation discussed by Marshall (2010) provide a vocabulary for identifying factors that potentially constrain evangelical leaders from speaking out about politics on Twitter. For example, if addressing political issues could hurt a church leader's image (public self) and thus hamper celebrity (desire for visibility), such activity is likely to be avoided. On the other hand, if an evangelical leader's trademark message is uniquely political, political engagement on Twitter may be more likely.

However unsurprising this speculation, to date little effort has been expended in determining if these assumptions about evangelical leaders' use of Twitter are born out empirically. In the following section, we discuss a new dataset of evangelical leader tweets that allows us to explore evangelical leaders' online behavior and self-presentation.

4   Data

To capture a general sense of how evangelical leaders use Twitter, the first task undertaken was to compile a list of prominent Twitter accounts; however, this

is a difficult exercise given the amount of ambiguity surrounding both the term "evangelical" as well as the term "leader." First, there is no universally accepted definition of "evangelical." The scholarly literature has constantly evolved on the topic (see Bebbington, 2003; Hackett & Lindsay, 2008), and the evangelical community struggles internally with the criteria (Kurtzleben, 2015). Though it is hard to pin down a precise definition for evangelical, studies including the 2011 "Global Survey of Evangelical Protestant Leaders" conducted by the Pew Research Center identify a number of characteristics associated with self-identified evangelicals, including a "born-again" experience, commitment to following the teachings of Christ, commitment to evangelism (leading others to Christ), a belief in the exclusivity of salvation through Christ, and belief in miracles, among other characteristics. The approach that was adopted here tried to embrace the ambiguity of the term. Speaking broadly, the sample included the accounts of prominent religious leaders that most individuals who attend traditionally evangelical churches would see as "one of them." What this means tangibly is: would a book written by this person be sold in an evangelical bookstore such as Lifeway Christian Books (which is operated by the Southern Baptist Convention)? Oftentimes this has become a litmus test for an individual whose theology could be considered out of step with mainstream evangelicalism. For instance, Jen Hatmaker (a popular Christian author) had her books removed from Lifeway's stores in 2016 for publicly affirming same-sex marriage (Shellnutt, 2016).

Second, the nature of evangelicalism makes it difficult to clearly demarcate leadership. Evangelical Christianity (writ large) does not have a rigid hierarchical structure like other religious groups (i.e., the Catholic or United Methodist churches). Therefore, a broader definition of leadership was employed that takes cues from the writings of John Maxwell. Maxwell is a self-identified evangelical who has written a number of books on leadership, including *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership.* Maxwell defines leadership as "influence – nothing more, nothing less" (Maxwell, 2007). So, instead of limiting the study to just evangelicals who have a clearly defined leadership title such as "senior pastor" or "president," the dataset includes leaders who may lack formal titles but have enormous influence. One of the most illuminating examples of this is Beth Moore, who is likely the most prominent female evangelical Bible teacher in the United States but does not hold a title that accurately captures that influence (Smith, 2017). Despite not restricting the sample to just pastors, the dataset does include many who hold positions of leadership in a prominent church or religious organization. For instance, at least 50 of the 88 Twitter accounts in the list were individuals who are current or former church pastors. In addition, there are a number of prominent Christian college/seminary presidents.

The other problem we encountered was how to define influential Twitter accounts. In general, we worked under the assumption that Twitter accounts that have a larger number of followers are more likely to have their tweets read, retweeted, and responded to, and therefore the total number of Twitter followers was taken into consideration. The average account that was included in the sample had 370,000 followers. The most popular account was Joel Osteen with 4.68 million followers, while the fewest number was Ted Haggard's (the former President of the National Association of Evangelicals) with 938 followers.[3] This collection of 88 Twitter accounts is by no means a comprehensive list of prominent evangelicals on social media; however, the goal of collecting this data was to generate a sample that would be representative of a larger population.

The final list was a collection of 88 total accounts that were scraped using the twitteR package, which was written for R statistical analysis software.[4] Twitter has a number of APIs available to scrape tweets from their database; however, the public API was chosen for this analysis because it is provided without charge to researchers.[5] The final dataset contained 85,543 tweets with over 1.2 million total words. The scraping process was conducted during the first half of September of 2016. The earliest tweet was created on December 13, 2008, and the most recent tweet in the dataset was September 17, 2016.[6]

5 Method

One of the most important evolutions in data analytics in recent years is automated text analysis. For decades scholars have been using the technique of content analysis as a means to understand the thought processes, motivation, and interactions between individuals (Stemler, 2001; Neuendorf, 2016). While this approach to research has generated a tremendous amount of scientific progress, it is a technique that is incredibly labor intensive and opens researchers

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3   A full list of each account in the sample is available in the Appendix.

4   See Gentry (2015).

5   There are several limitations to using the public API, and the one that constrains this analysis to the greatest degree is that a user can only download the last 3,200 tweets from each user account. This does truncate the dataset for some accounts; however, only one of the accounts that were analyzed contained more than 3,200 tweets, and therefore it was possible to capture the complete history of nearly the entire sample.

6   This timeframe was chosen both to demonstrate the growing importance of Twitter as a medium of communication for evangelical leaders, and to allow for a larger longitudinal sample to facilitate a more holistic picture of salient words and topics mentioned in evangelical leaders' tweets that a cross-sectional snapshot would fail to capture.

up to a number of types of bias, especially when dealing with a large corpus of source material (Hogenraad et al., 1996). Text as data is an emerging field in natural language processing that uses much of the same logic as quantitative social science to convert words into numbers as means to generate word counts and conduct sentiment analysis, among other techniques (Jurafsky & Martin, 2009). The advantages of using this technique to analyze over 85,000 tweets are apparent; however, care must be employed when conducting text analysis. Words need to be understood in the context of sentences/tweets to understand if they are being used in a similar way (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). This work relies primarily on insights gleaned from computerized text analysis, such as word counts, "metadata" associated with given tweets and Twitter accounts, and a little used but powerful method known as term frequency-inverse document frequency. However, in several places the actual tweets were read, as a means to ensure that the analysis presented accurately portrays the realities of the data.

6   Findings

6.1   *The Growth in Twitter Volume*

Figure 1 shows the change in the volume of Twitter activity of evangelical leaders during the period we sampled. One can easily see that frequency of tweets by evangelical leaders in the dataset increased exponentially over time. Due to the potential usefulness of rapid updates when it comes to sharing material, many have likely turned to Twitter as a social networking tool since one of the key features of Twitter is the speed with which it allows users to make updates (Levinson, 2009). In April of 2016, there were 3,453 tweets scraped, and in August of the same year that total rose to 6,377 total tweets. The trajectory observed would indicate that the number of tweets doubles every six to nine months.

6.2   *The Most Effective and Influential Tweeters*

Evangelical Twitter accounts can be examined by two broad metrics: *prolific-ness* and *effectiveness*. The former can be measured by simply comparing the total number of tweets per evangelical included in the analysis. The latter can be measured by comparing the number of Twitter followers per evangelical Twitter account and the frequency that evangelical tweets are retweeted and favorited by other Twitter users. By these metrics, Joel Osteen is, by far, the most prolific tweeter, followed by Beth Moore. However, while Joel Osteen has the greatest percentage of tweets that have been retweeted, Joyce Meyer and John Piper have had a greater proportion of their tweets retweeted by other

Increase in Twitter Usage by Evangelical Leaders over Time
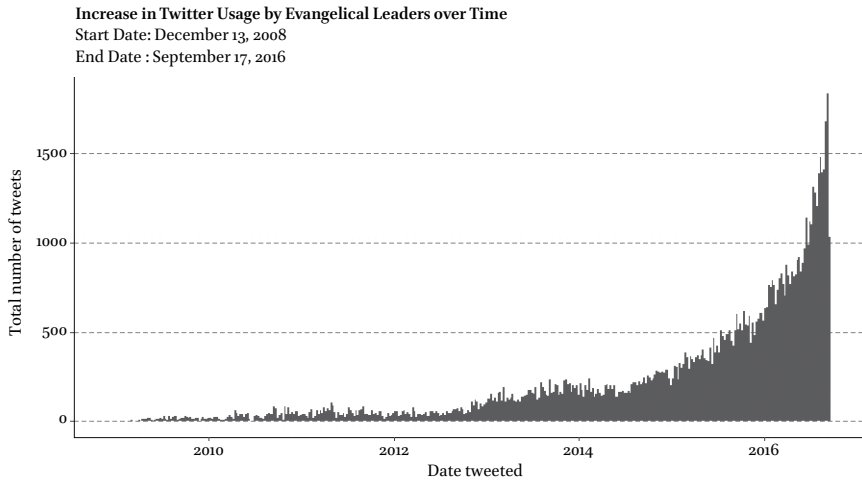Start Date: December 13, 2008
End Date : September 17, 2016

FIGURE 1   Tweet Counts for Sample of Evangelical Leaders over Time

Twitter users. Billy Graham is the least prolific tweeter among the top 35 evangelical Twitter accounts, although a large share of (what few) tweets he has produced have been retweeted. When it comes to favorites, the share of tweets per evangelical Twitter account that have been favorited by other Twitter users is quite high. Joel Osteen, again, appears especially dominant. This would provide support for a clear association between the number of retweets and favorites received per tweet; however, favorites are more often received in comparison to retweets. Additionally, the number of followers per evangelical Twitter account appears to have a positive correlation with retweets and favorites, although there are some exceptions.[7]

Figure 2 plots the mean number of retweets per tweet and the mean number of favorites received per tweet for each of the top 35 evangelical Twitter accounts. To make the plotted points more distinguishable, the mean number of retweets and favorites are placed on a log10 scale. The number of followers per Twitter account is denoted by the size of the plotted points: a larger point denotes more followers.

Effectiveness by one metric is positively associated with effectiveness in the other. Not only is Joel Osteen the most effective on Twitter, his number of followers is also the greatest. Meanwhile, Tim Tebow, who has the second most effective Twitter account, has fewer Twitter followers than Joel Osteen, but many more than the individuals who appear in the lower left corner of

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7   See Appendix 3A for visualizations of how frequently the top 35 Twitter accounts receive both favorites and retweets.

Effectiveness of Top 35 Evangelical Twitter Accounts
Effectiveness Measured by the Mean Number of Retweets per Tweet
and the Mean Number of Favoriteds Received per Tweet.
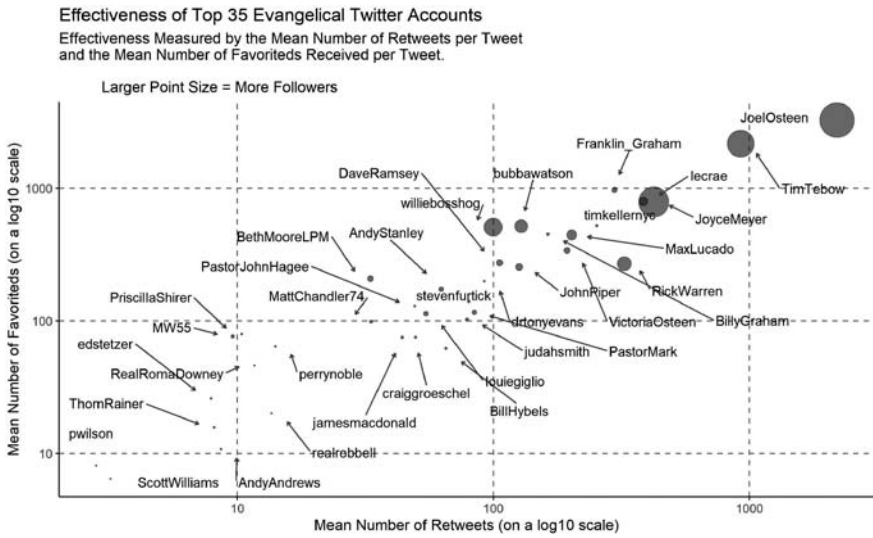

FIGURE 2   Scatter Plot for Mean Favorites Count over Mean Retweet Count per Top 35
            Evangelical Leaders

the plot. However, there are some exceptions to this pattern. Joyce Meyer and
Lecrae, for example, have nearly equal levels of effectiveness, even though the
former has substantially more followers on Twitter than the latter.

6.3   *Word Usage*

When analyzing the words used by the evangelical leaders in the sample,
the most straightforward and effective way to visualize frequency is a word
cloud, which can be seen in Figure 3. It is not surprising from the sample that
the evangelicals we analyzed used religious language with a great amount of
regularity. "God" was the most used word in the sample, appearing a total of
10,656 times, which is over twice as much as the second most used word, "us."
It is somewhat intriguing that this sample was three times more likely to use
the word "God" than "Jesus," and the word "Christ" is invoked half as much as
"Jesus." The overall tone of the words used by evangelicals could most aptly be
described as encouraging and collective. For example, "will," "love," "new," and
"life" all appear in the top ten word counts. In addition, the sample writes in an
inclusive manner, with words like "us" and "team" having counts of over 4,000
occurrences each. It thus seems that many of the individuals who are preach-
ers or evangelists use their Twitter accounts as an extension of their religious
message. Many high-profile evangelicals like Joel Osteen use tweets as a way
to encourage both their local congregation as well as the wider audience that
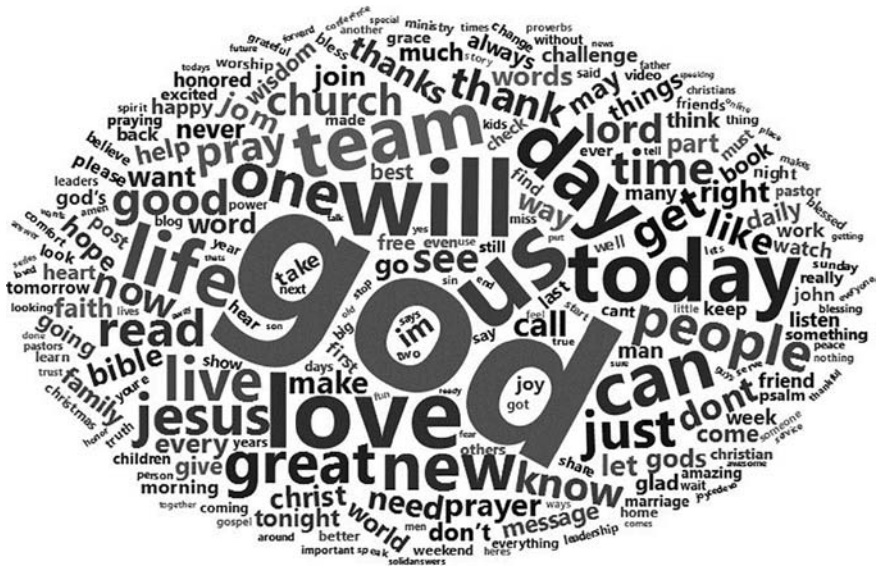
FIGURE 3   Word Frequency Cloud

follows them on social media. These results provide support for the notion that evangelical leaders both focus on the promotional use of social media and also on the ability for Twitter to create a connection between author and followers, although that connection could be considered particularly weak. What is also notable is that none of the top 250 words in the sample have any sort of overt political meaning. This will be explored in greater depth later in the analysis.

6.4   *Engagement with Other Users*
While it seems that evangelical leaders try to use their tweets as a way to be inclusive of their audience, it is useful to further explore how often these individuals engage with the larger "Twitterverse." One simple way to measure engagement is the number of replies to, or mentions of, another user via use of the "@" symbol either at the beginning or in the body of the text. Both of these actions lead followers to believe that an evangelical leader wants to draw attention to other users or to directly engage in a conversation with someone that follows them on Twitter. Each of these would provide direct evidence that social connectedness is a primary motivator for the use of Twitter by evangelical celebrities.

Figure 4 displays the results from an analysis of the level of engagement that is evident among the most popular accounts in the sample (based on followers). It is quickly evident that there is a stark difference in the amount

Evangelical Leaders' Level of Engagement with Twitter Followers
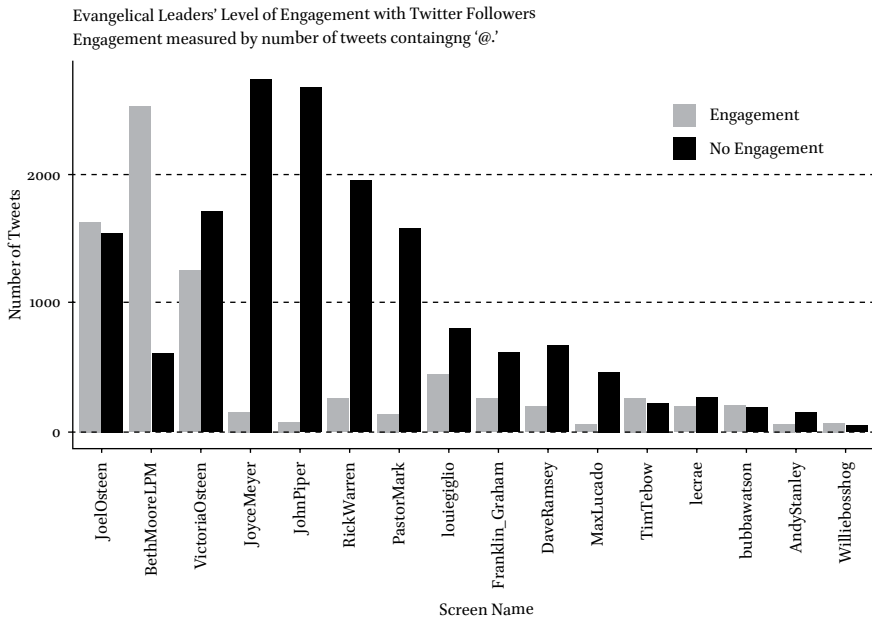Engagement measured by number of tweets containng '@.'

FIGURE 4   Engagement and Non-engagement with Twitter Followers

of engagement that occurs even in the three most popular accounts: Joel Osteen's, Beth Moore's, and Victoria Osteen's. In each of these cases, a substantial number of interactive tweets occur, especially in the case of Beth Moore, who includes the @ symbol in nearly 80% of her tweets. The balance for Joel Osteen is much closer to 50/50. However, when one looks at the fourth, fifth, and sixth most popular accounts of Joyce Meyer, John Piper, and Rick Warren, an even starker pattern emerges. Joyce Meyer is nearly the opposite of Beth Moore, with just 156 out of nearly 2,900 total tweets that engage other users. From comparing the style and substance of Beth Moore and Joyce Meyer, it seems evident that Moore is in control of her own Twitter account, while Meyer's seems to be run by a social media team.[8] This difference could explain why

8   The evidence for this claim can be found in the fact that many of Joyce Meyer's tweets are signed with other names (i.e., ^Regina or ^Ellen). However, beginning in January 2017, the Joyce Meyer Twitter account has taken a completely different approach to engagement. For instance, tweets are now signed with a more generic signature "-JMM" and the account has become much more engaged and prolific in its activity. For instance, in a 20-day period from June to July of 2018, the account tweeted 3,200 times, or over 160 times per day. Of those 3,200 tweets, nearly 3,000 of them were engaging with her followers. It is clear that there was a significant shift in the social media strategy of Joyce Meyer Ministries.

Meyer's account is more reluctant to personally engage, while Beth Moore uses Twitter for primarily social engagement. The analysis was then broadened to the entire sample as a means to determine whether engagement is a causal factor for a more effective or popular Twitter account, but there was no evidence for either of those two claims. From the data that was collected, it seems to matter very little to followers whether an account engages other users or not, either through mentions or direct replies.[9]

6.5   *Analyzing Unique Words*

In addition to measuring the total engagement the sample had with other users of Twitter, it would be insightful to determine if each individual account had specific words or hashtags that they used which differentiated themselves from other Twitter users. Analyzing the uniqueness of users can be a valuable way to understand whether evangelical leaders are using their tweets as a way to teach followers about theology, to encourage them in their faith, to talk about their personal lives, or to promote their work. The approach that was undertaken to find unique words used by each account was tf-idf analysis, which is a measure of how often a term is used adjusted for how rarely it is used. In this case, tweets were compared of one user to the tweets of every other user in the dataset to see if they use unique words frequently. This analysis was conducted using the tidytext package written for the R statistical software program.[10] The results of this tf-idf analysis can be seen in Figure 5.

It is crucial to note that tweets are inherently a difficult media to assess with textual analysis because they often contain many troublesome elements to parse such as hashtags and hyperlinks, which is evident in the results displayed in Figure 5. Instead of displaying the entirety of the sample, only the top ten Twitter accounts based on number of followers are shown. It becomes quickly apparent that certain personalities are much more likely to use their social media as a promotional vehicle. The clearest example of this is Tim Tebow's usage of the phrase "avosinspace," an advertising campaign for avocados from Mexico, which Tebow was paid to promote.[11] Other evangelical leaders did not use their Twitter account to do paid promotion, but instead chose to promote their own projects. Examples of this in Figure 5 include author and pastor Max Lucado, who frequently mentioned the name of several of his books, including *Grace: The Book* and *Glory Days*. This same phenomenon also appears multiple

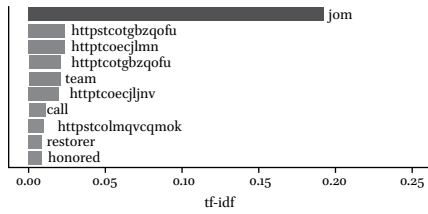9   Scatterplots comparing engagement with both follower counts and retweets are available in Appendix 5A.
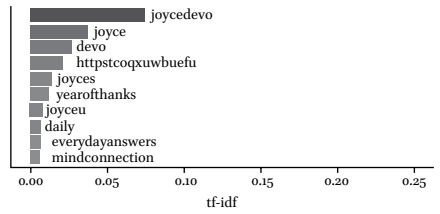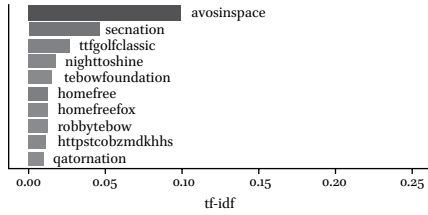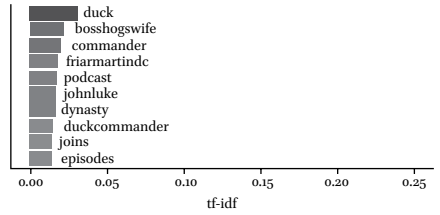
10   See Silge and Robinson (2016).

11   http://gridironnow.com/tim-tebow-twitter-chat-categories-run-the-gamut/.
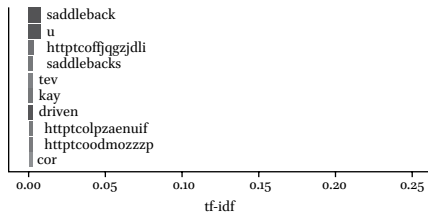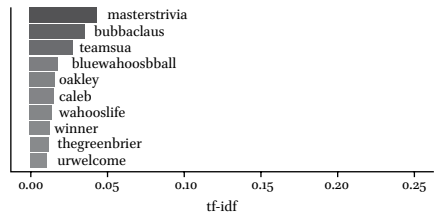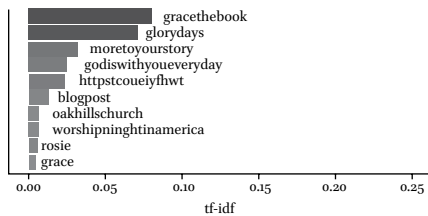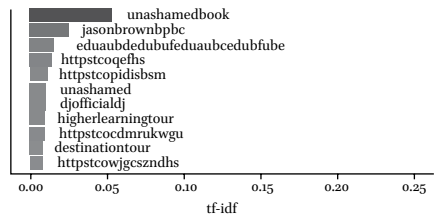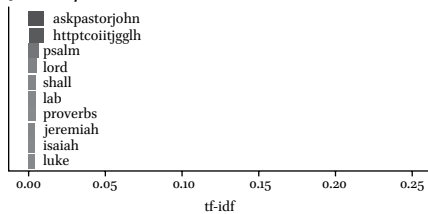
Top tf-idf Words

FIGURE 5   Top 10 tf-idf Words for 10 Evangelical Leaders

times in the account of Lecrae, a Christian rapper, who mentions the name of his book *Unashamed* as well as the hashtags that he used for his musical tours, including "higherlearningtour" and "destinationtour." These findings evince strong support for the public self (often interested in self-promotion) described by Marshall (2010).

In contrast to the accounts of those such as Tebow, Lecrae, and Lucado are the Twitter accounts of evangelicals who are more likely to be seen as pastors by the public. In Figu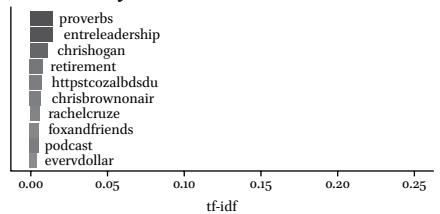re 5, there are two clear examples of pastors using Twitter as an extension of their church ministry: Rick Warren and John Piper. Looking through the tf-idf results for either of these two reveals very little in the way of self-promotion. Rick Warren mentions the name of his church, Saddleback, frequently but only once mentions his popular book, *Purpose Driven Life*. John Piper's tweets are even less promotional. The unique terms that Piper uses are books of the Bible, including Psalms, Proverbs, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Luke. It seems, therefore, that people like Piper and Warren are forging a path on social media that does not fit neatly into the three levels of self-presentation proposed by Marshall (2010). It appears that a fourth dimension – "extension of professional career" – represents another likely use of Twitter by well-known individuals.

6.6 *Mentions of Political Issues*

In order to explore the extent to which the sample engaged in political discourse, several words were identified that either relate to topics that are political but general/neutral or were focused on specific political issues. The list of words chosen is hardly comprehensive; however, the goal here is not to develop a complete lexicon of political terms but rather to demonstrate how reliance on a count measure of political terms could look in practice and how such a measure can be used to provide insight into the political engagement of religious leaders on Twitter. Of the 21 words that were chosen, 11 were considered to be more general—i.e., words and names such as "Obama," "Trump," "election," and "politics." This kind of speech could include statements like, "Don't forget that election day is on Tuesday." This kind of speech is undoubtedly political but would not likely be seen as divisive. On the other hand, it seemed worthwhile to get a general sense of how often evangelical leaders engaged in political speech that had the potential to be divisive. Three broad categories of issues were chosen: the conflict in the Middle East with isis and radical Islam, abortion, and same-sex marriage. In total, ten terms were selected to assess these three large topic areas; however, care was taken to make sure to not include words that may be associated with a political issue

but could also be more innocuous. For instance, the term "marriage" appears 472 times in the dataset. Of those, 136 come from the account of Dr. James Dobson, who is the founder of Focus on the Family. None of those 136 tweets containing "marriage" have to do with same-sex relationships. This list of 21 terms is not to be considered comprehensive. It is likely that evangelical leaders made mention of a myriad of political topics during this time period. In addition, oftentimes political discussion occurs in coded language that is only decipherable to a specific audience (Djupe & Calfano, 2013). To untangle every instance of political discourse would be impossible. Instead, reliance on this list serves to demonstrate the potential of such a measure of political discussion and the types of insights that such a measure can provide—future studies will certainly need to update this list of political words.

Figure 6 indicates the frequency of each of the 21 words in the sample. In total, 3,658 tweets contained at least one of these political terms. Names of nationally known politicians such as Obama and Trump were the most used by the accounts that were scraped. For President Obama, this might be due to the fact that he was in the White House for the entirety of the sample, but it is readily apparent that Trump's name was very popular, despite the fact that
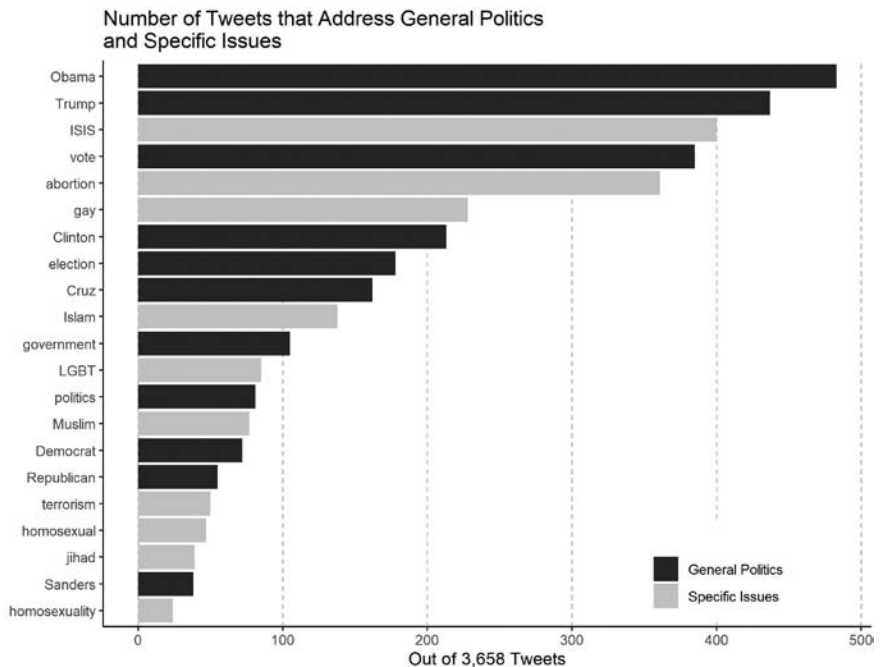

FIGURE 6   Number of Tweets that Mention Political Terms

he was only a national political figure for 18 months before he was elected President.

When it comes to specific political issues, evangelicals frequently mentioned the problem of ISIS in the Middle East, which may be due to the fact that the conflict has a religious component that could have been used as fodder for evangelical Christians to discuss. The second most frequently used term was "abortion," which suggests that the issue is a particularly salient one among the evangelical leaders in the sample. Turning to another important issue among evangelicals, many permutations of the terms surrounding the gay marriage debate were included, such as "gay," "homosexual," "homosexuality," and "LGBT." Surprisingly, even combined those three terms were still used with less frequency than abortion. This becomes an even more interesting finding when one considers that during the time period that the tweets were composed the United States Supreme Court legalized gay marriage in the United States (Yoshimo, 2015). It may be that evangelical leaders have come to the conclusion that the gay marriage fight is over, with public opinion shifting rapidly in favor of legalization (Brewer, 2014), while abortion is still a highly divisive issue among the general electorate (Pacheco, 2014).

Looking beyond how much these political terms were mentioned generally, it is important to understand how these political tweets are distributed throughout the sample of 88 accounts that were analyzed. Figure 7 displays the frequency of political term mentions by the 35 most politically active evangelicals in the sample (as measured by the frequency with which individuals mentioned at least one of the terms included among the 21 selected). A cursory glance at the results paints a clear picture: a small number of evangelical leaders are doing the lion's share of the political discussion, at least in regards to the words examined here. Two individuals stand out from among the rest when it comes to who was most likely to discuss political topics. The Twitter account that contains the most political language is Jay Sekulow's, who is the chief counsel of the American Center for Law and Justice, an organization that is committed to fighting for the religious liberty of evangelical Christians in the United States.[12] The other prominent political tweeter is David Barton, who is the founder of Wallbuilders, LLC, an organization that promotes the argument that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that there should be no separation between church and state.[13] The fact that these individuals tweet frequently about political matters provides support for the idea that they use Twitter as a vehicle to promote the message that made them popular

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12   http://aclj.org/jay-sekulow.
13   http://www.wallbuilders.com/abtbiodb.asp.

Number of Tweets that Address General Politics
and Specific Issues
Top 35 out of a Total of 77 Evangelicals that Talk about Politics
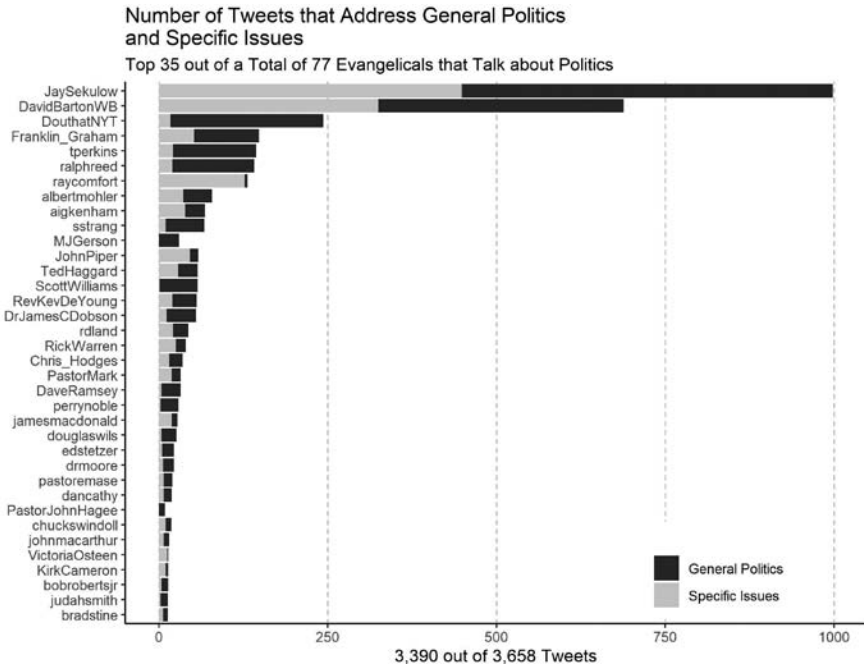

FIGURE 7   Count of Tweets that Contain a Political Term per Evangelical Leader

in the first place. These individuals exist largely outside the constraints that
are placed on pastors who preach to the same congregation on a weekly basis.
The evidence for this conclusion is strengthened by the fact that none of the
top ten political accounts are those of pastors of individual congregations but
instead are those of Evangelicals who have strong ties to politics, like Sekulow,
Barton, Ralph Reed, and Tony Perkins. These individuals are not constrained by
politics; rather, their influence may be amplified when they speak on political
issues.

While it is apparent that there are a fair number of political tweets being
written by evangelical leaders, it is important to note how much or little of the
other overall sample is composed of political messages. Figure 8 displays the
number of tweets that are non-political, contain discussion of general politics,
and contain terms related to specific political issues.

Of the 85,543 total tweets in sample, just 2,209 contained words generally
related to politics such as Obama, Trump, or election, and 1,449 contained dis-
cussion of ISIS, abortion, and other hot button political topics. Taken together,
just 4.3% of all the tweets in the sample contained at least one of the 21 terms

Number of Political vs. non-Political Tweets
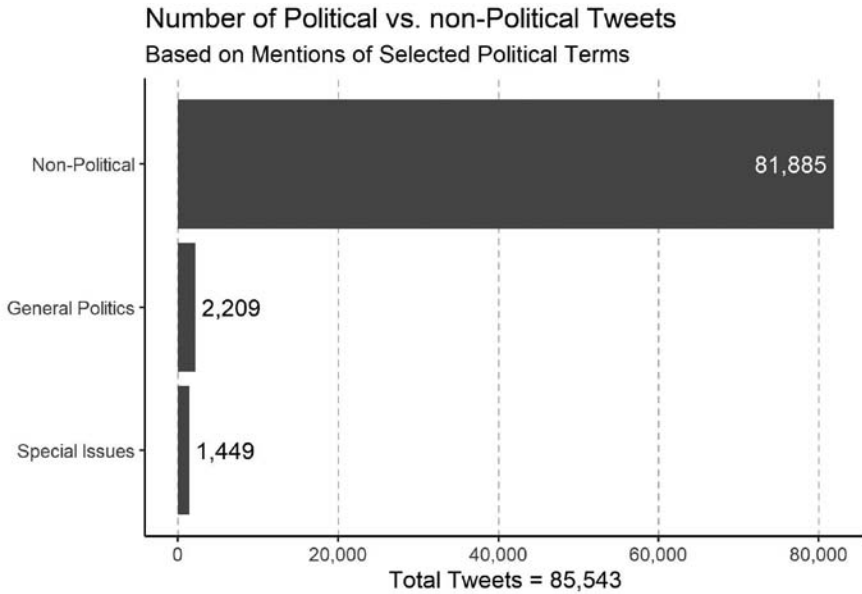Based on Mentions of Selected Political Terms

FIGURE 8   Number of Tweets in Sample that Contain at Least One Political Term

examined by this study. In addition, while we found that 77 of the 88 accounts did contain general or specific political language, very few accounts could be described as being especially political. As Figure 8 indicates, over half of all the political mentions in the sample came from three accounts, and nearly two-thirds of the total mentions come from the top five accounts. Taken together, those five highly political accounts comprise a total of approximately 215,000 followers,[14] which is just 5% of the followers of either Joel Osteen or Joyce Meyer, two accounts that hardly ever mention one of the 21 political terms used here. It seems entirely possible that an evangelical Christian could follow a dozen or more of the accounts in this sample and never see a mention of politics at all. Of course, given the limited scope of political terms used here, this analysis should be regarded as, at best, suggestive of a broader trend. It is possible (even highly likely) that more than 4.3% of tweets in this sample are political in nature; however, only a small number appear to explicitly mention the political topics examined here.

14   This number does not consider the number of people who follow several of the accounts in the top five, and therefore the likely number of unique followers for these five individuals is less than 200,000 in total.

7   Discussion

As a first cut, this analysis provides few hard conclusions; however, it does provide numerous interesting insights that hopefully serve to inspire theoretical contributions and more in-depth empirical analysis from other scholars. Twitter use by evangelical leaders has exponentially increased in the past several years, suggesting that religious leaders see growing value in Twitter as a social media platform. It is further evident that evangelical leaders' Twitter activities vary substantially in both their prolific-ness and their effectiveness. The latter, measured via average counts of both favorites and retweets per tweet, shows a noticeable association with the number of followers per Twitter account (with only some exceptions) while the former, though still relevant, lacks an equally strong association with the share of favorites and retweets received per tweet.

Through use of a rarely applied, but valuable, technique for text analysis (term frequency–inverse document frequency, or "tf-idf"), the identification of the unique self-portrayals of top evangelicals was ascertained. While some displayed unique engagement in various degrees of self-promotion, others used their Twitter accounts as a distinctive extension of their ministry. Furthermore, this analysis shows that the nature and scope of evangelical leaders' engagement with followers is likely constrained by the primary purpose of a given leader's Twitter account. While some evangelicals' accounts seem to be run by a marketing or ministry team, other accounts are used by evangelicals personally, with the latter scenario facilitating one-on-one interaction and the former precluding it.

Regarding politics, the unique message and public image of a given evangelical leader appears to either limit or enable political activity. Some evangelicals whose popularity and image are founded upon a uniquely political message have significantly more tweets that mention at least one of the 21 political terms selected for use in this study. Meanwhile, those whose image is more firmly grounded in ministry, music, art, athletics, etc., mention these terms with less frequency. Of course, the list of political terms used here is not comprehensive. The pattern in mentions of political terms, though interesting and consistent with a reasonable set of expectations about which evangelical leaders should be most apt to engage with political issues, should be interpreted with caution. The methods used here are demonstrative of a potentially fruitful approach for gaining greater insight into the political engagement of religious leaders on social media, though the findings of this study are limited in scope, necessitating future research that develops a more comprehensive lexicon of political terms that can be used to draw more certain inferences.

Returning to the three-part theoretical outline put forth by Marshall (2010), a mixed bag emerges. For instance, the results provide clear support for the "public self." The results from the tf-idf portion of the analysis indicate that many accounts are used frequently to support the person's career. Oftentimes tweets are meant to inform followers of upcoming book releases, tour dates, or speaking events. In addition, there is evidence that some accounts engaged in paid sponsorship, as in the case of Tim Tebow and his discussion of avocados. The second dimension of Marshall's typology "the public private" self was less evident in these results. That could likely be because it is hard to use computerized textual analysis to identify tweets of a more personal nature. For instance, a tweet that included the word "son" or "daughter" may refer to that individual's children or it could be a portion of a Bible verse. It seems that this type of analysis is not well suited to fully investigate this line of inquiry. The "transgressive self" is the last type proposed by Marshall, and this analysis looked at these instances through the lens of political expression. As noted previously, an evangelical engaging in political discussion can be highly polarizing and could lead to the loss of followers. This analysis found that evangelicals who are widely known for their political discourse such as David Barton or Jay Sekulow do not hesitate to mention political issues. On the other hand, the vast majority of this sample largely stayed away from politics and focused their tweets on religious matters.

Taken together, this empirical analysis attempts to make headway into the new landscape of social media. Using computerized textual analysis allows researchers the tremendous ability to analyze tens of thousands of tweets in just a few seconds, something that was not possible even a decade before. However, no computerized analysis adequately understands the nuances and subtleties of human communication as well as other human beings. In the future, analysis that combines both computerized techniques alongside human interpretation will push social science to better understand the way that religious leaders communicate to their flocks about matters of faith.

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Appendix

Last Name	First Name	Username	Position/Title	Followers
Allen	Jason	Jasonkeithallen	Pastor and Seminary President	11.1K
Anderson	David	AndersonSpeaks	Pastor and Author	49.4K
Andrews	Andy	AndyAndrews	Author	191K
Barton	David	DavidBartonWB	Company President and Author	28K
Bell	Rob	Realrobbell	Author and Motivational Speaker	159K
Bezet	Rick	rick_bezet	Pastor	23.7K
Bolz-Weber	Nadia	Sarcasticluther	Pastor and Author	45.8K
Cameron	Kirk	KirkCameron	Actor	61.3K
Cathy	Dan	DanCathy	CEO	53.8K
Champion	Joel	joechampion	Pastor	15.9K
Chandler	Matt	MattChandler74	Pastor	383K
Chapman	Gary	DrGaryChapman	Author	49.9K
Comfort	Ray	Raycomfort	Pastor	53.3K
De Jesus	Wilfredo	PastorChoco	Pastor and Author	13.4K
DeYoung	Kevin	RevKevDeYoung	Pastor	91.2K
Dobson	James	DrJamesCDobson	Author and Psychologist	39.1K
Douthat	Ross	DouthatNYT	Author and Columnist	83.2K
Downey	Roma	RealRomaDowney	TV Producer	140K
Driscoll	Mark	PastorMark	Pastor	525K
Edmondson	Ron	RonEdmondson	Pastor and Consultant	137K
Evans	Tony	Drtonyevans	Pastor and Author	172K
Falwell	Jerry	JerryJrFalwell	Liberty University President	19.7K
Floyd	Ronnie	RonnieFloyd	Southern Baptist Convention President	25.3K
Fry	Matt	mattfry	Pastor	16.2K
Furtick	Steven	Stevenfurtick	Pastor	313K
George	Willie	Willie_George	Pastor	32.2K
Gerson	Michael	MJGerson	Op-Ed Columnist	16.4K
Gibs	Joel	CoachJoeGibbs	Former Football Coach	5,716

Last Name	First Name	Username	Position/Title	Followers
Giglio	Louie	Louiegiglio	Pastor	557K
Graham	Billy	BillyGraham	Evangelist	321K
Graham	Franklin	Franklin_Graham	Evangelist	644K
Groeschel	Craig	Craiggroeschel	Pastor	283K
Hagee	John	PastorJohnHagee	Pastor and CEO	238K
Haggard	Ted	TedHaggard	Pastor	938
Ham	Ken	aigkenham	President of Answers in Genesis	40.2K
Heisel	Doug	DougHeisel	Pastor	1,964
Hodges	Chris	Chris_Hodges	Pastor	77.9K
Hybels	Bill	BillHybels	Pastor	267K
Jakes	TD	TDJakesShow	Pastor and Author	21.3K
Johnson	Brian	brianjohnsonM	Singer and Worship Leader	103K
Junior	Michael	MichaelJrcomedy	Stand-Up Comedian	45.2K
Keller	Timothy	timkellernyc	Pastor	278K
LaHaye	Tim	Dr_Tim_LaHaye	Author and Minister	1,152
Land	Richard	rdland	Southern Evangelical Seminary President	2,079
Lucado	Max	MaxLucado	Pastor and Author	1.29M
MacArthur	John	Johnmacarthur	Pastor and Seminary President	133K
MacDonald	James	Jamesmacdonald	Pastor	312K
Mahaney	C.J.	CJMahaney	Pastor	53.4K
Mason	Eric	Pastoremase	Pastor	32.1K
McLaren	Brian	Brianmclaren	Pastor and Activist	48K
Meyer	Joyce	JoyceMeyer	TV and Radio Show Host	4.05M
Mohler	Albert	Albertmohler	Pastor and Baptist Seminary President	128K
Moore	Beth	BethMooreLPM	Ministry Founder and Author	724K
Moore	Russell	Drmoore	Theologian	102K
Munsey	Phil	Philmunsey	Chairman of Champion Network of Pastors	30K
Noble	Perry	Perrynoble	Pastor and Author	170K
Norris	Chuck	ChuckNorris	Martial Artist and Actor	106K

Last Name	First Name	Username	Position/Title	Followers
Ortlund	Ray	rayortlund	Pastor	23.7K
Osteen	Joel	JoelOsteen	Pastor	4.68M
Osteen	Victoria	VictoriaOsteen	Pastor	720K
Parsons	Burk	BurkParsons	Pastor	33.9K
Peavy	Jake	JakePeavy_22	Professional Baseball Player	123K
Perkins	Tony	tperkins	Lobby Organization President	25.1K
Piper	John	JohnPiper	Pastor and Author	860K
Rainer	Thom	ThomRainer	CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources	228K
Ramsey	Dave	DaveRamsey	Radio Show Host and Author	753K
Reed	Ralph	Ralphreed	Political Activist	11.4K
Roberts Jr	Bob	bobrobertsjr	Pastor	12.5K
Robertson	Willie	williebosshog	TV Personality	2.42M
Sekulow	Jay	JaySekulow	Attorney and Talk Show Host	64.3K
Shirer	Priscilla	PriscillaShirer	Author	227K
Smith	Judah	Judahsmith	Pastor	376K
Stanley	Andy	AndyStanley	Pastor and Author	543K
Stetzer	Ed	Edstetzer	Pastor and College Professor	197K
Stine	Brad	Bradstine	Stand-Up Comedian	4,319
Stockstill	Larry	larrystockstill	Pastor	19.8K
Strang	Stephen	sstrang	CEO of Charisma Media	4,055
Surratt	Greg	Gregsurratt	Pastor	32.6K
Sweet	Michael	MichaelhSweet	Singer	67.9K
Swindoll	Chuck	Chuckswindoll	Pastor	104K
Tebow	Tim	TimTebow	Football Player	3.33M
Waltrip	Michael	MW55	Stock Car Racing Driver	386K
Warren	Rick	RickWarren	Pastor	1.84M
Watson	Bubba	Bubbawatson	Professional Golfer	1.72M
Williams	Scott	ScottWilliams	Pastor	144K
Wilson	Douglas	douglaswils	Pastor	23.7K

Last Name	First Name	Username	Position/Title	Followers
Wilson	Pete	Pwilson	Pastor	153K
	Lecrae	lecrae	Hip Hop Artist	1.09M

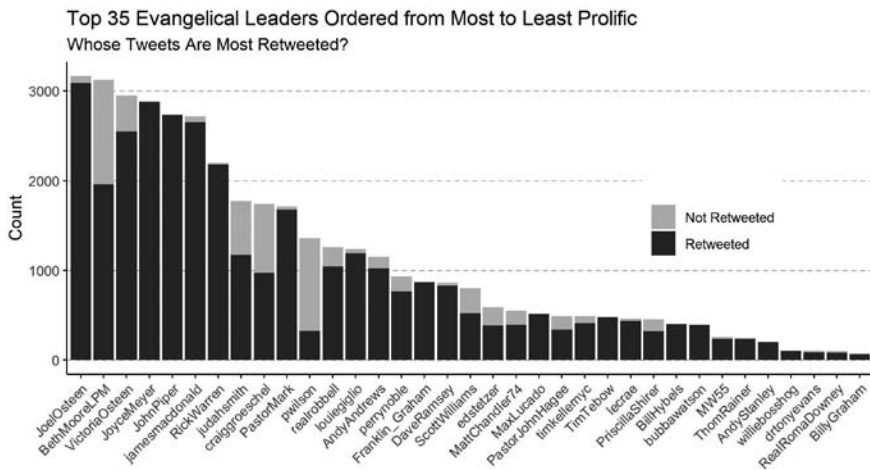| Terms that Have General Political Meaning	Terms that Refer to Specific Political Issues
Trump, Clinton, Obama, Cruz, Sanders, politics, government, Democrat, Republican, election, vote	abortion, homosexuality, homosexual, gay, LGBT, Muslim, Islam, ISIS, jihad, terrorism

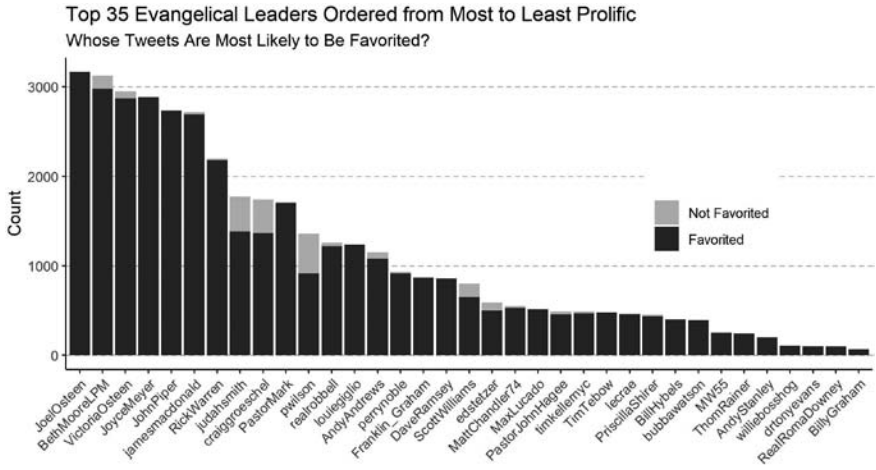FIGURE 1A   Number of Tweets that Receive at Least One Retweet

Top 35 Evangelical Leaders Ordered from Most to Least Prolific
Whose Tweets Are Most Likely to Be Favorited?

FIGURE 2A   Number of Tweets that Are Favorited at Least Once

Top 35 Evangelical Leaders Ordered from Most to Least Prolific
Scores based on the Sum of Retweet Counts and Favorited Counts Divided
by the Total Number of Tweets per Twitter Account
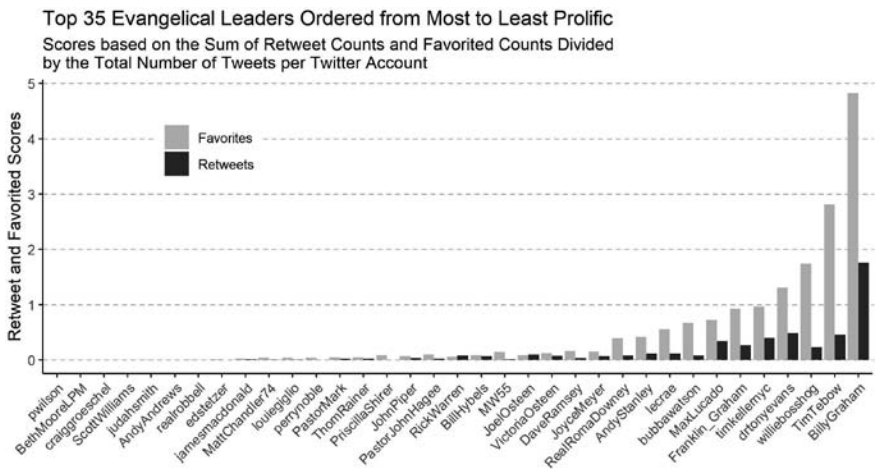
FIGURE 3A   Counts of Favorites and Retweets per Total Number of Tweets for Each Twitter
             Account

Relationship between Engagement and Number of Followers
Engagement measured by number of tweets containing '@.'
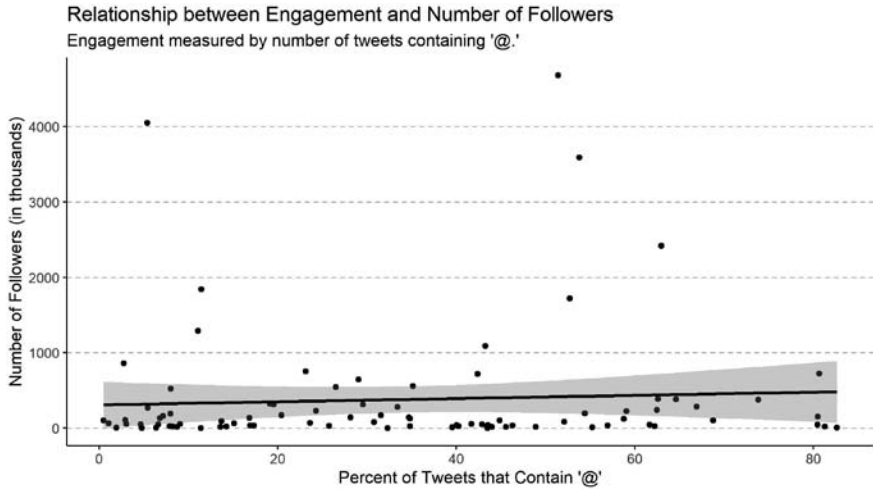

FIGURE 4A   Scatter Plot with Regression Line and 95% Confidence Interval for Number of
Twitter Followers (in thousands) over the Percentage of Tweets that Contain '@'

Relationship between Engagement and Retweets
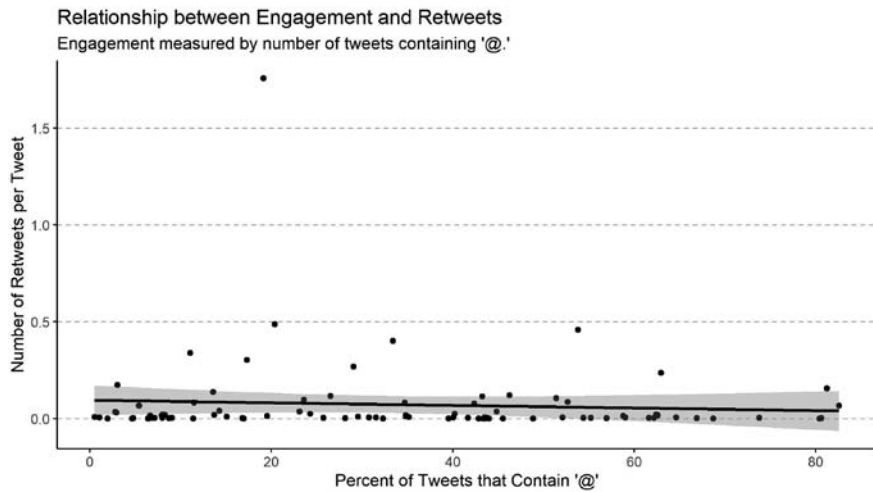Engagement measured by number of tweets containing '@.'

FIGURE 5A   Scatter Plot with Regression Line and 95% Confidence Interval for Number of
Retweets per Tweet over the Percentage of Tweets that Contain '@'