Sharing Christian Faith Through Social Media:
Effects on College Students

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Abstract

This qualitative descriptive study explored how college students describe the influence that encountering Christian faith sharing through social media has on their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Data collection took place through interviews and focus groups followed by thematic analysis of the data, which resulted in six themes. Three themes described the influence on college students' thoughts and emotions: a) the message contents and delivery methods influence college students' thoughts and emotions, b) positive or negative influences on their thoughts and emotions can occur based on their perception of the posts, and c) people who practice Christian faith sharing through social media but live a sinful lifestyle negatively influence their thoughts and emotions. Three themes described the corresponding influence on behaviors: a) positive thoughts produce positive interpersonal and spiritual behaviors, b) negative thoughts typically decrease interpersonal interactions but also prompt negative or positive behaviors, and c) thinking changes produce greater behavioral changes than college students typically recognize. Using these findings, Christians could learn to share their faith online more effectively and less offensively.

Keywords: evangelism, hypocrites, persuasion, social behaviors, social change, social learning theory, social networking sites

Social media use has become commonplace in contemporary society, with four out of five people that have access to the Internet using some form of social media (Lim 2017). Users spend far more time on social media than they use the Internet for any other purpose, and many users spend hours on social networking sites each day (Vidyakala and Nithyakala 2016). This explosion of social media use currently incorporates billions of people (Bowman 2019), providing an enormous potential for creating change within society. Consequently, many people have successfully used social media successfully as a tool to promote societal change, even within the context of religious causes (Deaton 2015; Lim 2017). Employing this means of impact, Christians have used this growing platform of social media for sharing their faith in response to the biblical mandate to do so (Previte 2017; 2 Corinthians 5:11-20; 2 Timothy 4:1-2). In a recent study by Brubaker and Haigh (2017), 20 percent of adults in the United States stated that they had shared their faith on social networks in the last week, and 46 percent saw someone else share their faith online during that time. However, Christians often share their faith without understanding their intended audiences' thoughts and desires (Lie 2017; Previte 2017). Accordingly, their faith sharing techniques have produced mixed results, often receiving intense criticism and persecution from others (Lehtipuu 2016; Philips 2015).

Because this ongoing conflict between people who share their Christian faith and those who encounter their message still occurs today (Lie 2017), it seems pertinent to study how social media users describe the influence of encountering Christian faith sharing through social media. Younger generations tend to encounter religious ideas through digital media more often than they receive religious teaching from their families and churches (Lövheim 2012), showing a greater potential for this influence through social media. In addition, college students may receive more influence through social media based on their frequent use of social networking sites and greater inclination towards change (Kelly 2015). However, despite the growing use of social media for Christian faith sharing (Bowman, Osueke, and Baires 2021), there has been a noticeable decline in Christian practices such as faith, prayer, and worship among college students (O'Brien and Noy 2015; Twenge et al. 2016). This societal shift implies a lack of effectiveness in Christian faith sharing through social media on college students.

Several articles have described techniques that Christians use when sharing their faith through social media (e.g., Efiong 2015; Lie 2017; White, Tella, and Ampofo 2016). For example, White et al. (2016) took a common approach in the literature toward this topic by describing certain pastors' faith sharing techniques using Facebook, but without mentioning if their methods produced a noticeable influence. Some of the suggestions for faith sharing in these articles may come from the recent decline of attendance in Western churches (Audette and Weaver 2016; Voas and Chaves 2016), amplifying the sense of urgency that many Christians feel to produce a greater influence in faith sharing (Van der Walt 2017). However, very few articles have described the influence on people who encounter Christian faith sharing through social media. Mayhew et al. (2017) quantitatively studied how college students who do not

practice Christian faith sharing gained an appreciative attitude towards Christian college students that do share their faith. Somewhat closer to this research topic, Lim (2017) strove to measure the effectiveness of churches' faith sharing posts on social media, but used general categories connected to the quantity of Facebook likes and comments for their measurement of effectiveness. Moreover, Bowman et al. (2021) studied the effects of Christian faith sharing through social media, but only used a brief quantitative survey for data collection. Understanding this topic could engender positive social change in effectiveness between Christian faith sharers using social media and college students who encounter their faith sharing by bringing a greater understanding to those Christians, prompting them to share their faith more effectively and less offensively.

In this research, the term Christian is defined as a person who claims to follow Jesus Christ and his teachings (Mayhew et al. 2017; Previte 2017), regardless of the biblical accuracy of their beliefs or practices. Faith sharing describes the process of conveying facts and beliefs about the Christian religion to others for the purposes of discipleship or evangelism (Previte 2017). Based on the theoretical framework of social learning theory (Bandura 1963, 1965, 1971), the following research questions guided this qualitative study:

R1: How do college students describe the influence that encountering Christian faith sharing through social media has on their thoughts?

R2: How do college students describe the influence that encountering Christian faith sharing through social media has on their behavior?

Methods

Semi-structured interview and focus group questions were composed to answer the research questions based on previous research of Christian faith sharing through social media (e.g., Hutchings 2017; Previte 2017) and the process of social learning theory (Bandura 1963, 1965, 1971). These questions were reviewed by an expert panel and field tested twice, with appropriate changes made based on that testing and feedback. The expert panel included: two Bible professors with PhDs, two Christian faith sharers with DPTs, a psychology professor with a MA, a minister with a psychology background, and an agnostic professor with a PhD in higher education and social psychology.

Recruitment for both the interview and focus groups took place through social media posts, messages, and emails sent to students at a private college in the Midwestern United States affiliated with Christianity but containing a religiously diverse student body. Participants provided an e-signature giving informed consent through Google Forms prior to their interview or focus group. Contributing students also provided information through a demographic data sheet sent through Google Forms. Overall, 15 subjects were recruited to participate in a semi-structured interview and six subjects took part in focus groups, with two focus groups of three

students each. The sample size of 15 interview participants came from the standard estimate of subjects needed to reach saturation in a qualitative descriptive study (Kahlke 2014).

This study used a descriptive design to expand knowledge about this relatively underexplored phenomenon (Magilvy and Thomas 2009; Percy et al. 2015; Van Hoek et al. 2013) because very little research had described the influence of encountering Christian faith sharing through social media (Bowman et al. 2021; Previte 2017). College students were asked to share their experiences and perceptions regarding the influence of encountering Christian faith sharing through social media. Interviews and focus groups were recorded using Zoom video conferencing software with a backup audio recording through Voice Recorder (Version 3 for Android phones). The recordings were transcribed with an initial transcription through trint.com and received further editing from the first author to fix errors produced by the transcription software. After data transcription, member checking took place with interview subjects to confirm the accuracy of subjects' transcribed responses. Thematic analysis was used to organize the data in codes, categories, and themes using the six-step method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). While the first author performed data analysis as the only coder, the second author contributed guidance as necessary to promote meaningful and proper thematic analysis.

Results

Twenty-one college students, 12 female and 9 male, participated in the study. Regarding race and ethnicity, 16 students reported themselves as White, 2 Black, 2 Hispanic, and 1 reported another race (Polynesian). The ages of participants ranged from 19-38, with a mode of 19 years old (nine students), a median of 20 years old, and a mean of 21 years old, with only one participant over 26 years old. The majority of students attended the college on-campus as undergraduates, with a few graduate students and online students participating in the research. Students answered the demographic data questions which included "How strong of a relationship do you have with God?" They received the following multiple-choice options: no relationship, very weak, weak, moderate, strong, and very strong. Eleven students selected strong, five chose moderate, four stated very strong, and one reported very weak.

Subjects participated in either a recorded focus group or a semi-structured interview. The first focus group lasted 45 minutes and the second lasted 53 minutes. The 15 interview subjects participated in data collection with a range of 30-35 minutes, a mode and median of 31 minutes, and a mean of 32 minutes. Students' data was included in thematic data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) even if they did not respond to every question, with three subjects deciding to skip one question each. The data summary below contains highlights of the findings and support of the themes, with some additional data description appearing in the conclusion section.

Research Question One Themes

Three themes emerged from the data in answering RQ1, which asked: How do college students describe the influence that encountering Christian faith sharing through social media has on their thoughts? The themes that emerged state that a) college students describe the message contents and delivery methods of Christian faith sharing through social media as having an influence on their thoughts and emotions, b) Christian faith sharing through social media has both a positive and negative influence on college students' thoughts and emotions based on their perception of the posts, and c) college students describe people that practice Christian faith sharing through social media but live a sinful lifestyle as negatively influencing their thoughts and emotions. Each of these themes receives further examination in the subsections below, with Table 1 listing those themes and the categories used for theme formation.

Table 1. Research Question One Themes and Corresponding Categories

Theme	Categories Incorporated
1. College students describe the message contents and delivery methods of Christian faith sharing through social media as having an influence on their thoughts and emotions.	Manner of delivery (TN) Means of delivery (TP) Message contents (TN) Message contents (TP)
2. Christian faith sharing through social media has both a positive and negative influence on college students' thoughts and emotions based on their perception of the posts.	Negative emotions (TN) Negative thoughts (TN) Psychological changes (TP) Spiritual changes (TP)
3. College students describe people that practice Christian faith sharing through social media but live a sinful lifestyle as negatively influencing their thoughts and emotions.	Hypocritical actions (TN) Manner of delivery (TN) Negative emotions (TN)

Theme 1.

This first theme explains how college students describe both the message contents and delivery methods of Christian faith sharing through social media they encountered and how it influenced their thoughts and emotions. It seems straightforward that the content of a message might influence students' thinking, but they often described aspects of the faith sharing delivery affecting their likelihood of reading a post and their consequent mindset towards it. Both the message contents and delivery methods could have either a positive or negative influence on the students, with that dichotomy receiving greater explanation in the next theme's discussion.

While no questions in the interview guide directly asked about the preferred means of faith sharing delivery, subjects often gravitated towards this topic in answering questions. The most often coded means of delivering positively influential material for college students came through videos. One subject explained why this might occur by saying that "I think a video can be the most impactful because you can really explain things. And I think people are much more likely, especially in today's society . . . to watch a two-minute video than read something for two minutes." Another means of delivery commonly preferred by college students involved testimonies of what God had done in their lives. Another subject mentioned that "I like it when people will, like, open up and share their testimonies. I think those are extremely powerful." Some other preferred means of delivery included Christian faith sharing messages with famous athletes modeling their faith, online worship, and recorded sermons.

Students often connected a preferred manner of faith sharing or preferred message content with positive thoughts and emotions. For example, a code for a positively perceived means of delivery is "prayer" and a code for a positive change is "uplifted." A student described this process by explaining how she read a prayer "that was just praying like, God, please help our nation." In describing it, she stated, "it was just a prayer. And I thought it was just really uplifting…this is what people need to be seeing right now." She connected the means of delivery through a prayer with the content that the message contained, her thought of wanting others to see that type of message, and her emotion of feeling uplifted. The students mentioned a wide range of preferred message contents, including positive examples, Bible verses, and love. Table 2 contains a complete listing of the codes connected to preferred means of delivery and preferred message contents, including the number of times that each code appeared in data analysis.

Table 2. Faith Sharing Delivery Methods and Contents College Students Preferred

#	Preferred Delivery Method Code	#	Preferred Content Code
18	videos	30	positivity
17	timely	19	helps when you know/respect poster
16	testimonies	16	encouraging
8	athlete modeling faith	16	positive example
7	online worship	15	use Bible verses
6	sermons	14	love
6	simple/easy to understand	13	others' viewpoints
		11	relatable/empathetic
		10	trust God/He is there
		10	vulnerable/admit faults
		9	current events
		9	similar thoughts/beliefs
		8	God has a plan/purpose
		8	hope
		8	turn to God/forgiveness
		6	prayer
		3	call to something greater
		2	unique posts

The Christian faith sharing through social media disliked by college students typically fell into the categories of "message contents" and "manner of delivery." While the positive thought comments about the means of delivery often involved the medium used, such as worship and videos, the negative manner of delivery codes often mentioned the tone of the messages. For example, students described negative thoughts and emotions connected to faith sharing that they perceived as blunt, shoved down their throat, attacking people, and not understanding cultural differences. One student emphasized a post's tone by observing that "if it's just a generally positive tone to the post, I think that gives positive thought…but…when it seems condemning...I get negative thoughts about that."

The disliked message contents had a significant influence as well, with negativity broadly characterizing many of the subjects' negative thought comments and eight subjects using that exact word in their descriptions. Many other comments against negative posting seemed more specific in nature, such as judgment, condemnation, and Bible verses taken out of context. While the above average Christian understanding of the participants may have resulted in the last comment appearing more often, it seemed problematic for many respondents because eight different subjects used the phrase "out of context" in reference to a negatively perceived post. Table 3 includes the codes developed for the faith sharing delivery manners and contents disliked by college students. The consequent thoughts and emotions connected to the preferred and disliked faith sharing appear in the next theme's description.

Table 3. Faith Sharing Delivery Manners and Contents Disliked by College Students

#	Disliked Delivery Manner Code	#	Disliked Content Code
14	shoved down their throat	39	hypocrisy
11	attack/debating people	32	negativity
11	not understanding cultural differences	27	judgment
8	bluntness	19	condemnation
6	sensitivity of readers	15	meeting their own desires/agenda
5	defensive	14	Bible verses taken out of context
4	super long/boring	13	different viewpoints
4	superiority	11	false teaching
		11	hate speech/slander
		10	opinion-based posts
		9	declaring things to be sinful
		7	current events
		7	peer pressure
		7	post Scripture alone
		6	politics

Theme 2.

The second theme noted that Christian faith sharing through social media has both a positive and negative influence on college students' thoughts and emotions based on their perception of the posts. As one might expect, positively perceived Christian faith sharing messages through social media produce positive thoughts and emotions in college students while negatively perceived messages produce negative thoughts and emotions. Several of the questions in the interview guide asked college students about their positive and negative Christian faith sharing encounters through social media, the types of messages that have those effects, and their influence on thinking and behavior. Their responses to these questions and the connotations from the language used led to the division of two general areas of thinking: positive thoughts (TP) and negative thoughts (TN). Some students contributed more positive comments about their encounters, and a few had more statements focused on the negative side. The subjects' worldview and experiences with Christian faith sharing through social media seemed to strongly shape their viewpoints and answers. Less religious students tended to report more negative comments about encountered Christian faith sharing through social media, as previous research would also suggest (Bobkowski and Kalyanaraman 2010).

The two categories of positive changes resulting from the preferred posts included "psychological changes" and "spiritual changes." This distinction occurred based on spiritual changes clearly seen in Scripture placed within that category, which included codes such as "increased faith." Other positive changes not clearly defined in the Bible, such as "increased

openness/open-mindedness," fell into the psychological changes category. Some positive changes that college students frequently described included being encouraged, experiencing improved mood, and having more Christ-like thinking. Table 4 includes the codes for positive thoughts and emotions stemming from positively perceived posts, subdivided by category and including definitions for each code.

Table 4. Positive Thoughts and Emotions from Positively Perceived Faith Sharing

#	Code for Positive Change	Definition
		Psychological Changes
18	better mindset/thoughts	Improvements in thinking and viewpoint.
17	increased open-mindedness	Broadened perspective to new ideas.
15	improved mood	Positive change in emotions.
10	improved attitude	Enhanced way of thinking or feeling
10	self-reflection	Meditation about one's character, actions, and motives.
9	changed beliefs	Altered perspective on the truth about a certain situation.
3	ignore negativity	Conscious choice to shut out criticism or pessimism.
		Spiritual Changes
18	encouraged	Received support, confidence, or hope.
16	think more Christ-like	Thought patterns conforming more to the traits of Jesus.
15	increased knowledge/understanding	Greater comprehension, especially spiritually.
12	uplifted	Elevated or stimulated spiritually/emotionally.
9	more happy/joyful	Stronger feelings of pleasure and happiness.
8	strengthened	Receive additional strength emotionally or spiritually.
7	increased faith	Greater trust, belief, or confidence in God.
6	increased growth	Developing/maturing mentally or spiritually.
5	increased hope	More confident expectation for circumstances to improve.

Students resoundingly emphasized their positive thoughts and emotions for positively perceived content through descriptions such as positivity and positive examples (see Table 3). Also, students often made comments regarding their emotions in contrast to thoughts, so it seemed appropriate to add the word "emotions" to the themes addressing RQ1. These positive changes in emotion appeared in several codes, including being encouraged, uplifted, and having an improved attitude. Positive changes in thinking outside of specific emotions also occurred frequently, such as comments describing increased strength, faith, growth, knowledge, and understanding.

This theme also contained a large number of negative thought codes subdivided into two general areas: Christian faith sharing messages through social media that college students disliked, and changes in thoughts and emotions based on those negatively perceived messages. The disliked messages fell into three categories: message contents, manner of delivery, and

hypocritical actions. The last category noted college students' perception of some online faith sharers, with the negative thoughts and emotions towards them appearing so frequently that it received its own theme described in the next subsection. While many of the codes within this theme would seem negative to a broad cross-section of people, some of the codes that students perceived negatively might not have a negative reception for all ages and cultures, such as declaring things to be sinful, bluntness, posting Scripture alone, and politics. Table 5 includes the codes concerning the students' negative thoughts and emotions from negatively perceived posts.

Table 5. Negative Thoughts and Emotions from Negatively Perceived Faith Sharing

#	Code for Negative Change	Definition
		Negative Thoughts
15	negative thoughts	Unconstructive ideas, opinions, or ruminations.
9	making Christians look bad	Concern that posts cause Christians to appear negatively to others.
8	negative view of bad posters	Poor opinions or viewpoints about people who post.
6	judge negative posters	Make cynical but uncertain assumptions about those who post.
5	fear judgment because of negative CFSTSM	Worry that others will view them negatively because of negatively perceived Christian faith sharing through social media.
3	become defensive	Think reactionary, anxious thoughts to challenge or avoid criticism.
		Negative Emotions
13	frustrated/upset	Feeling distress, sadness, or annoyance.
10	negative emotions	A poor feeling or state of mind.
7	hurt mood	A negative temporary state of emotion.
6	angry	A strong feeling of annoyance, hostility, or displeasure.
4	decreased hope/faith	Lowered sense of spiritual well-being or optimism.
3	discouraged	Having lost confidence or enthusiasm.
3	guilty	Feeling culpable or responsible for a perceived wrongdoing.
2	disappointed	Displeased because of unfulfilled expectations.

These areas of negatively perceived Christian faith sharing posts produced a variety of negative thoughts and emotions in college students. The first and third most common codes for describing this area simply had the descriptive labels of negative thoughts and negative emotions, because some subjects often used nonspecific terms to describe their thinking and emotions such as "negative headspace." However, others used more descriptive language, such as frustrated, upset, and angry, which resulted in specific codes towards those concepts. Several subjects developed negative opinions of people after they read their negatively perceived posts, although a couple of students mentioned their efforts to try avoiding this way of thinking (see RQ2 – Theme 2). Many negative perceptions focused on the posts and comments connected to the Christian hypocrites mentioned in the next theme.

Theme 3.

The third theme developed from the data connected to RQ1 states that college students describe people who practice Christian faith sharing through social media but live a sinful lifestyle as negatively influencing their thoughts and emotions. They often used the word hypocrite to describe them, which comes from a Greek word used in the Bible which literally means to play a part on stage (Bloomfield 2018). The students consistently noted people that they encountered on social media who pretended to act spiritual at certain points through their social media posts, but did not maintain that spirituality either outside of social media or at other points when posting online. Almost all subjects in the study described someone who behaved in that manner, and connected negative thoughts and emotions to these people and their posts. Since so many students mentioned these individuals without prompting from a question in the interview or focus group guides, it seemed pertinent to categorize the reaction to these people into their own theme. Interestingly, Miller et al. (2013) found that college-aged Christians with less devotion to God had a greater likelihood of using social media sites than more devout Christians, which could increase the likelihood of college students encountering Christian faith sharing hypocrites.

Two codes for disliked messages on social media fit the category of hypocritical actions more than any other topic, whereas some described that category and another based on some of the comments made regarding hypocrites. Hypocrisy and peer pressure became the only two codes primarily linked to this theme based on occurrence rates, but other codes also had connections to this theme and another theme, such as judgment, peer pressure, and meeting their own desires/agenda. It seemed consistent in the students' comments that they did not have much empathy for Christian hypocrites, because many believed that they placed a negative light on Christians and Christianity. These strong changes in thoughts and emotions mentioned in the RQ1 themes influenced college students' subsequent behaviors as noted below.

Research Question Two Themes

Research question two asked: How do college students describe the influence that encountering Christian faith sharing through social media has on their behavior? Based on the theoretical framework of Bandura's (1971) social learning theory, Christian faith sharing through the college students' social media environment produces changes in thinking that could then alter their consequent behaviors. Based on this process clearly observed in the data, three major behavioral themes emerged: a) positive psychological and spiritual thoughts produce positive interpersonal and spiritual behaviors, b) negative thoughts and emotions typically decrease interpersonal interactions but also prompt negative or positive behaviors, and c) thinking changes produce greater behavioral changes than typically recognized. These

themes receive greater discussion and connection to the RQ1 themes in the following subsections. Table 6 contains the RQ2 themes and the data analysis categories used to construct and support each theme.

Table 6. Research Question Two Themes and Corresponding Categories

Theme	Categories Incorporated
1. Positive psychological and spiritual thoughts from Christian faith sharing through social media produce positive interpersonal and spiritual behaviors in college students.	Direct post reactions Psychological thoughts Sociological behaviors Spiritual behaviors Spiritual thoughts
2. Negative thoughts and emotions from Christian faith sharing through social media typically decrease interpersonal interactions, but they can also prompt negative or positive behaviors in college students.	Behaviors reported as positive and negative Decreasing interactions Increasing interactions Negative emotions Negative thoughts
3. Thinking changes from Christian faith sharing messages through social media produce greater behavioral changes than college students typically recognize.	Behaviors reported as positive and negative Decreasing interactions Estimate of impact Increasing interactions Sociological behaviors Spiritual behaviors

Theme 1.

The first theme for research question two noted that positive psychological and spiritual thoughts from Christian faith sharing through social media produce positive interpersonal and spiritual behaviors in college students. When responding to questions, college students often reported their thinking changes and immediately connected them to their behavioral changes without prompting. Since their reported behavioral changes almost always involved interactions with others, the wording of this theme describes certain changes as interpersonal. As in the TP categories, the positive behavioral (BP) changes connected with biblical teaching was categorized as spiritual behaviors while some other interactions changes fell into the sociological behaviors category (re-worded as interpersonal for clarity in this theme). A third category in this theme contained positive actions performed with a connection to the specific post called direct post reactions. For example, commenting on a post online, sharing it, and mentioning the specific post in a conversation all fell into that category.

Almost all students reported positive, notable behavioral effects from their positive faith sharing experiences. A commonly used code in this theme stated that students changed to

become more Christ-like. Other codes in the spiritual category stressed more specific sub-topics of Christian living, such as serving others more, studying the Bible more, and expressing their faith more. The two most frequently used codes in the sociological changes category were improved relationships and improved communication. These behavioral changes took place in college students' lives both inside and outside of social media. Accordingly, the direct post reactions often categorized online behavioral changes by resulting in students liking posts, commenting on them, sharing them, private messaging people, and even extending to texts, phone calls, and in-person conversations. Table 7 displays the codes used for positive behavior changes from Christian faith sharing through social media listed in their corresponding categories.

Table 7. Positive Behavior Changes from Faith Sharing Through Social Media

#	Behavior Change Code	Definition
		Sociological Changes
17	improve relationships	Advancing how people are connected or their state of connection.
11	improve communication	Developing people's exchanging of information.
4	become available	Changing accessibility to be at another's disposal.
4	be more vulnerable	Communicating openly despite the risk of emotional harm.
3	be authentic/genuine	Behaving consistent to one's beliefs; the opposite of phony.
2	smile	Form one's mouth into a pleased expression.
		Spiritual Changes
20	be more Christ-like	Behave closer to the qualities in the Bible concerning Jesus Christ.
13	study that topic/Bible more	Searching for added information, especially from the biblical text.
10	more positivity	Increasing the tendency to be positive in tone and attitude.
10	share/talk about faith more	Communicating ideas about personal beliefs related to Christianity.
9	serve others more	Perform duties or services for another more frequently.
8	increase love	More of an intense feeling of deep affection for others.
7	kinder/nicer	Added displays of affection or love.
7	work out of social media too	Influencing behaviors outside of the social media realm.
6	do more CFSTSM	Share their Christian faith more often through social media.
5	model positive behaviors	Follow the helpful example noted online.
4	lead by example	Model spiritual behavior for others to follow.
4	seek more CFSTSM	Actively look for more Christian faith sharing through social media.
4	show consistency	Acting the same way over time, especially to be fair or accurate.
3	be accepting	Recognize someone as deserving of love and/or approval.
2	pray more	Address requests or expressions of thanks to God more often.
		Direct Post Reactions
24	talk in person about post	Communicate face to face about a social media post.
18	share/retweet post	Repost something for others to view it on social media.
11	screenshot/save	Record a data image displayed on the screen on an electronic device.
10	like/love post	Make a positive notation towards a certain online post.

8	comment (but not much)	Will write a remark on someone's post, but not frequently.
8	message people	Send a private message to someone through social media.
6	comment	Writing a remark on someone's post visible to others.
6	compliment post	Making a positive statement regarding a post or reaction to it.
6	text someone	Sending a text message to someone, often including a post.
5	return to impactful posts	Review certain posts that made a significant positive impact.
4	thank poster	Express appreciation to the person who made a particular post.
3	journal about them	Write a journal entry reflecting on ideas expressed in the posts.
2	talk on phone	Call someone as a response to a post and possibly discuss it.

Theme 2.

The next theme describes how negative thoughts and emotions from Christian faith sharing through social media typically decrease interpersonal interactions, but they can also prompt negative or positive behaviors in college students. This theme encompasses the range of reactions that college students described when they had negative thoughts and emotions based on their encounters with Christian faith sharing posts. The three reactions in the theme are listed in the order of how often students mentioned them, with decreased interactions with others as most common, negative behaviors or interactions as next in frequency, and positive behaviors as least common but still mentioned by a few students. Those students who had positive reactions mentioned making a concerted effort to overcome their negative thoughts and emotions.

The primary reaction mentioned by college students involved withdrawing either from the person who posted the negatively perceived post or from people in general. Sometimes a lack of response to negative faith sharing posts did not result simply from negative emotions, but the basic practice of some students to never respond negatively to anyone online. This attempt to avoid negative interactions promoted by negative thoughts and emotions became apparent in behavioral change codes such as being cautious online, evangelizing less, avoiding conflicts, isolating self, avoiding discussing certain topics, and ending relationships.

However, not all college students mentioned withdrawing when experiencing negative thoughts and emotions, with some choosing to confront the negative faith sharers. The students communicated that they did not confront everyone with whom they disagreed, but selectively engaged people and typically preferred one-on-one interactions for that purpose. A couple of students mentioned that they would overcompensate for the negative faith sharers, while others described conflicts that took place online from these posts. However, a few students mentioned positive behaviors as a result of negatively perceived Christian faith sharing posts. Some of the behavioral reactions seemed difficult to judge as positive or negative, but their intent seemed positive. However, these overt reactions stood out as exceptions in contrast to typical hesitancy to respond in any way when college students experience negative thoughts and emotions. The codes for the categories decreasing interactions and increasing

interactions appear in Table 8 along with codes categorized as both positive and negative behavioral responses based on the students' mixed comments and the contexts of their occurrences.

Table 8. Negative Behavior Changes from Faith Sharing Through Social Media

#	Negative Behavior Code	Definition
		Decreasing Interactions
11	cautious online	Careful to avoid potential problems or dangers on social media.
8	hurts interactions with others	Communication is harmed with people who post negatively.
7	avoid conflicts	People strive to steer clear of disagreements or arguments.
6	ending relationships	Stopping affiliation with others that they disagree with.
6	post less	Less public comments are made on social media.
5	don't talk/post	Shutting down to stop online or offline interactions for a while.
4	afraid to CFSTSM so they don't	Not sharing their faith online from fear of negative reactions.
4	evangelize less	Make fewer efforts to share their faith with non-Christians.
3	avoid discussing certain topics	Strive to not mention topics that caused issues in the past.
3	isolate self	Distancing from others and stopping interactions completely.
2	avoid negative posters' posts	Evade posts of those whom they perceive post negatively.
		Increasing Negative Interactions
5	criticize negative posters	Making negative comments about people who post negatively.
4	arguments over post	Quarrel over content in a post, often with the person sharing it.
3	act angry	Show irritation outwardly, often hurting others.
2	call out hypocrites	Publicly confronting people who behave inconsistently.
2	overcompensate	Take excessive measures to make up for poor faith sharing.
2	people pleasing	Behaving in a way to please or appease others.
		Behaviors Described as Both Positive and Negative
10	conversations from bad posts	Talk in-person about posts perceived negatively.
5	message/text negative posters	Reach out via technology to people who posted negatively.
4	conformity	Changing behavior to act like others.
4	more bold not face-to-face	Tending to post things that they would not mention in person.
3	block	Set social media account for someone to not access their page.
3	can affect people far away	Using social media to reach people from long distances.
3	unfollow	Changing profile setting for someone's posts to not appear.
2	unfriend/mute	Disconnect social media accounts to create social distance.

Theme 3.

This final theme states that thinking changes from Christian faith sharing messages through social media produce greater behavioral changes than college students typically recognize. This theme might not resonate well with college students, but the idea that their thoughts and behaviors can be influenced beyond their recognition has a basis in empirical literature (Gilder and Heerey 2018). Some students commented that they did not perceive their

thoughts changing much, but some of their other comments showed significant shifts in thinking and consequent behavior. One subject said that this faith sharing had "very little" influence on her behavior, but she had 19 comments coded for behavioral changes (16 positive changes and 3 negative). She mentioned changes about how she responded to posts online, discussed posts in-person after reading them, studied Christianity more after seeing posts, and sought more online worship and other faith sharing posts. Another participant commented that her behavior did not change at all from these posts. However, she had 23 comments coded for behavioral changes (14 positive and 9 negative), which included online responses, in-person conversations, avoiding conversations based on negative posts, and turning to God.

Beyond those specific examples, students often would recount ways that their behavior changed later in the interview process even though they did not mention those changes when first asked about that topic. While these oversights could understandably happen to an occasional college student, the subjects' underestimation of their influence from social media seemed far more common than one might expect. Even though some students readily recognized a significant influence through social media, others seemed to have this implicit change below their conscious awareness, at least to some extent. Obviously the PI coding data used judgment in assigning codes, but these discrepancies seemed too prevalent and consistent to deny their significance. Table 9 contains the codes for college students' influences that they noticed and mentioned from this faith sharing.

Table 9. Descriptions of the Estimated Influence on Thoughts and Behavior

#	Coded Influence Estimate	Definition
6	pretty impactful/lasting	The faith sharing effects were powerful and/or lasted a long time.
5	indirect (improved attitude/ thoughts improved actions)	Comments regarding the indirect effects of faith sharing which aligned to social learning theory.
4	small behavioral changes	Mentioned behavioral changes but were described as slight.
3	comes from personal desire	The state of thinking of a person affects the faith sharing influence.
3	less behavior change than thought change	The perception that their behavior changed less than thinking.
3	long-term changes	Noted that the change lasted a significant amount of time.
3	more likely if know poster	Change occurs more often when the person posting has a connection to the social media user.
3	not much change in thinking	Perception of small effects on thoughts.
2	less impact if you don't know poster	Less influence occurs when users do not know the one posting.
2	little to no belief change	Shifts in belief reported as not happening or slight.
2	momentary changes mostly	Effects occurred short term primarily instead of long term.

| 2 | short-term effects | Effects occurred short term entirely instead of long term. |
| 2 | small effect | Slight change reported overall. |

Discussion

Several insights came from this data based on the thick description of college students who participated and the lack of previous qualitative research in this area. First, a discussion is presented linking the themes and theoretical framework to previous empirical literature and relevant conclusions from the theme. The strengths and weaknesses section outlines those stemming from limitations of the research. The following section includes suggestions for expanding knowledge in this area of study. Finally, the practical applications section offers suggestions for more effective and less offensive Christian faith sharing through social media, and for actions of college students to engender positive social change.

Theme Conclusions and Connections to Empirical Literature

The findings from RQ1 – Theme 1 advanced scientific knowledge by identifying college students' preferred and disliked means of Christian faith sharing through social media based on the faith sharing contents and means of delivery. Lim (2017) strove to explore user preferences of social media posts from churches through quantifying the number of likes and comments on posts, but this did not directly measure the influence or preference of posts. By qualitatively examining direct comments from college students about these faith sharing methods, a greater understanding of their thinking may have advanced scientific knowledge in this area.

The findings from RQ1 – Theme 2 identified both positively and negatively perceived Christian faith sharing through social media and how those posts influence college students' thinking and emotional well-being. Based on Hutchings' (2017) findings, it seems that Christians do not typically have a strong awareness of this area, so this research may add to the literature and general knowledge in this respect. Also, since the positive thoughts and emotions mentioned from these preferred faith sharing posts occur, it indicates that Christians can influence college students towards positive spiritual and psychological outcomes through social media. Conversely, Christians can portray themselves and their religion as negative and hurtful, so greater consideration should come from those faith sharers to avoid the negative methods mentioned and focus on positively perceived methods.

A search through Google Scholar showed little focus on Christian hypocrites in the empirical literature. Understanding this topic from RQ1 – Theme 3 may advance scientific knowledge by exploring these faith sharers' influence on college students. The findings showed that Christian hypocrites' faith sharing through social media did not receive a positive reception by anyone who mentioned the topic. Therefore, Christians should show spiritual consistency in all areas of society to prevent college students from categorizing them as hypocrites. Another

significant finding from the study indicated that regardless of the veracity of the post, spirituality should be apparent in a faith sharer's life for the post to create a positive influence in college students' thoughts and behaviors.

The findings from RQ2 – Theme 1 may have advanced scientific knowledge by helping to fill the gaps in the literature mentioned by Bosch et al. (2017) and Previte (2017), discovering positive behaviors engendered from encountering Christian faith sharing through social media. These findings also seem significant to Christians who share their faith, because it describes a variety of faith sharing methods that provide positive psychological and spiritual changes in thought along with corresponding positive interpersonal and spiritual behaviors. However, this straightforward relationship between changes in thoughts and consequent behaviors does not occur in exactly the same manner for negative influences as noted below.

The findings from RQ2 – Theme 2 helped to explain the internal struggle when people encounter negatively perceived Christian faith sharing through social media. It seemed that some spiritual students strove to react with positive behaviors while students with less spirituality often reacted in an outwardly negative manner. Students of moderate spirituality tended to succumb more often towards hesitancy and withdrawal, especially online. This theme adds to the significance of the study by helping to understand negative aspects of this topic and how college students react in diverse manners to these negatively perceived posts.

RQ2 - Theme 3 and its associated data showed that Christian faith sharing through social media could influence thinking and behavior outside of college students' conscious awareness. This also added to the significance of the study because it shows that Christian faith sharing through social media may have greater effects than its recipients realize. The emotional changes (especially lifting a student out of a bad mood) and corresponding behavioral changes seemed remarkable, with students often reporting that those posts and their consequent changes in thinking could reorient their attitude and the outcome of their day.

A noteworthy finding of this research also comes from examining the theoretical framework of social learning theory (Bandura 1971) as applied in this research. Bandura argued that changes in the external environment would change people's internal thoughts and consequently may affect their external behaviors. Bandura and others have provided ample data to demonstrate the usefulness of this model to understand behavioral changes (Bandura 1965; Bandura et al. 1963; Chen et al. 2015). Deaton (2015) wrote a theoretical article about how social learning theory could affect people through social media, and this research built on his theory by demonstrating this means of influence occurring through social media.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Study

The study had various strengths that contributed positively to the data and research findings. The PI used a wide range of reviewers in his expert panel to refine the interview and focus group questions, including an agnostic education professor experienced in studying

religion at higher education institutions. Also, the possibility of greater exposure to Christian faith sharing through social media from attending a Christian college may have given the subjects greater knowledge of the research topic, allowing for a more comprehensive description in answering the research questions. Furthermore, the PI did not convert to Christianity until after college, giving him ample life experience from both a non-Christian and Christian worldview, which may have enabled him to have a more objective view of the college students' data.

This study contained limitations based on the methodology, design, and other factors outside the researchers' control. The faith-based focus of the school as well as the method of convenience sampling to recruit subjects may have resulted in a non-representative sample of college students. To combat this problem, the subjects received gift cards to recruit more self-seeking participants who may not have a Christian worldview or lifestyle. Despite these considerations, it seems that most subjects held a Christian faith and worldview, which may have produced both positive and negative side effects. Also, students may have felt pressure to answer in certain respects based on recruitment at a Christian institution and discussing the topic with a former professor with Christian beliefs. However, the PI made a strong emphasis with each participant before collecting data that their answers had no connection to the college, and therefore they should answer the questions freely. Despite attempts at minimizing these factors, they should probably be considered weaknesses of the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study may generalize to other settings, but it would behoove researchers to expand upon these findings in different respects to examine that possibility. To accomplish this, researchers could conduct this study at a public university or a private institution without a connection to Christianity. A study could also focus exclusively on non-Christians' thinking and behavioral changes, especially because some would probably respond more negatively based on comments in this research and other findings (Bobkowski and Kalyanaraman 2010; Mayhew et al. 2017). Further research could study the influence of other religions' faith sharing through social media to compare and contrast with these findings. Additionally, future research could focus on teenagers or generations in older age groups. One of the 21 students in this research was 38 years old, but over 75 percent of participants were 19-21 years old.

Quantitative studies could use more subjects and colleges to discover if these thinking and behavioral changes from encountering Christian faith sharing through social media generalize to the entire college student population. In addition, a pretest-posttest design could take place using a control group, delivering Christian faith sharing posts through social media to college students for a set number of days. Those surveys could determine if thinking and

behavioral changes resulted from this added exposure, using this study's findings as a basis for creating positively perceived faith sharing posts.

Recommendations for Practical Applications

Since the practice of Christian faith sharing through social media occurs frequently, it behooves those sharing their faith to alter their practices to include aspects that college students perceive favorably and that would engender positive changes in their thinking and behavior. If Christians catered their faith sharing techniques towards practices that produce positive outcomes, they could more effectively and less offensively share their faith since these outcomes seemed intertwined to almost all participants. College-age students tend to use social media more often than other adults (Greenwood et al. 2016) and receive a greater amount of influence from their online experiences (Kelly 2015). Therefore, Christians changing their faith sharing behaviors through social media may have a greater likelihood of impacting college students than those in any other category of adults.

College students clearly favor positivity and encouragement in posts and react poorly to condemnation, judgment, and negativity. Therefore, Christians would benefit by focusing their faith sharing posts and private messages to college students on positive, encouraging topics. Some students astutely mentioned that topics they perceived negatively online but were biblical in nature could be taught face-to-face for more effective outcomes. This would also benefit college students who would appreciate Christians' social media posts more and continue to engage those people more often online instead of blocking, unfollowing, or unfriending them.

The manner of delivery also seemed influential to college students, as they tended to prefer simple messages as opposed to complex or longer posts. The tone of the message also held a great deal of importance, favoring loving, empathetic, and vulnerable posts over haughty, hateful, or blunt messages. Additionally, any message coming from someone perceived as a hypocrite received either negative attention or no attention at all. Therefore, Christians should show consistent spirituality both on social media and offline. They might shorten their posts for greater engagement and re-read them before posting to consider the possibility of a negative tone in their messages. It may also behoove Christian faith sharers to not post when angry, since it may cloud their judgment in posting.

The form of the faith sharing posts influenced college students as well because they repeatedly mentioned preferring videos, online worship, testimonies, and posts from athletes/celebrities. Both the title of a video and the source of a video also influenced whether they would watch it, so Christians would benefit from carefully naming their videos in order to pique interest. In addition, Christians should consider posting more videos of high quality and interest to college students. Songs, sermons, and prayers seemed meaningful to many college students, so using the digital world to incorporate them into worship may prove beneficial.

While Christian faith sharers using social media would probably receive most of the direct benefits from this research, college students could continue to voice their opinions to affect positive change in Christian faith sharing through social media. Most students chose not to confront anyone that posts negatively, but this silence has not engendered positive social change. Continuing to conduct research in this area may also create greater dialogue between the two groups, especially because a significant divide seemed apparent between college students and negatively perceived faith sharers.

Multiple students mentioned the use of social media as just one tool to further in-person relationships and conversations. Especially for sensitive topics, they typically chose to meet and discuss with people face-to-face, where nonverbal cues could convey love and compassion often lost in a message written on social media. Also, students described positive thoughts and emotions more often with in-person conversations, phone calls, texts, and other methods of communicating. Remembering that social media should serve as just one form of communication among many should compel both college students and Christian faith sharers to reach out frequently to others outside of their preferred social media accounts. Positive thinking and behavioral changes can also occur through many mediums besides social media (Bandura,1963, 1965, 1971), so Christians and college students should take advantage of various forms of communication to achieve the greatest positive influence.

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