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How evangelical ministries create social identity on college campuses: An analysis of The Salt Company

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How Evangelical Ministries Create Social Identity on College Campuses:
An Analysis of The Salt Company

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Abstract

My initial interest in researching college evangelical ministries spurred from my own experience with a ministry on my campus, The Salt Company. As I dug into their media presence, I became fascinated with how The Salt Company creates and performs their social identity as a larger community. The current research over evangelical ministries on college campuses focuses primarily on students involved within the ministry, but there has been little to no research of how these evangelical ministries and their social power affect students who are not members of the ministries. I used media from The Salt Company's website to do a rhetorical analysis of how members create and maintain their identity through Goffman's (1959) performance theory. I then analyzed how these performances create identity for Salt members at the University of Northern Iowa. I conclude by arguing that the performance of Salt Company members is created to be in conflict with the larger campus culture, leading to the oppression of already marginalized students.

How Evangelical Ministries Create Social Identity on College Campuses:

An Analysis of The Salt Company

When a student first enters the independent world and leaves their childhood behind, pain and fear can follow college freshman, and feel unbearable. When I began my freshman year, I came in with a few friends and a lot of hope. I tried out for improv team, joined the band, ate lunch with my hall, but most importantly I joined an evangelical ministry on campus, The Salt Company. The group had a kickoff on the green lawn in the middle of campus, so I stopped by and listened to their message, signed up for a group and did not talk to anyone. I had always been a part of a church in some aspect, but it was never the center of my identity. However, by the middle of the semester I was going to this ministry three times a week, once for small group called Connection Group, big groups, and Sunday church, not to mention one-on-ones with my small group leader every other week. The women in my Connection Group became my friends and grounded my sense of belonging in the ministry and at UNI in general. I thought I avoided the struggles many freshman face.

While I felt included and a part of something at Salt, I started realizing I may have gotten myself into something I fundamentally opposed. The first sign was when my group leaders told me that I should break up with my boyfriend because he was not following the same path of God as me. Even though he was also a Christian, he was not the type of Christian they believed to be authentic. Then, in a small group session we were told that women should not wear leggings because it was too tempting for men to see. Finally, after many meetings with my small group leader, I learned the church's belief that LGBTQ people lived in perpetual sin if they deviated from the heterosexual and cisgender expectations they found in the Bible. As a young woman

struggling with my own sexuality, I decided that nagging feeling that this ministry left me with meant The Salt Company was not working for me.

I spoke to my small group leader and our group and to tell them I would no longer be attending the ministry. Slowly, I stopped talking to all of the women who were integral to my first semester in college and they stopped reaching out to me. Our distance was not out of malice, but rather a lack of having anything in common. I was excited about politics and social systems, and I simply stopped relating to their fundamental belief and goal to convert everyone to be children of Jesus. I realized my relationships to my Connection Group leaders felt more transactional as I grew farther from them. Their theology alienated many people in my life from my gay best friend to my atheist roommates. I found new roots in organizations that were better suited to my interests. I eventually joined another ministry that I believed better lined up with my personal beliefs.

For two more years at UNI, I believed my story to be an anomaly. Most people seemed content in their evangelical groups. Those not involved also seemed content not to be members of the group, but then the stories started trickling in. I heard friends say they were cornered in booths in basements while other students attempted to evangelize them. I heard ministries that told students they did not love God if they did not attend the church's overseas mission trip. I learned of LGBTQ students who were ostracized and demonized for their sexuality and gender identity. Many students I knew felt wary of members of The Salt Company on campus, but could not quite put their finger on why. Through my research I assert it is because The Salt Company intentionally performs their identity as in conflict with the performance and norms of UNI campus life.

In this paper I give a historical comparison of The Salt Company to Bill Bright's Campus Crusade. I build upon The Salt Company's roots in evangelical and mega-church philosophies by comparing the The Salt Company to Fletcher's (2013) analysis of famous mega-churches Willow Creek, Saddleback, among others. I then use Goffman's (1959) theory of performance as a team to understand how students involved in The Salt Company understand and enact their roles as members using the church's promotional and web available content. The selected media that The Salt Company provides for the public, presents the performance that they are trying to create as an organization. I argue that the reason I, and many others, felt ostracized on our own campus by The Salt Company was because of our refusal to participate properly in the performance the ministry has cultivated as a social group, using Douglas's (2002) theory of liminality. Salt members performance of their social identity on a college campus affects both the campus at large and students not involved in the ministry. The evangelical theology of Salt is imposed on students and ultimately further oppresses those already systematically marginalized.

For my data, I use a rhetorical analysis of the online materials that The Salt Company and affiliated ministries provide through their website and social media. I use data from their parent church, Candeco Church, and their sibling church, Cornerstone at Iowa State, which can be extrapolated to also understand how Salt performs on UNI's campus because of the matching theology and organizational set up. I use videos from The Salt Company's Vimeo page featuring sermons, informal discussions between pastors and church leaders on contemporary issues called "Late Night Talks," and "Q and A's", and student testimonials from the Iowa State ministry. I use the stories and themes from their media to code the important performance roles enacted by Salt members.

COMPARISION OF THE SALT COMPANY AND CAMPUS CRUSADE FOR CHRIST

The origin of The Salt Company is not a new story; it has historical roots in evangelical ministry practices started in the 1900s. The college ministry Campus Crusade for Christ, founded by Bill Bright in 1951, is one of the most influential evangelical ministry models across the nation. Campus Crusade provides many parallels in their origin and philosophy to that of The Salt Company. Bright was able to capitalize upon the college campus system to spread the Gospel through student leaders and strict organizational theology. The similarities between The Salt Company and Campus Crusade both historically frame the beginnings of The Salt Company and position it as a college ministry in the broader framework of evangelism on campuses.

Campus Crusade for Christ began on the campus of UCLA as a small student organization led by Bill Bright (Turner, 2008). They had weak ties to the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, but were more most recognizable as a para church organization because of the lack of leadership from First Presbyterian, an institutional church. The organization continued to grow and by 1962 Bill Bright raised enough donations and investments in Campus Crusade to purchase the building Arrowhead Springs.

The theological motto of Campus Crusade was, “Win campus today, win the world tomorrow” (Turner, 2008, p. 42), which was reflected in their efforts to spread their ministry across the nation to different campuses. To facilitate the growth of Campus Cruse on college campuses, Bright ran Campus Crusade with a tight hierarchy in the organization. (Turner, 2008). The goal was to convert student leaders and to keep them involved Bright encouraging high participation in Campus Crusade events and practices, such as their personal proselytization program, *Four Spiritual Laws*, or their national conventions. Campus Crusade also followed a conservative theology, specifically emphasizing anti-communism and the importance of godly ordained gender roles. Campus Crusade continues their success today and is one of the world’s

largest evangelical organizations (Turner, 2008). The path to success for Campus Crusade was a blue print for The Salt Company.

The University of Northern Iowa (UNI) Salt Company finds its origins at Iowa State University (ISU). In 1986, a campus group on at ISU formerly called The Baptist Student Union, a ministry of Grand Avenue Baptist Church, was transformed into The Salt Company under the leadership of Jack Owens (Who We Are, 2019). The Salt Company reformed as a para-church, deviating from oversight from the Grand Avenue Baptist Church. In 1994 church leaders Troy Nesbitt, Harold Nesbitt and Peter Matthews planted a Salt Company church in Ames, Iowa calling it Cornerstone. The church originally met at the Grand Avenue location, but by 1997 had collected enough funds to build their own facility for Cornerstone. The formal church Cornerstone and the para-church college campus ministry continued to grow and by 2016 the ministries had created The Salt Network “with the goal of planting a church and Salt Company at every major campus in the Midwest” (Cornerstone Church, 2019). Today the Salt Network has settled eleven different ministries, with six in Iowa, and one in Missouri, Minnesota, Kansas, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Two more ministries are planned to be planted in 2019 in Michigan and Florida.

The UNI Salt Company began in 2013 when the Ames ministry planted the Candeco Church and leaders for the college ministry. By 2017, Candeco had grown enough in members and funds to build and move to a larger building and send their own families to plant a church in Missouri (Candeco Church, n.d.). The Salt Company at UNI has a highly stratified leadership team. The Candeco Church and Salt Company leaders are the Church Elders, all seven of which are men. The Salt Company has their own director, assistant director, ministry leaders, freshman leaders, worship leader, coordinator, and finally a graphic designer (Candeco Church, n.d.). After

the established roles for The Salt Company, students take on roles of leadership in the group. Students are interviewed and chosen by church leaders to be Connection Group leaders. The Connection Group leaders organize and lead meetings for other students to go over scripture and messages that The Salt Company will be presenting at the formal worship.

The Salt Company offers many opportunities for students to become involved outside of leadership, including the Connection Groups, a college only worship time on Thursday nights, and community church services on Sunday morning. Along with all of these options, students in Connection Groups are encouraged to have one-on-one meetings with their small group leaders to personally reflect upon their faith and lives. Also, once a semester the organization has a retreat for students to go to another city to learn about their faith for an immersive weekend.

The Salt Company follows a literal interpretation of the Bible, meaning that they believe everything written or translated is divinely ordained by God and should be interpreted as the literal meaning, not metaphorical or allegorical. The literal interpretation leads them to emphasize the importance of complementation, men and women provide different but equal roles in the church, sexual morality, and the importance of evangelizing. Although their church does not have a strong political affiliation, their social values are complementary to conservatives.

Campus Crusade for Christ provided the blueprint for the beginning of The Salt Company. They both began with informal ties to an institutional denomination, but are moved to a para-church organization through student organizations. Once both of them had grown their membership numbers and finances, they legitimized their ministry by purchasing a building and creating a large, stratified staff. They follow the same theological principles that college campuses are an important resource for ministries to convert followers. They emphasize the importance of continual involvement, such as small groups and conferences, to ensure that

students continue to come back. Finally, both ministries follow a conservative doctrine. To understand why students are attracted to The Salt Company in the first place, I compare their ministry marketing practices to a study of mega-churches done by Fletcher, a theatre and performance scholar, in 2013.

PERFORMANCE OF EVANGELICAL MINISTRIES

Evangelical ministries' main mission is conversion. Fletcher (2013) did an analysis of the mega churches Saddleback and Willow Creek to understand how large evangelical ministries' use performance techniques to engage and grow their membership. He argues that to fulfill the goal of bringing in and retaining members, mega-churches use specific marketing strategies to create a worship service that keeps members coming back and highly engaged in the church. He uses the theoretical frame of performance to understand how the church, from its building to its services "tap into and mobilize conventions of active and passive audience response, defining the "feel" of the church" (p. 224). Fletcher's findings about mega-churches resonate with my observations of Salt worship services and the physical building which I was able to visit. Using Fletcher's observations of different church marketing models, I place Salt as a combination of Seeker-Sensitive worship, wherein the main goal of the service is meant to attract new members, and Emergent worship, wherein the goal is to spread theological messages through nontraditional means, because both worship styles are present in their services.

Growing churches is much easier when focusing on a whole identity groups rather than individuals. Donald McGarvan, a 1930s minister, theorized the church should focus on converting social groups to the gospel, instead of the individual conversions being pursued at the time (Fletcher, 2013). Mega-churches embraced McGarvan's theory and began marketing their church toward groups of people, specifically what Fletcher calls "seekers." College campuses

provide many seekers, such as students who have either left their home church or that have never attended church, but are looking to find a community. The Salt Company has worked effectively to recruit their own social group, focusing in the world of campus ministry looking to convert college students. In the effort to recruit college students, Salt follows similar formula to other mega churches that Fletcher (2013) observes. The Salt Company uses specific and intentional performance techniques to recruit students to their church.

To cater to seekers in the church, ministries distance themselves from the traditional church atmosphere. Beginning with the physical space, Fletcher (2013) writes “its architecture, its location in a community, its size, its recognizability as “church”—also generates a performance field that transmits messages of welcome or hostility to attendees” (p. 225). Candeco Church, The Salt Company’s main building, is located in a newly developing neighborhood about a ten-minute car ride away from campus pictured in Figure 1. Figure 2 shows inside the building in the service area, designed with a large stage and movie style seating and arranged gray chairs. Directly to the right is the modern coffee shop that offers food and drink for a price shown in Figure 3, and Figure 4 displays the menu. Throughout the space, black and white images are displayed within the longue spaces found in Figures 5 and 6. The space feels curated and contemporary. The building has design themes, including black and white, wood features, and metal accents. The non-traditional styling signals to college students that this church is not your grandparents’ church. It is different from traditional cathedrals or meeting houses. The people who attend this church understand design and definitely are not old or traditional. College students can feel welcome in this space because it has been built to appeal them with young and modern themes.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

The physical location of the Candeo Church contrasts to the design of the building. While the building is accessible in its modern design, it is not accessible to college students from campus. They must drive to services, unless they have an hour to walk. The physical distance separating the church and its services from campus signal the metaphorical distance that The Salt Company keeps from UNI. The Salt Company works to maintain real and imagined distance from the secular college campuses it draws members from, through their building location selection to their messaging.

Moving into the actual services of The Salt Company, I first compared their music styling's to the themes Fletcher found in his own observations. The music of mega churches is meant to be distinct from the traditional hymn- and organ-based stylings of mainline Protestant denominations; instead, they opt for a rock band including guitar, bass guitar, drums, synthesizer or keyboard, and multiple people singing. The music has messages that are clear to understand, such as a song titled "God is Great." Furthermore, Fletcher argues that the music of the service is performed to create a welcoming and powerful experience for the ministry. During a set, songs bleed into one another, never ending the experience of the worship music. When leaders take a chance to talk to the members or pray during the set, the band softly strums or sings at the same time. The music is non-confrontational and often takes on what Fletcher calls a "soft sell" of the Gospel" (p.237), which "sells" Christianity through the wheelhouse of joy. Such messaging appeals to visitors looking to find happiness instead of the Hellfire and brimstone messages expected of traditional churches.

The Salt Company service I was able to attend was marked with all of these observations. The band performed on a well-lit stage using professional lighting and sound systems, with the sound booth at the back of the space pictured in Figure 7. The band included a guitarist/singer,

drummer, bass guitarist, keyboardist, and two singers. The music took place before the sermon and once it started did not stop until the pastor came up to the stage to do the message. The first song in the set was “Great Are You Lord” with uplifting lyrics such as “You bring light to the darkness / You give hope, You restore/ Every heart that is broken / Great are You, Lord.” The last song, “Living Hope,” continued the uplifting message with the chorus of “Hallelujah, praise the One who set me free / Hallelujah, death has lost its grip on me.” At the end, after the set was done, a guitar softly strummed and a keyboard played major chords, while the man on the guitar prayed. The set worked effectively in creating an atmosphere of what Emile Durkheim called “collective effervescence,” a shared feeling of group solidarity, with most students with their hands in the air and eyes closed belting out the lyrics by the end.



Figure 7

The Salt Company’s services reflect Fletcher’s theory of a seeker-services because it “re-designs the conventions and structures of the traditional church service around the preferences and prejudices of an unchurched/dechurched public (“seekers”), creating an experience of church

designed to be especially welcoming to those generally uncomfortable with Christianity” (p. 223). Both the dechurched, people who have left the church, and the unchurched, those who have never been to church, are looking for a space that feels welcoming. Churches may accommodate this need by creating a space they are more familiar with, such as a movie theatre, coffee shop, or entryway lounge area. All of these areas replicate secular world spaces, making those new to the church feel more comfortable and at ease with their surroundings. The church may also create their messages to be theologically simple as to help non-church goers feel they can understand the message. This marketing system is especially effective at UNI for students who may come from small towns or non-religious families looking to find a community and feel excited to find a church that is tailored to their college lifestyle and preferences. However, once students have been recruited to The Salt Company, I assert their ministry does encompass some aspects of an Emergent Ministry.

Fletcher explains emergent ministries as those that “often seek to disrupt a unilateral, polished-product presentation feel in favor of creating a messier, more dialogic and participatory space” (p. 258). The Salt Company does use a small amount of emergent ministry practices, specifically in the structure of their messages. The messages available to watch on their website average from about 35-45 minutes in length and generally go line-by-line of the scripture. Members are encouraged to take notes throughout and bring their own Bible to study. Furthermore, The Salt Company does not shy away from sharing their more conservative beliefs, such as complementarianism roles for men and women and the rejection of LGBTQ lifestyles. The pastors uses personal and often humorous anecdotes to share theologically traditional messages. They effectively marry the seeker-services oriented music and design concepts with more emergent style messages. The seeker sensitive worship style attracts students to the

ministry, however the emergent style worship helps spread the theologically conservative message that The Salt Company follows.

Team Performance of The Salt Company

The marketing strategy Fletcher explains is more than creating a structural church, it affects how individuals perform their status in the group. Goffman (1959) frames the idea of performance in teams by arguing that individuals become a team when their performances become connected in maintaining the image the group has agreed upon. Goffman explains that performance by individuals is meant to command interactions with others, both in controlled (verbal) and uncontrolled (expressions or behavior) actions. The audience can either accept this performance as authentic or reject it as untrue, but either way they have their own interpretation of how the individual performed. This means that team members must rely upon one another to maintain the performance and not break character. Members in the team must have a common bound of “familiarity,” warm or otherwise. The team must be a united front before audiences, and only takes the chance to chastise others when they are assumed alone. The role of the team is to maintain the image of oneness.

Douglas (2003) further expounds on the ideas of team performance theory with the theory of liminality. She explains that social identity groups manufacture boundaries between themselves and those outside of the group to create their identity and performance. However, these boundaries are not always neat, and some individuals end up somewhere in between inside or outside the social group in a liminal space. Within this space, social groups have the opportunity to further define their identity by either accepting or rejecting these liminal individuals. The liminal actors are marked by their power to define the social group. On UNI’s

campus, many students fall in a liminal space between The Salt Company and secular college life, which can lead to unease for all parties involved due to the push and pull of both groups.

I found three distinct ways that Salt members perform their status through rhetorical analysis of sermons and student testimonials. First, Salt members affect happiness; second they emphasize the authenticity of the group; and finally, they distance themselves from the secular culture found on campus. The identity Salt members perform is for the audience, people on campus, and can help them gain members while also isolating those who are not apart of the organization.

Joy and authenticity.

The Salt Company's mission statement found on their welcome page of their website is (2019), "IT IS OUR AMBITION TO HELP PEOPLE FIND THEIR GREATEST JOY IN JESUS." Unpacking this statement, it can be understood that the explicit goal of The Salt Company is, on UNI's campus, to bring students to Jesus through the appeal of joy. Using Goffman's theory of team performance, Salt members have agreed as a team, that they must perform joy to stay authentic to the idea that their ministry and Jesus did actually bring them "their greatest joy in Jesus" (The Salt Company [Website]). If one or more Salt members is not seen as authentic, then their ministry may be perceived as untrustworthy or even corrupt, leading to less students joining and hurt their goal of helping people find Jesus. Students who do appear joyous are not performing within their teams' agreed image and may be categorized as inauthentic Christians, pressuring students to upkeep their performance as joyful in Jesus, whether they are or not. To appear as a ministry that is not faking their joy, The Salt Company also emphasizes the authenticity of their members. To assess how Salt members enact their joy

and authenticity, I studied their testimonies of real students on their website where the students explain or as they call it, testify, to their relationship with God.

The Salt Company Resource Page (2019) features stories of students journey with The Salt Company and the gospel in order to share the experience of joining Salt with the public. The page contains ten videos all with similar themes throughout. The person tells the story sitting in a leather chair, a stool, or standing in front of a minimalist background. The videos features multiple camera angles switching between close up views of the face and far shots of their whole body. The video has clips edited in of different shots such as the students playing sports, old family photos, or videos of students worshipping at Salt. When the student begins their story, they share their life was bad, or lacking joy, ranging from feeling like they have never been accepted to their family struggles with drugs and absent parents, with slow quiet music playing in the background. Then, the students reveal how they found God through The Salt Company and the music intensifies and becomes happier and the students conclude that having The Salt Company and the gospel in their life has changed their lives for the better. The Salt Company is making choices when they make these videos. They could have chose a video blog format, or not taken the time to create b-roll footage, or added music, but they chose to because it added to the stories and created the affect The Salt Company prides itself in: joy and authenticity. All of the editing and curating of the videos are a performance for an audience watching, which they can either reject or accept.

Many of the students in the testimony videos speak directly to how they have found happiness and joy through The Salt Company. Morgan (2016) began her story by describing herself as the “golden girl” who no one ever knew how much she was struggling internally with herself. However, after being accepted by Jesus she says, “I let go of this perception that I had to

be amazing in every way and let go of my anger with God. And instead felt so joyful and so loved knowing I was his daughter.” Morgan later explains that “I was no longer happy on the outside, I was joyful on the inside.” The Salt Company connected her to Christ and she no longer needed approval from others and this set her free. Bailee (2016) continues this idea of acceptance and joy by sharing her own story of being an atheist in college leading the Gay Straight Alliance, but never feeling accepted until The Salt Company introduced her to Jesus helping her find real joy. She says, “The moment I said it (yes to Jesus) out loud, I was filled with overwhelming joy and just love.” Emily (2017) in another video shares how that “at the end of the semester after being a part of the Salt company, “I’m a happy person, I’m outgoing, and I love Jesus.” These three women stories were selected to be shared on Salt’s public website because they perfectly perform the team image of finding joy through Jesus and The Salt Company.

The only video that does not follow that sad to happy transition in finding Jesus was of Laura (2016). She explains that coming to college she became involved in the “party group,” which led to what she describes as “family and legal pain.” However, through acceptance in The Salt Company she was able to move on and find happiness. But then the video cuts to a month later where she confesses to getting drunk on her 21st birthday. The video returns to the sad music as she explains she’s still growing. The video emphasizes that when students stray from the ideals of The Salt Company and God, such as partying, students can and will become unhappy. The students who have found joy credit it to the following Christ, and those who have lost it have lost God.

The Salt Company also uses the performance of joy throughout their promotional material to attract students to the ministry and their conferences. The Salt Company Cedar Falls Facebook Page video, “2017 Fall Retreat,” features students hugging, dancing, playing games

together, running to get seats for service, and singing with their palms and arms outstretched. All of these clips and images together create the performance of acceptance and happiness. The creation of these videos is to promote the retreats to students and they make choices in how they want to promote the trips. In these videos, we see how Salt wishes to emphasize the positive community that comes along with being a member.

The Salt Company needs to prove that they are not faking their happiness but that their joy really does come from Jesus. Their team performance must be perceived as authentic by both people looking to join the group and those that look to criticize it. Many of the stories on their website highlight how Salt has proved their authenticity to others outside of the ministry. One video features two women, Emily and Anna. Emily (2017) explains that she believed that Christians did not truly walk the walk and judged others, but through her friendship with Anna she found out that Salt members were “real” with their own struggles they spoke openly about. Chelsey’s (2017) video also highlighted Salt members sharing of their own struggle. She speaks about how she felt her Connection Group was authentic because at their very first meetings the leaders shared their testimony and their struggles. The Salt Company and their members prove authenticity to their happiness and joy through Christ by sharing how they have not been happy. The ability to share their own dark moments and struggles with Christ, means that their experience is not fake but a real story that we everyone can relate to. Bri (2018), in her video, shares that when she interviewed for the Salt mission trip, her conversation with her interviewers “was real,” and she was finally able to share everything about herself with them, a thing she could never do previously mentioning how she built up walls to protect herself from others. While Salt members are looking to spread the gospel through their own joy and happiness, they must prove their own authenticity by testifying about their own imperfections and struggles to

large and small groups. By sharing their own struggles, they create an atmosphere of no judgment which is appealing to new recruits and heightens the chances they come back.

Sermons explicitly preach the message of authenticity through acceptance of all sinners. In a message on July 10, 2017, freshman minister Stephen Jones uses Titus 2:6-10 to understand the how Salt should enact their role in the community. He encourages Salt members to be so kind and loving that people who disagree with them and their beliefs still look to them for help, such as care for Muslim refugees, feminists, and even atheists. He then tells a story about an interaction with a man from his dorm in which he accidentally revealed porn on his phone, leading Stephen to admit his own struggle with porn addiction. Each story that a pastor shares is way to describe to his ministry how people in The Salt Company act. The stories that the pastor shares need to be relatable to explain the message. Even if the story is not relatable to all men, sharing it engrains the idea that being a man who struggles with porn is a legitimate struggle the men of Salt experience.

Performing humility of one's sin is also seen in a video from the Salt Late Night Series, which includes discussions of modern controversial issues like homosexuality. Dr. Alex Tuckness Cornerstone Church Elder, explains that Salt members should not judge people with same-sex attractions because everyone is a sinner and we cannot rank sins. He encourages Salt members to treat people with same-sex attraction the way they would treat anyone who was sinning in any other way, with love and compassion. However in the same vein, members should also hold firm in the belief that what the person was doing was wrong, and guide them toward a holier lifestyle and away from their sin. The Salt Company can bring joy and happiness to people through the gospel, but only if students are able to admit their struggles that go against the beliefs of God, as interpreted by The Salt Company. The larger issue with this performance, is that the

actions that The Salt Company views as sins, such as homosexuality, sex before marriage, and idolatry of secular culture, are not considered “sins” on the college campus. When they teach members to guide those they know from their “sin,” they also teach students to criticize and even demonize normal activities of students on college campus, especially those of a marginalized status.

There are many other ways the Salt members perform to create and maintain the group identity of The Salt Company aside from joy and authenticity. However, to understand how The Salt Company uses both individuals acting as a team and controlled rhetorical devices to create and maintain their identity as a ministry and social group, I focus on ones that create conflict with college lifestyles. In these conflicts, Salt’s performance purposefully creates tension with the performance and agreed upon scripts found on college campuses. By doing so, Salt is able to create their identity through negation, what they are is *not* the secular college lifestyle.

Performing in conflict with campus culture.

The Salt Company has many strong values instilled in their college congregation. One central theme that comes up constantly in Salt media is determining biblically ordained sexuality. In the stories section, Karlie (2018) speaks about how at her lowest point she found herself in the party group and was overcome with lust. In another story, Bailee (2016) reveals when she was emotionally lost in high school and unaccepted she identified as gay, but after she came to college and became involved in Salt, she does not explain if she still identifies as gay. In two different sermons I watched, the male pastors spoke about their own struggle with pornography. In the Late Night Talks: Same Sex video, Dr. Tuckness (2017) explains that sex is an idol that society has created and Salt members need to be able to place God before it. In another Late Night Talk: Engaging Contemporary Culture, Russell Moore (2017) explains that transgender

people are lost and that God intended for only two sexes and therefore only two genders. He states that as the modern culture moves more secular, morality is often not tied to religion, but as Christians they must adhere to Biblical morality, and that sexuality righteousness is very important.

By watching Salt videos about sexuality, I have found specific scripts Salt members must follow when speaking about sexuality. This sexual script proves to themselves and others that they are authentic Salt Christians, which affirms for their own identity while also displaying it for outsiders. Because women are not allowed to preach at Candeo Church, men are usually the only ones who speak about sexuality in regards to both men and women in formal Salt settings. In one Questions and Answers format video called “Late Night: The Talk” (2017), a female church leader is on stage with a pastor to answer questions submitted by Salt students online. When the male pastor speaks of his own sexual experiences with his wife, the woman clearly laughs awkwardly and avoids adding her own experiences. In my own experience in small group at The Salt Company, women were told not to wear leggings because they were sexually tempting for men. On a larger scale women in Salt are taught their performance of femininity should be modest to avoid tempting men. However, there was not discussion about how men could change their behavior to be less sexually tempting for women. The struggle of porn is relegated to men, which could be a function of only men speaking on sexuality. The Salt Company perpetuates the idea that women are temptresses for men and that women are not agents in their own sexuality. To perform as a woman and team member of Salt, she must be submissive and modest. This performance largely contradicts the feminist values that surround campus culture.

Furthermore, aside from sexuality, The Salt Company leaders create strict standards for the performance of men through their language and sermons. In the Late Night Q &A session about the talk, the Pastor Vance (2017) mentions that men need to be tough. He scolds his son for being scared to take a band aid off, explaining that he needs to toughen up. Furthermore in the Titus 2:6-10 sermon on masculinity, Pastor Jones (2017) explains that being a biblical man means that he has “self control,” not giving into the temptations of laziness, porn, cheating, and addiction to the secular like alcohol or video games. Men are meant to be leaders in The Salt Company, meaning their performance should match as such. They need to be giving and kind, but also strong. Women in The Salt Company are given less instruction because they are meant to be followers of the men in their lives. Men are leader in the church, so they need to be addressed more, whereas women can get instructions from men anywhere.

UNI versus The Salt Company’s performance.

The strict regulation of sexuality and performance of sexuality by The Salt Company is in fairly stark contrast to gender and sex norms on a college campus. At UNI, the administration strives to create a diverse and equitable experience for all genders. For example, the availability and building of gender-inclusive bathrooms and housing points to the University's acceptance of transgender students. Furthermore, throughout campus there are resources for students who wish to engage in sexual activity, from birth control in bathrooms to STD testing. These allow all students to have the ability to safely engage in sex. Additionally, the resources directed specifically toward women allow women full agency in their sex lives. The stark difference of sexuality regulation between The Salt Company and UNI is a pattern seen in many different aspects of college life. The Salt Company also distances itself from the campus culture in their teachings about authority, diversity, and the participating in normal college experiences. The Salt

Company's group identity is premised on the boundaries between themselves and the secular campus. Students either identify as Salt Christians or not, and their performance of these categories help distinguish in which group they belong.

College is a chance for students to engage in critical thinking. UNI has a Liberal Arts Core for all students meant to improve student success in learning. The social science core lists one goal for students as "The Liberal Arts Core should encourage students to develop skills in inquiry, critical analysis, and logical thinking" (University of Northern Iowa, 2019). Students are taught that social institutions and norms, while the dominating ideas and authority, need to be questioned and sometimes even destroyed. However, at The Salt Company authority is held up in very high esteem and students are not encouraged to question the hierarchy they teach. In the Titus 2:6-10 sermon Pastor Jones (2017) encourages students to follow their leaders, whether they be bosses, professors, or masters. The only time that followers should speak out is if they are being actively abused. Furthermore, in the Late Night: Gender Roles discussion Pastor Tuckness (2017) tells women they should not "lecture" their husbands but ask for change with humility and respect. On the more macro-scale, in the Late Night: Engaging with Popular Culture discussion, Pastor Moore (2017) says while not everyone agrees with the leaders of our countries, specifically naming Presidents Obama and Trump, students need to respect and pray for them. The Salt Company promotes the idea that leaders are inherently endowed by God with respect and power because of the position they hold. The idea of respecting power because of history and norms directly contradicts the college education that values questioning institutions and people in authority.

Even though it contributes to the cohesiveness of their group identity, The Salt Company's esteem for authority hurts marginalized students on campus. Often, the ones in

power have achieved their status through unequal means. Institutions and systems perpetuate the oppressive means in which they were created, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Only through questioning authority can these institutions be dismantled to create a more equitable system. Even on UNI's campus, valuing authority over equity harms students who are being oppressed by leadership at UNI.

Diversity is essential to UNI and its Strategic Plan, the 2017-2022 (2019) lists three goals to improve student success and goal number two is "Diversity and Inclusion." On a college campus students are taught the value of diversity and recognizing one another's diversity. The Salt community also values diversity, but understands the unity of Christians as the most important aspect of community. In the sermon on Corinthians 12: 12-31 (2019), the pastor explains that while diversity of the congregation is important, it is unity as Christians that is most salient for their community. He explains that people's identities do not matter to God, only that they are Christian. Students can come from all backgrounds, but they are all made better in Christ. The call for unity and erasure of identity is opposite to the University, where diversity is essential to making the community better.

Furthermore, Salt distances itself from politics on both sides. In the Late Night Talk: Same-Sex Attraction, Pastor Tuckness (2017) explains that Right-wing conservative Christians have given the church a bad reputation because of their continual vilification of LGBTQ individuals. Furthermore, in the Late Night Talk: Engaging Contemporary Culture, Dr. Moore (2017) is quick to argue that both sides have their faults, liberals and conservatives, but both deserve prayers and respect. College campuses are often where students first become involved in politics, from protests to their first caucus, but The Salt Company actively distances themselves from party politics that can be so important to the college campus community. Party politics

divide people, whereas The Salt Company is looking to unite students, so they avoid the outright conflict of politics.

Finally, The Salt Company frequently calls out college culture and student lifestyles as something for students to avoid due to its immorality. In the stories of students confessing their path to God, many begin by explaining how they used the college lifestyle as a false idol for their God. Ruben (2017) and Derek (2018) both explain that their sports were the most important part to their college career; Karli (2018) and Laura (2016), on the other hand, point to the partying lifestyle as their path to approval and joy. All of the students discover through the Salt Company that these college idols could not fill the gap that God could. They renounce their reliance on the allure of college and proclaim that all the joy and acceptance they need can be found at The Salt Company, conveniently located off campus.

The sermons and discussions of Salt Company leaders also reflect the idea that college campus life cannot coexist with The Salt Life. In a *Late Night Talk: Gender Roles* (2017), two male church elders describe that while feminism has brought good things to society through questioning male authority, they have overcorrected and blurred the roles of men and women hurting all of society. One pastor describes that when students adhere to biblical notions of gender they are in fact being counter cultural and to embrace that status. In another *Late Night Talk: Engaging Contemporary Culture*, Pastor Moore (2018) explains how weird it is to be a Christian as the world becomes more secular, but that students need to embrace that path. Through these messages, The Salt Company further distances themselves from college life to frame themselves as the minority fighting the majority. While they may have larger numbers, they believe that their ideology is the in the minority.

These ideas are even found in how the students themselves talk about being a Christian on campus. Ruben says in his story, “The Christian life is not easy, but it’s definitely worth it.” Nick continues with the same sentiment in his story saying, “I can say no to sin. And. I just think that’s so awesome especially on a college campus because there’s so much temptation and there’s so many things going on and there so many ways you can just fall into a sinful sinful four years here.” The example that Salt leaders give to students is that their identity and beliefs are at risk because they are a minority on campus. As Goffman explains, their team must follow the same performance to be believed as authentic, so when the leaders say that students should feel weird and different being Christians on a college campus, the students must follow that performance to be accepted in the group and be authentic members of the church. This performance of persecution has had large consequences on UNI’s campus for other students.

The Salt Company’s Performance on Campus

The Salt Company performs as a minority on campus in their values and ideology, when in fact Christians, specifically evangelical Christians, are a majority at UNI. The largest student organizations on campus are Christian ministries, including BASIC, Chi Alpha, and The River. When Christians students believe they are the minority they also begin to believe that they are being silenced by the majority and look to send their message through unconventional and even illegal ways. Students are encouraged to do one-on-one evangelicalism in public spaces, where non-Christians students may not have the ability to leave. They perform “dorm storms,” knocking on every door in a college dormitory, to spread their ideas through fliers and word-of-mouth, which is strictly against campus policy. On a college campus where liberal ideas are more accepted, minority and oppressed identities still face structural struggles from safety to access to healthcare. When Salt students frame the protection of their beliefs and ideas they hurt

minority students who struggle to even feel safe in their own bodies. Through the literal biblical interpretations Salt uses, such as disparaging LGBTQ lifestyles or promoting the submission of women to men, they continue systematic struggles these groups face. Also, many students do not fit neatly into the categories Salt creates in their performance, which can lead to students feeling very uncomfortable.

In maintaining their performance as a team, Salt students create boundaries for their social group to maintain who they are *not*. There are students who do not fit neatly into the categories of evangelical Salt Company member or secular college student. These students as Douglas (2002) describes, are in a liminal space on the margin of both social groups, such as students who are LGBTQ and religious, Salt members uncomfortable with mission trips, or students like me who wanted to find community in Christ, but was not comfortable with the group ideals. When these liminal actors do not fit the script of two teams at play on campus, college liberals versus The Salt Company members, their identity is in flux. Both groups try to define their own boundaries more clearly, pushing and pulling students into and out of their own group until they fit the script. Even further, the liminal space that students find themselves in during college, transitioning from childhood to their own adult independence, is a powerful time for social groups such as Salt to solidify boundaries by adding new members and rejecting others.

Morgan in her own story speaks about the power that college has to change and claims it was a time for her to reinvent herself. Ruben and Derek, the college athletes, both spoke in their stories about how they came to college for sports, but ended up finding God instead. When I entered UNI, I was looking to find my own identity and I thought Christianity was an aspect I wanted. In almost all of the student stories, they explain that when they came to college they

looked for acceptance and belonging, which they found at The Salt Company. The ability for The Salt Company to “find” students looking for a network and inclusion is not a coincidence, but rather it is a tactic to create social boundaries. Students from the testimonies joined The Salt Company to signify how Salt students are happy, accepted, and authentic Christians. Students like me, who ended up leaving, do not belong because of their liberal values and continual struggles with power. To maintain their status as a team, members must stick to the performance scripts Salt requires. If you cannot, then you are pushed out. Students in this liminal space looking for their identity and social place are both a powerful asset to social groups looking to develop their teams and also vulnerable to manipulation as social groups look to mold them into their group performance. The UNI campus is full of lost people looking to find joy and happiness. While the appeal of The Salt Company is undeniable, it can be dangerous for students who do not recognize their appeal is a conscience decision through performance.

Conclusion

While I worked on my research about The Salt Company many more people came forward with their own stories about evangelical ministries. One Resident Assistant told me how Salt members would help new students move into the dorms and then try to convince the new students to join them for church, which led to students feeling uncomfortable and coerced. Another student told me about his experience in Salt where he felt they were very anti-Catholic. When the conversation is open to discuss how evangelical ministries impact culture, students speak up; however, this conversation is often stifled to avoid offending members of the ministry. My goal through this research was to better understand why students felt uneasy towards evangelical ministries, specifically The Salt Company. Through my analysis, I argue that The Salt Company intentionally creates tension between the campus community and their own. To

establish their social identity as evangelical Christians, they create a boundary between themselves and the secular UNI campus. The creation of these two distinct identities leaves out many students who are intentionally left somewhere to flounder in the middle. Furthermore, when The Salt Company frames themselves as the minority on campus, they limit the criticism and changes individuals and the university can make due to UNI's climate to avoid conflict.

My research also focused on how the leadership of The Salt Company creates identity through performance. My rhetorical analysis was not able to look at the lived religion of Salt members. While I could look at how The Salt Company would like to be viewed, the reality of how students perform their faith and identity would be better explored through an ethnographic study of Salt Company members. To continue this research, I suggest investigating how Salt members understand their own performance and how they act out their faith in their everyday life.

The scope of this research may be tied specifically to UNI and The Salt Company, however it can be expanded to larger implications. Social identity is integral to the human experience to maintain relationships and inclusion. All social identity groups create their identity through performance and boundaries, which will always have implications outside of the group. The goal is that groups in power will not use their performance to further oppress systematically marginalized people. At the UNI, for example, the administration should take steps to ensure that students are protected from coercive recruitment strategies from evangelical ministries, such as not allowing the organization to attend freshman activities as the formal organization. In spaces in which identity groups have unequal power, it is up to leaders to limit the inequity that comes with this.

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