You need ‘help for the journey’: freedom and regulation in a ‘market-friendly’ megachurch
Abstract
One of the dominant trends in contemporary religion is a focus on individual freedom, choice and autonomy, all central tenets of mainstream consumer society. Rather than indicating a lack of religious regulation, we show how they can be the means through which regulation operates. Drawing on the theory of governmentality, which focuses on how power operates in discourse, we present a case study of a highly successful megachurch and global leader in Christian music – Hillsong – and show how this religious producer constructs a subject position for the consumer that promotes freedom and choice but nevertheless has regulatory implications by limiting what is thinkable and possible. Our findings show how Hillsong uses music and offers a worship experience that encourages continued reliance on the Church supported by its selective interpretation of the Pentecostal tradition. We trace how Hillsong claims knowledge of the religious consumer, identifying its central logic and contradictions. In doing so we show how religious regulation is taking new forms in contexts that may appear to be unregulated. We highlight the potential of this Foucauldian theory to not only enhance understanding of current trends in religion, but also to widen the repertoire used by critical marketing scholars to analyse how marketing discourse and practices are mobilized in specific contexts, and with what effects.

Keywords
Religion, governmentality, regulation, megachurch, critical marketing
Introduction

“…our message isn’t ‘listen to this music because our music is great’, it’s more about helping people on their journey” Tim Whincop, Manager Hillsong Music Australia, (interview with The Music Network 16 January 2017)

Religion has gained increased recognition in the last decade within marketing and the social sciences. Once predicted to decline as societies modernized, it has ‘staged a comeback’ (Toft et al., 2011), evident in increasing religiosity around the world (Ger, 2013). In addition, there have been important changes in religion itself. At least in Western societies, religion is now more individualized and self-reflexive, a matter of choice, rather than tradition or birth, with many beliefs systems on offer (Ger, 2013; Woodhead and Heelas, 2000; Rinallo et al., 2013). Further, some religious organizations embrace the strategies and techniques of marketing; others see this as a ‘contamination’ of religion by the profane.

While traditional forms of religious regulation may be breaking down, this does not mean regulation has disappeared. Rather, it will take new and different forms (Gauthier, 2013), reflecting the dominance of consumerism and capitalism. Recognizing these forms requires understanding the symbiotic relationship between religion, culture, economics and politics which attracted the attention of foundational social theorists (Ger, 2013: 501). Foucault is one such theorist who drew heavily on religion to develop his theory of discourse, power, knowledge and the subject. Yet his ideas have rarely been applied to study contemporary developments in religion.
In this paper, we apply Foucault’s theory of governmentality (Beckett and Nayak, 2008; Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991; Dean, 1999; Skålén, Martin and Fougère, 2008) to explore how regulation operates in a highly successful Christian megachurch – Hillsong – with significant global reach because of its music. Megachurches are large, fast-growing Protestant religious organizations, often Pentecostal in practice and theology (Thumma and Travis, 2007) who typically embrace marketing, popular culture, prosperity and consumption (Ostwald, 2003). Because they are so aligned with mainstream Western culture, the form religious regulation takes in this type of Christian church may be less apparent. Yet by using a governmentality ‘lens’, we are able to ‘make the familiar strange’ and show how regulation is implicit in the construction of the free religious consumer in its products and services.

From this perspective, power takes ‘discursive shape’, bound up with the language used to communicate and construct knowledge about a topic within which only a certain range of subject positions ‘make sense’ (Foucault, 1988). The logic of a particular discourse gives rise to a ‘regime of practices’ which are organized sets of ways of influencing the conduct of the governed (Dean 1999: 18) with implications for how individuals are encouraged to think about, and act upon, their selves (Beckett and Nayak, 2008; Burchell, 1993; du Gay, 1996; Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Hackley, 2009a).

Our findings show how individual freedom, choice, autonomy and worldly success, all supportive of the market and consumption, have regulatory implications, making some practices, ways of thinking and acting possible and preferable, while others are unthinkable. Overall, we argue Hillsong’s approach constitutes a mode of governmentality based around a central consumer orientation combined with a selective use of Pentecostal tradition and theology.
We make two main inter-related contributions: firstly, we show how religious regulation is taking new forms in contexts that could appear ‘unregulated’. Specifically, rather than the opposite of regulation, individual freedom, choice and autonomy can be essential to its operation. Secondly, we highlight the potential of governmentality to enhance understanding of how power operates in discourse, specifically through the subject positions created by religious market producers that target consumers and reflect broader cultural, economic and political developments.

This broader second contribution addresses calls for critical marketing scholarship to draw on a ‘far wider range of intellectual influences’ (Hackley, 2003: 154) and engage to a greater extent with contemporary social theory (Brownlie, 2006; Brownlie and Hewer, 2007; Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Morgan, 2003). To date, critical marketing has been dominated by Critical Theory perspectives, associated with the Frankfurt school of neo-Marxism (Saren et al., 2007) while Foucault has been far less influential. However, the ways in which his ideas have been developed within political economy and cultural studies provide additional ways critical marketing scholars can analyse how marketing knowledge and technologies generate power effects. While we have studied these processes using a specific case of religion, we suggest the governmentality framework has far wider applicability and utility, consistent with the overall objectives of critical marketing to make visible, and question, the basic assumptions that underpin “the powerful subjectivizing processes of contemporary marketing discourse” (Brownlie and Hewer, 2007: 47).

We begin by reviewing literature about the relationship between religion and the market before explaining the Foucauldian perspective we adopt. We then outline the research context and our analytical approach. In our findings we discuss the role of
music and Pentecostalism in Hillsong’s approach, then apply Dean’s (1999) governmentality framework to show how certain ways of thinking and acting underpin the subject positions constructed by Hillsong. We conclude by arguing that rather than individual freedom and choice being the opposite of religious regulation, in this case they are central to its logic and suggest some other areas of contemporary social life to which governmentality could be applied.

**Religion, markets and marketing**

Until recently, religion generated only sporadic critical interest within marketing and consumption literature which Sandicki and Jafari (2013: 413) attribute to the lingering effects of the secularization thesis. According to this idea, while religion may once have regulated daily life in Western countries, its influence waned and fragmented with the rise of scientific rationality and greater social and economic mobility generated by industrialization, trends predicted to accelerate with increasing modernization and free markets. Not only has this thesis proved empirically false but the separation between markets and religion was always more normative than descriptive, and even less relevant in current contexts. Markets continue to be influenced by religion, for example, in the promotion of consumption through religious holidays and its restriction due to particular rituals or belief systems (Drenten and McManus, 2016; e.g. McAlexander et al., 2014). Religions themselves can produce goods and services traded through market relations and some promote, rather than constrain, the individual freedom, choice and consumption so central to markets and broader Western culture.

Recognition of the ambiguous relationship between religion and markets has led to more nuanced understandings of how they interact (Haddorff, 2000; Jafari and Süderdem, 2012; Karatas and Sandikci, 2013; Sandikci and Jafari, 2013; Sandikci and
in “symbiotic and conflictual, complementary and contested” (Schmidt 1995: 14) as well as paradoxical ways (Jafari and Süerdem, 2012; Rinallo, Maclaran and Stevens, 2016). These interactions manifest in ways unique to the religious context and the individuals, groups and communities that create and maintain their version of the belief system. Critical marketing scholars have shown how religious traditions less familiar to Western audiences such as Islam, imagined to be highly restrictive and regulatory, are open to interpretation and drawn upon flexibly by consumers for specific purposes. For example, in different ways Jafari and Süerdem (2012), Moufahim (2013), Karatas and Sandikci (2013) all explore how individuals and groups interpret, and work with, shared local understandings of religious-based restrictions on consumption, producing heterogeneous outcomes reflecting the particular cultural context and activity being undertaken. Rather than the sacred, secular and profane being sharply delineated, they exist in ‘symbiotic relationship’ (Jafari and Süerdem, 2012), relational discourses (Townley, 1988) capable of being enacted, materialized and operationalized by religious organizations in their processes, practices and artefacts in different ways to accomplish various objectives.

These changes in the religious landscape, and ways of understanding them, reflect the rise of marketing and consumption as dominant modes of life in the twentieth century (Schwarzkopf, 2015) with its focus on individual freedom and choice. Religion is taking more individualized and self-reflexive forms (Ger, 2013; Beck, 2010), reflecting a shift in religious authority to the individual. People are also presented with more choices, and elements of different religions and belief systems can be combined in ways that suit self-development (Ger, 2013; Woodhead and Heelas, 2000; Rinallo et al., 2013).
However, this has potentially led us to underestimate, and perhaps neglect, contemporary religion’s regulatory effects (Gauthier et al., 2013). As Gauthier (2013) argues, a decline in traditional forms of religious regulatory mechanisms does not mean an absence of regulation per se. Rather than deregulation, a shift away from hierarchical, central religious authority to focus on the individual generates different patterns of regulation. He asserts “the contemporary religious landscape reveals not so much a state of un-regulation as a coherent system in which the values, ethics, worldviews, and eschatologies of consumerism are structural” (p. 149).

Literature about the tensions and contradictions inherent in consumer freedom can help us to understand the new forms religious regulation may be taking. In particular, Foucauldian-oriented work on the discursive construction of markets, marketing and the consumer offers a way of understanding the relationship between freedom and regulation. Further, it provides a way of connecting subject positions targeted at individuals with broader cultural, economic and political trends, showing how they constitute a coherent, self-reinforcing worldview.

Where the market has become the foundational institution and all items of culture conceptualized and redefined as commodities (du Gay, 1996), individuals are expected to practice freedom of choice, self-reliance and self-regulation. The citizen as choosing consumer has both the power and burden of choice: ‘no choice but to choose’ (Giddens, 1991: 81; see also Rose 1993). Further, they are expected to treat themselves as a project that could be improved to enhance its worth (Giddens, 1991). Labelled ‘the enterprise self’ (du Gay, 1996), this ideal identity encourages individuals to ‘become, as it were, entrepreneurs of themselves, shaping their own lives through the choices they make among the forms of life available to them’ (Rose, 1989: 226). Whatever activity or arena the individual is engaged in, they are expected
to see themselves as seeking meaning, fulfilment and self-improvement. The subject remains free, in fact, the discourses of the market and marketing are predicated on that freedom (Rose 1989).

However, while free and independent, this ideal self is dependent on others to remake itself in pursuit of the enterprise ideal (Giddens, 1991; Fairclough, 1995). This includes expert knowledge, such as modern psychology (see Cruikshank, 1993; Rose, 1989), as well as market intermediaries. Within marketing, Beckett and Nayak (2008) have explored how the active, agentic customer identity constructed by collaborative marketing ‘binds’ the consumer more tightly to producers. Rather than being independent, the individual is incorporated in ways that perpetuate their continued involvement. In a similar way, Caruana et al (2008) have shown how constructions of ‘the independent traveller’ in guidebooks foster individuals’ dependence on their expert advice to achieve the sought-after travel experience and their own identity as ‘not a tourist’. Rather than being totally self-reliant then, the individual requires the assistance of organizations, experts and market intermediaries to cultivate and exercise their freedom and autonomy. In effect, this reliance circumscribes the freedom it promotes. Even as it encourages individual independence and authority, the subject position created for the consumer by the producer has regulatory implications by ‘framing reality’ and the role and place of those who populate it.

While there is a strong Foucauldian influence throughout this body of work, Foucauldian theory has rarely been used to analyse developments in contemporary religion, despite his use of the history of Christianity to develop his theories of power, knowledge and the subject. Moreover, to date, critical marketing has been dominated by Critical Theory traditions associated with the Frankfurt School of neo-Marxism (Saren et al., 2007). Yet, as Beckett and Nayak (2008: 299) have argued, Foucauldian
theory, specifically *governmentality*, can increase understanding one of critical marketing’s central concerns: the “antagonism between freedom and subjugation that lies at the heart of producer-consumer relationships”. Accordingly, we explain both governmentality and Foucault’s theory of power in more detail in the following section.

*Governmentality*

The concept of governmentality originally conceived by Foucault has been further developed by Graeme Burchell, Colin Gordon, Nikolas Rose, Peter Miller, Mitchell Dean and others (see Burchell et al. 1991). In this context, ‘government’ refers broadly to the ‘conduct of conduct’, not the power of the State, and assumes a free subject who is “capable of thinking and acting otherwise”. Governmentality denotes logics of government or a body of “knowledge, belief and opinion in which we are immersed” (Dean, 1999: 16) that limit the ways of being and acting that seem possible and give rise to regimes of practices and technologies. These concepts of government and governmentality are underpinned by Foucault’s theory of power which marked a shift away from seeing power as a resource or held by a particular group or actor (‘sovereign power’). Instead power takes ‘discursive shape’ (see Skålén, Martin and Fougère, 2008: 22) permeating the very ways we think about and come to know the world, including how we think about ourselves and others: thus knowledge, power and the subject cannot be separated.

In developing this theory, Foucault relied heavily on shared knowledge about Western European history including the role of Christianity in promoting the idea of a unique individual subject that had intrinsic worth. In contrast to the repressive power of a sovereign ruler that treated people as ‘resources’ or objects, in the Enlightenment a different conceptualization of the subject and approach to power evolved, associated
with Christian ‘pastoral care’. Foucault used the metaphor of the Christian pastor to outline how power in contemporary society was now exercised by knowledge of subjects’ inner desires and needs, by (secular) pastors who managed people through ‘constant kindness’, encouraging them to share in particular belief systems that would deliver valued outcomes consistent with these beliefs, thus reinforcing its logic (Skålén et al., 2008; Dean, 1999). In developing these ideas, much of the governmentality literature explores how different types of liberal government operate “through the freedom or capacities of the governed” (Dean, 1999: 15), encouraging self-regulation but in ways that support its basic logic through exercising choice, participating in ‘free’ consumption and labour markets, pursuing self-improvement and aspiring to upwards social and economic mobility.

Of course, this does not determine consumers’ actual identities. Dean (1999: 32) writes:

The forms of identity promoted and presupposed by various practices and programmes should not be confused with a real subject, subjectivity or subject position … Regimes of government do not determine forms of subjectivity. They elicit, promote, facilitate, foster and attribute various capacities, qualities and statuses to particular agents.

There were also shifts in Foucault’s theorization of power and subjectivity over the course of his work: in his earlier period, he was more concerned with how discourses constructed particular, consistent subject positions whereas at a later stage he focused more on how individual subjects construct themselves (Dean, 1999; Skålén et al., 2008). Following Skålén et al. (2008) and Beckett and Nayak (2008), we take the former as our focus. In other words, we are not studying identity as experienced by the people it targets, but rather seeking to analyse discourse in order to deconstruct its
internal contradictions and render the subject positions created and its governmental logic more visible and explicit. In addition, while Foucauldian and critical approaches drawing on Marxian analyses and the Frankfurt School (Critical Theory) both seek to make power structures more visible, there are important differences. While the latter seeks to propose alternatives to current social systems and arrangements, those working from a Foucauldian perspective do not partly “because of the risk of being unable to see the potentially perverse power effects of this new normativity” (Skålén et al., 2008: 1).

In summary then, we focus on exploring how regulation operates through the promotion of consumer freedom and choice. We use a case of the highly successful and market-oriented Hillsong Church whose tenets are supportive of mainstream consumer culture and place no obvious restrictions on the part of religious consumers and churchgoers. Accordingly, we seek to explore the contradictions inherent in its construction of the subject position of the free religious consumer, and by implication the Church, and how this encourages certain ways of thinking and behaving while limiting others. Consistent with a governmentality tradition, we concentrate on analysing Hillsong’s discursive practice to reveal its logic, contradictions and implications, focusing on the subject positions designed to target individuals but which can never determine their actual identities.

In the following section, we provide some background to the case, including the religious tradition from which it draws, and explain our methodological framework before presenting our analysis.
Hillsong: Pentecostal music megachurch

Background

Pentecostalism is a type of evangelical Christianity experiencing global growth. Often associated with the Asuza Street Revival movement among the poor in the US in the early twentieth century, in Australia it began as a nineteenth-century religious movement of the middle class (Clifton, 2005). Based in an experiential paradigm of worship where music, oral testimony, narrative and free expression plays a central role, it is distinguished by its emphasis on the Holy Spirit and manifestations of its power (Althouse, 2001; Riches, 2010). Pentecostal Christians expect to be changed in worship by the Holy Spirit, evidenced by spontaneous ‘speaking in tongues’, and singing and dancing, thought to simulate bodily unity and ‘oneness’ with Christ. Music expresses the belief system but rather than a ‘teaching tool’, it is a way of experiencing the power of the Spirit through evoking feelings and (literally) moving people through free physical expression (Althouse, 2001; Moore, 2006).

Many megachurches belong to the Pentecostal movement, and have pioneered new forms of worship, with contemporary, secular-styled music (Ellingson, 2013; Roof, 1999; Snow et al, 2010), new styles of architecture, congregational events and transnational networks. Their ‘growing influence… in the religious marketplace’ (Ellingson, 2013: 59) stems not only from the size of their congregations but also from the diffusion of their practices and models facilitated by overt marketing of “theologically and ecclesiologically neutral” products and services (Ellingson, 2013: 73).

Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the Christian Music market. Secular-styled songs have become increasingly popular and widespread among music designed to be sung in churches and here, Hillsong is a market leader. Since its first
album in 1988, Hillsong Music Australia (HMA) has sold more than 18 million albums worldwide with strong followings in the US, UK, South Africa, South America, Europe and Asia (Tuskan, 2017), assisted by its internationalization and expansion strategy, consolidated in 2010 with distributor EMI CMG (Christian Music Group). It topped the Billboard charts in 2013 in the Christian and Gospel music category with its album *Zion* and single *Oceans* staying at the top of the Billboard charts for 45 consecutive weeks, a first for a Christian song (Adams, 2013; Tuskan, 2017). It won the 2016 American Music Awards for ‘Favourite Contemporary Inspiration Artist’ for its Hillsong United band (the only Australian music artist to do so) and a 2017 Grammy nomination for ‘Best contemporary Christian music album’.

Hillsong Church itself has a significant physical presence with over 35,000 attendees in Australia (Riches and Wagner, 2012). It has expanded its church operations domestically (twenty eight locations across all states) and internationally, with sixty four centres in eighteen countries across North and South America, South East Asia, Western and Eastern Europe, the United Kingdom, South Africa and the middle East. ([http://hillsong.com/](http://hillsong.com/), accessed 5 July 2018). Yet the church has arguably had the greatest influence through its music. One religious commentator remarked:

> …whether you travel across the urban areas of Asia, Africa, North America or Australia, everywhere you go, increasingly, the singing in the church – both the songs that are sung and the style of music – is the same. It’s the McDonaldization of our world. And in every church you visit across the world, the music is just the same. I’d describe it as the ‘Hillsongization’ of music (Raiter, 2008, p. 13).

**Data collection and analysis**

Our case study of Hillsong analyses its music in relation to its role in worship and a broader ecology of texts and practices such as DVDs of performances, special events, books etc that together represent the Church’s views and encourage ongoing religious consumption (see Evans, 2006, 2017). We draw on different primary sources,
including texts and participant observation of worship by the first author, as well as secondary scholarly sources on Hillsong, Pentecostalism and the evolution of Christian music in Australia (e.g. Clifton, 2005; Ellington, 2000; Evans, 2006; Evans, 2017; Moore, 2006; Riches, 2010; Riches & Wagner, 2012; Wade, 2016; Wagner 2017). Both the participant observation and secondary sources were important in understanding the role of music in worship, how it relates to other products and services provided by the Church, and Hillsong’s blending of Pentecostal tradition with popular culture.

Primary texts included five public interview transcripts of the senior pastors in 2004, 2005 and 2013, ten books written by the senior pastors, music albums produced by Hillsong from 1992 – 2014, websites and social media posts of the church and church newsletters, as well as general media coverage of Hillsong (see list of texts in appendix). Participant observation was undertaken by the first author from 2004-2014. The first author’s various positions (researcher, Christian, marketing academic) informed and influenced the collection and analysis of data at various stages of the research. She has been immersed in the church environment for 25 years, and attended churches of various denominations, including Baptist, Methodist, Anglican, Pentecostal and non-denominational but is not currently a church member or involved in any church ministry. She was a regular attendee at Hillsong from 2001-2008 during which time she volunteered in welcoming new people and assisting with church communion, attended fortnightly group meetings and completed a certificate in biblical studies offered by the Church. From 2009-2016 she attended irregularly. Over these two periods, she has shifted from being an ‘insider’ to an outsider and the emic and etic perspective on Hillsong offered in this case is informed by her immersive experience. This aided in understanding Hillsong’s theology and practices
but it also caused intellectual unease at various times as she was critically reflecting on her own beliefs (Harper, 2003).

Our research is not theology-driven, but we recognize the need to understand Hillsong in relation to the Pentecostal tradition; to do otherwise risks missing or misunderstanding the presence of religious discourse and practices in their approach (Althouse, 2001; Moore, 2006; Riches, 2010). Consistent with a Foucauldian tradition, we are not attempting to assess whether what Hillsong does is right or wrong. Instead, we assume that different subject positions in discourse enable certain possibilities of thought and action while constraining or restricting others. Our focus is on how Hillsong as religious producer constructs a version of consumer identity in its texts, the discursive contradictions in its logic and their disciplinary implications, rather than how religious consumers experience the Church, its products and services.

To analyse the data, we applied the governmentality framework developed by Dean (1999) and used by Skålén et al. (2008) in their monograph tracing shifts in marketing discourse in the twentieth century. This approach to discourse analysis does not focus on micro-level linguistic features or structures but instead involves analysing how a particular discourse or governmentality attempts to govern the self. It involves interpreting texts and practices to address the following four questions: Firstly, what is to be governed? (ontology); secondly, how does governing work? (ascetics), i.e. what are the technologies, practices, procedures that governing in this way involves; thirdly, who does the subject become when governed in this way? (deontology); finally, why govern in this way (teleology), in other words, what is its purpose? (Dean, 1999: 17; Skålén et al., 2008: 33-35). After presenting our account of Hillsong in the following section, we apply this framework as a lens to summarize and extend our analysis.
Findings

Music is the way consumers are initially drawn to Hillsong which then introduces them to other products and services, and encourages ongoing dependence on the Church. In the following sections we discuss the role of music in more detail followed by an analysis of how Hillsong selectively interprets aspects of Pentecostal tradition with contemporary culture. Finally, we use Dean’s (1999) governmentality framework to summarize and explore the logic and contradictions of Hillsong’s approach.

Music and the worship experience

Music is central to providing an entertaining, enjoyable worship experience that offers immediate gratification and opens the door to further engagement with the Church. In worship itself, people are offered the opportunity to experience heaven in the ‘here and now’. The Church is “a place so irresistible that people can’t wait to get there [and]… no one ever wants to leave” that exists to help “humanity to flourish” (Bobbie Houston 2001a, *Heaven is in this House*, back cover). The congregation is expected to respond to the music by dancing and singing, encouraged by frequent references in the lyrics to the language of freedom (e.g., ‘release’, ‘liberty’, ‘leaving the past behind’ and ‘flying’) and the pleasurable experience of individual liberation. For example, in the song *Break Free* (Houston, Crocker and Ligertwood, 2006), the congregation is invited to ‘get up and dance’. The long chorus and refrain ‘So won’t you break free, won’t you break free’ is sung repeatedly to generate a collective emotional response and encourage freedom in physical expression:

I really have this belief that church should be enjoyed not endured. Sadly, I think it is possible for church to be a very long hour. I want people to be able to be
animated about their worship (cited in *Australian Story*, The Life of Brian, 1 August 2005).

The weekly service is dominated by music that is professionally staged, produced and performed. Typically two 20-minute sets consisting of songs of different tempos are interspersed with a shorter sermon, announcements, altar call and offering. Potential songs are ‘market-tested’ with congregations to assess their singability and popularity. Church leaders’ assessment of congregational reactions then informs the selection of songs for the annual album. Churchgoers are also incorporated into the product itself: all Hillsong albums are recorded live (with some overdubbing and after-production), then CDs and DVDs released of the performance. The annual album recording is widely publicized so individuals know they can be part of it. Excerpts from the DVD are also shown as ‘bookends’ to the church services, and in their replaying, show and reinforce how an attendee of Hillsong appears and behaves. The launch of the new album is then timed to coincide with Hillsong’s annual conference to boost sales.

Variety is built into the annual cycle of events and music production and there is a known season encouraging continued consumption of Hillsong offerings. Like the popular music genre from which it draws, most of the music is disposable, and superseded by the following years’ album. The live-recorded music merchandise, as well as downloadable podcasts, provide a simulated collective worship experience that can be played at the consumer’s convenience. There is heavy cross-promotion of products and services. For example, in the period preceding the annual conference, worship provides a platform for previewing and promoting each of the international speakers that will appear. At the conference an annual ‘theme’ or motif is announced which differentiates that years’ offerings. More specialized ministries target different market segments, for example, there is the women’s ministry (led by Bobbi Houston, wife of Brian Houston) which has an annual themed ‘sisterhood’ conference, and a
youth ministry particularly important for its music label, currency and social media presence: it ‘grows’ both songwriters, musicians and performers.

In contrast to other churches, those attending Hillsong or consuming its products and services do not become ‘members’. Hillsong imposes no obligations on those who attend but it also does not accord them any of the rights that might accompany membership of a religious organization, such as voting, participation in decision-making and even the collective power to dismiss a church leader. They remain ‘free to come and go’ and select offerings that appeal and suit their purposes. Thus, the subject position of the churchgoer constructed by Hillsong is that of religious consumer, at once involved in, but also separate from, the Church, encouraged to rely on Hillsong because they understand the consumers’ needs and aspirations and can provide practical help in meeting them. When asked by a reporter on why Hillsong is so successful, the senior pastor replied: ‘I think the biggest issue is relevance, I really do…We are scratching people where they are itching’. (http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/01/28/1043804401241.html, The Lord’s profits, accessed 19 Nov 2015).

*Hillsong’s version of Pentecostalism*

The practical help Hillsong offers to individuals to improve their lives is consistent with the pragmatism of Pentecostal tradition: believers expect change to take place, both in worship and the rest of their lives, because of the Holy Spirit (Riches, 2010). However, Hillsong emphasizes some Pentecostal transformations and downplays others. Three in particular are central to the construction of the subject position of the religious consumer, and by implication, the Church: anointing (becoming consecrated or special), personal development and prosperity. Withstanding trial and suffering are
largely absent, perhaps because this would introduce negativity which Brian Houston has declared ‘an enemy to life’ (Houston, 1999; Clifton, 2005). Further, the distinctly Pentecostal focus on the Holy Spirit and supernatural empowerment (manifested as speaking in tongues) were purposefully dropped by Houston to increase Hillsong’s appeal, rendering its music and worship experience more theologically neutral and transposable (Riches, 2010).

Individual, not supernatural, empowerment is at the centre of Hillsong’s message: the individual has the power to change their own life, and therefore, change the world, and they are ‘anointed’ to do so. This self-sacralization is reflected in a book written by the senior pastor, Brian Houston, in 2008 - *For this I was Born: aligning your vision to God’s cause*. The title is based on the Bible verse from John 18:37 (NIV) that states:

‘You are King then!’ said Pilate. Jesus answered ‘You are right in saying I am a King. In fact for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me’.

This verse recounts an exchange where Jesus declares his identity as the Messiah, just hours before his crucifixion. Spoken to mark the end of Jesus’ life on earth, it declares his purpose as bearing witness to the truth. The title of Houston’s book is however, addressed to the individual reader who are assured that they, ‘Messiah-like’, were born for a reason: to live positively and inspire others, that they are special and ‘anointed’ by God:

Your life is a gift waiting to happen. Your story is destined by God to give answers, hope and strength to others. You are saved, called, positioned and empowered by God. He has entrusted you and me with this very time in history.
When we live with purpose, his name will be great on the earth – *For This You Were Born* (Houston, 2008: 172).

This promise of empowerment does not require sacrifice or hardship on the part of the individual: the ‘good life’ has already been paid for by the original sacrifice of Jesus and is available to all who believe.

This positive teaching is reflected in many Church products that promote and legitimize Christians’ aspiration to prosperity. Hillsong’s growth and market dominance have been attributed to this emphasis on prosperity (Evans, 2006) but it has also made them the target of criticism. They directly address and reframe such critique, to advance their religious message:

How do you see prosperity? There are those who equate prosperity with guilt, perhaps due to their upbringing or religious mind-sets, and then there are those to whom prosperity is all about “me”. When godly purpose is attached to prosperity, guilt and greed are banished. I hear people talking about a “prosperity gospel”. There is no such thing. There is only one gospel – the gospel of Jesus Christ…. I believe unashamedly that God wants people’s lives to move forward and enlarge in every area, but for a greater purpose than ourselves (Houston, 2008: 129-130).

Hillsong also promises more specific signs of personal development: that individuals will personally ‘enlarge and expand’, ‘maximize their gift’, ‘develop leadership skills’, ‘build relationships’, and ‘become successful’ (Houston, 2001b, 42-45). Further guidance on how to accomplish this is outlined in a series of ‘self-help’ books written by Houston with titles such as: *How to Flourish in Life; How to Live a Blessed Life; How to Live in Health and Wholeness; How to Build Great Relationships; How*
to Build a Life of Wisdom; How to Manage Your Life; How to be Employed, Prosperous and Happy; and How to Empower the Women in Your Life. Throughout Hillsong’s products and services, prosperity is framed as God entrusted, a way of supporting believers on their chosen path:

Prosperity is a Bible word that encompasses much more than money and wealth. It is “help for the journey”. This definition paints a picture that I really love. Each of us is on a life journey, and prosperity is our supply pack for the long trek, as if God has packed sandwiches and a flask of coffee for our road trip that ends in eternity! (Houston, 2008: 124).

The individual is free to interpret prosperity according to their own desires and goals, but the Church does assume they will subscribe to a normative process of self-improvement, imagining the narrative of their own future life as a journey, an upwards trajectory of success, facilitated by Hillsong. This is reinforced in the stories told by Brian and Bobbi Houston:

When we started Hillsong Church in a humble warehouse on the northwest outskirts of Sydney, I would look out my grime office window and see undeveloped fields, weed-strewn paddocks where a few horses grazed, and an occasional truck searching for one of the handful of other warehouses nearby. A church full of people was a vision in my heart, but a far cry from the two hundred or so lovable misfits who regularly filled our pews. From a young age, I knew I was called to build the church. Yet the personal journey of leading Hillsong Church into the healthy, thriving global community it is today has led me along a winding path of both criticism and accolade. My wife, Bobbie, and I have experienced both the mountain peaks and the valley depths in our
endeavor to build the House of God, coupled with raising a family and maintaining a healthy marriage (Houston, 2015: 3)

This narrative of successful religious entrepreneurs provides a template for how the life of the religious consumer can be improved. Clearly the current level of success is not the end goal and being satisfied with the status quo does not appear thinkable. In sermons, blog posts, or greetings, the individual churchgoer is told by the senior pastor that ‘The best is yet to come’ (Houston, 2015: 1). It is a future-oriented, never-ending promise that cannot be exhausted or limited, manifested in the material realm through increased prosperity.

Hillsong as a form of governmentality

Having detailed the role of music in Hillsong and how they selectively draw on the Pentecostal tradition, we now summarize and extend our analysis by applying Dean’s (1999) governmentality framework.

What is to be governed?

What or who is targeted by Hillsong’s approach to governing? The main object is the religious consumer but this includes those who may never have attended a church, consumed religious products and services or in other ways have been ‘turned off’ by ‘traditional’ Christian religion. This consumer is someone who inhabits a ‘normal’ (i.e. middle class) secular world and has corresponding aspirations, needs and wants, for example, the desire for success and affluence, enjoyment and feeling good about themselves.

Hillsong can help the religious consumer to fulfil all of these and more: it encourages the consumer to have grander aspirations and bigger goals. Just as the mission of the Church is limitless, to have a ‘global reach’, so too the individual should not limit or
restrict their aspirations. There is no boundary between the secular and the sacred, and no differentiation between spiritual and material success or development. Prosperity is evidence of God’s blessing. The Church assists with all of life (not just the soul): making money, relationships, personal development and a sense of belonging to a ‘mega’ social movement.

Transformation begins with changing the individual’s mindset and then manifests outwardly. The individual is recognized as unique but can also be part of a Church that is successful and growing because it presents a better alternative to what is currently on offer. This Church is able to be a constant companion to the individual, fitting their lifestyle, providing practical help and reassuring them they should not feel bad for wanting material success: this Church is about making people feel better, uplifted and helping people achieve what they want, as this is part of God’s plan.

How is government achieved?

The technologies of government are the means through which human conduct is influenced, which are both predicated on, and reinforce, the logic of the discourse concerned (Skålén et al., 2008: 111). In our case, government is achieved by offering a church experience that is enjoyable, therapeutic and motivational, reassuring individuals they are powerful, their material aspirations are worthy and they should aspire to more. It works by making people ‘feel good’ and encouraging them to participate in a performance that stands apart from everyday life but is also different from any church they have ever known. The size of the audience is fundamental to producing the experience, heightening emotional contagion. People are guided in how to behave and participate in the production of the music.
Help is also available in many different forms and the products and services of Hillsong are flexible. Consumers can choose those that suit their needs (books, podcasts, DVDs, CDs, small groups, specialist ministries and conferences) and the music is delivered in multiple formats, and regularly renewed. Both the music and the worship experience are predicated on offering diversion and variety to the consumer. Inspiration for aspiration to upwards mobility is provided by the story of the Church itself: how one man’s vision (Senior Pastor Brian Houston) has resulted in worldwide success.

*Who do we become?*

This question addresses the types of subject positions provided for within a discourse and regime of practices. The individual as religious consumer is at the heart of Hillsong’s approach and assumed to be ‘sovereign’. Hillsong claims ‘true knowledge’ of what ‘normal’ (i.e. middle class, affluent, western) people seek and need: to feel free and empowered, to exercise choice, to be motivated, inspired, entertained, reassured and affirmed, to be supported in improving and changing their lives, including their material circumstances. This claim to knowledge underpins and justifies the approach of the Church and its difference from ‘traditional Church’: people need to be built up, not criticized; they need to realize their own power and ‘divine’ right; and they need help to realize their goals, not have these imposed, told they are wrong or made to feel guilty because they want to be successful and wealthy.

Those who attend Hillsong are simultaneously included in the church’s activities but considered separate from them - customers who are the target of marketing products and services. Therefore, the freedom and power ‘written into’ this central subject position is that of consumer choice. Churchgoers engage with Hillsong as a brand, but they do not become members in the traditional sense where they might be able to participate in decision-making.
Why? What is the logic for governing in this way?

Following Skålén et al., (2008), we first outline the implicit but central logic to Hillsong’s approach to governing and then deconstruct it. The rationale for Hillsong’s approach is that churches should respond to, and deliver, the needs and wants of people who live in a ‘normal’ (i.e. modern, consumption-driven, affluent) society, not require them to adapt to, or restrict themselves by, religious doctrine. Everyone is on their own journey of self-improvement and growth without limits – the role of the Church is to assist in this process and invest it with a higher religious purpose. People need to feel good about themselves and seek enjoyment and freedom. The fact that ‘traditional churches’ do not realize this is one reason for their decline. Those that criticize Hillsong’s approach are either old-fashioned, traditional churches or misinterpret their mission.

In deconstructing this logic, we identify three major tensions or contradictions. Firstly, Brian Houston claims they are successful because they are “scratching people where they’re itching”. However, like managerial marketing more generally (Brownlie, 2006; Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Hackley, 2009b; Morgan, 2003; Skålén et al., 2008), Hillsong is not just responding to (pre-existing) customer wants or needs, but participating in their formation. They actively seek to influence what people think is possible and desirable, encourage them to have grander goals and aspirations to prosperity and success that they then target with their offerings. People are schooled to expect entertainment and enjoyment, diversified offerings, shown how to behave like a Hillsong attendee, and participate in the production of music. All of this encourages ongoing dependence of the consumer on Hillsong.
Secondly, while the Church does not dictate the content of the individual’s aspirations, it assumes they seek personal development, prosperity and self-improvement. Further, it prescribes that individual freedom, power and choice should be applied to a normative pursuit of increasing success, without end. Thus the Church may construct the religious consumer as free and empowered but at the same time limits the uses to which their freedom and empowerment should be put: they are not free to remain in the same place or live with less ambition and less material wealth but instead assumed to want to join the ‘road trip’ of greater aspiration and increased prosperity.

Thirdly, Hillsong makes extensive use of the discursive foil of ‘traditional church’ in justifying its approach. It characterizes traditional churches (and Hillsong’s critics) as wanting people to suffer needlessly, requiring hardship and sacrifice, repressing normal human needs, restricting people’s freedom and potential, and offering them a boring, negative experience that has to be endured rather than enjoyed, all of which are in stark contrast to Hillsong. Negativity, including critical reflection, has no place in the Church. But if Hillsong’s aim is to have ‘global reach’ and to provide all the religious consumer needs (see Wade, 2016), it actively represses aspects of human experience over the life course. In effect, the dualism it uses to construct its own identity in contrast to traditional churches is inherently limiting. By allowing itself to only be a vehicle for promoting positivity, prosperity, enjoyment, entertainment, success and progress, it cannot include that which this represses: negativity or critique, poverty, modest living or restraint, suffering, obligation, accepting limitations, failure and stasis or decline. Thus it cannot assist with the whole of life or human experience, nor extend itself to areas without a sufficient middle class who could realistically aspire to upwards mobility.

Conclusions
In this study we have focused on showing how the freedom inherent to the construction of churchgoer as religious consumer has regulatory implications. To do this, we have traced how Hillsong Church selectively interprets and blends aspects of Pentecostal tradition with popular culture, particularly music and the worship experience to encourage ongoing dependence of the individual on the Church. It claims knowledge of the religious consumer, and in doing so, promotes and reinforces a subject position of the churchgoer as seeking personal development, success and affluence. While predicated on consumer freedom, this subject position has regulatory implications because it encourages continued reliance on the Church, limits what is thinkable and desirable, and expects followers to subscribe to a normative ongoing ‘journey’ of self-improvement and upwards mobility.

As Townley (1998) has noted, religious and secular discourses are capable of being combined and mobilized in various ways by organizations and directed at diverse objectives. We argue the implications of this discursive practice are only discernible by empirical study that gives due weight to understanding the context and religious tradition of the organization concerned. In this regard, it would be easy to underestimate the differences in religious forms and practices in traditions more familiar to Western audiences, such as Christianity. Here we have shown how Hillsong’s approach draws from a Pentecostal tradition but does so in a selective way that resonates with contemporary secular culture. Our point is that without taking Pentecostalism into account, it would be easy to miss the religious substance in Hillsong’s offerings and approach. And while we have analysed how the religious producer constructs a subject position targeted at the religious consumer, we have not attempted to explore how actual religious consumers use Hillsong’s products and services to construct their own identities. Such a project would draw more from
Foucault’s later work on technologies of the self and constitutes an interesting area for future research.

However, our study has extended current understanding of religion, markets and consumption by applying a governmentality framework to analyse the regulatory implications of the subject position constructed by a religious producer. In doing so, we have shown how the contradictions and tensions inherent in consumer freedom so central to markets and marketing constitute a means by which consumers become more tightly bound to producers and increased consumption in a religious context. In our case, promoting pursuit of a ‘journey’ of self-improvement, success and prosperity without end, is just as much an expression of power as requiring religious followers avoid the consumption of certain goods, services and activities. Conceptualizing contemporary religion as a ‘marketplace’ where consumers have more freedom and choice is thus not an escape from power and its regulatory effects, but rather another mode through which power operates.

While we have used governmentality to study religion, as a methodological framework it has further potential to be applied within critical marketing. One of its strengths is that it can render the operation of power more visible as well as show how individual subject positions are connected to broader economic, political and cultural developments. It is also an accessible approach to discourse analysis that does not require expertise in linguistics. Scholars could use it to explore how marketing discourse, technologies, and practices are mobilized in specific contexts to construct, and claim knowledge of, the ‘consumer’, and the ways this may reinforce, or potentially challenge, dominant ways of thinking and being in the world. It provides an additional way of defamiliarizing marketing discourse and the subject position of the free consumer that has come to dominate so much of contemporary social life.
For example, it could be used to explore the marketization of previously non-business domains, such as politics and citizenship (Morgan, 2003), health, education and the not-for-profit sector, to show that what has become taken for granted as normal is an effect of a particular discourse and so could be otherwise. This would assist critical marketing scholarship to expand its repertoire and perspectives, beyond Critical Theory, to enable different ways of exploring how marketing knowledge and technologies are performed, and with what power effects (e.g. Brownlie and Hewer 2007; Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Hackley, 2009; Morgan, 2003; Saren et al., 2007).
References


Hillsong Church, [www.hillsong.com](http://www.hillsong.com).


Appendix: List of primary texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Music year</th>
<th>Title of Album</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Cornerstone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>God is Able</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>A Beautiful Exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Faith + Hope + Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>This is our God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Saviour King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Mighty to Save</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>God He Reigns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>For All You’ve Done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Blessed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>You are My World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>For This Cause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>By Your Side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Touching Heaven Changing Earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>All Things are Possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>God is in the House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Friends in High Places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>People Just Like Us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Stone’s Been Rolled Away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>The Power of Your Love</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Books


Houston B (2001a) *Heaven is in this house*. Castle Hill: Maximised Leadership.


### Public interviews


### Album Recordings - DVD

- Saviour King 2007
- God He Reigns 2005
- For All You’ve Dove 2004
- Hope 2003
- Shout to the Lord 2000
- Hillsong Church Opening celebrations 2002

### Miscellaneous Texts

- Sixty e-newsletters in the period 2004 – 2009
- Forty six articles published in Australian newspapers in the period 2002 - 2009