A qualitative approach to unchurching and deconversion: Theme and sentiment analysis
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Abstract
Different research studies and polls indicate that church attendance in America has been declining for four decades. According to Barnes Group, 50% of young adults, while transitioning from high school to college, either cease to attend church or give up their Christian faith. Many studies approach this problem using a quantitative method; however, statistical figures are incapable of revealing the deeper structure of the phenomenon, especially the emotive and experiential factors. Using qualitative methodologies, the research team hopes that this analysis of rich data could unveil a holistic picture of the unchurching phenomenon.

Introduction
Prior studies conducted by the research team found that intellectual challenges by the New Atheist Movement and the postmodern culture are not major concerns by the participants at all. According to Hope and Packard, the experience of churchgoers in the community is a more determining factor to their continuation of Christian life than theological factors. Parents and Family: Parental religiosity has a significant effect on an emerging adult’s church attendance (Vaidyanathan, 2011). Further, young adults from divorced families have significantly lower religious involvement compared to young adults from an intact family unit. Those from divorced families reflected lower levels of attendance in religious services, but they did not, reflect lower levels in closeness to God (Zhai, Ellison, Glann, & Marquandt, 2012). Attachment Styles: Findings suggest that one’s attachment (secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful) is a determinant of one’s satisfaction of participation within the church. Those who are securely attached are significantly more satisfied with their church in comparison to all other attachment styles combined (Hamilton, Martin, & Martin, 2012).

Trust and Satisfaction: Millennials who are leaving the church do so because of feelings of lack of trust and satisfaction. Non-denominational churches seem to offer this sense of trust and relationship for millennial Christians. Millennials are looking for conversations and personal experiences to be stressed rather than doctrines (Waters, 2012). “The Dones”: “The Dones” are previously active members and faithful leaders who have given up church, but continue to practice faith. These individuals are discontent with the church’s imbalanced hierarchy, inauthentic community, and its stifling of different ideas. They aspire to cultivate genuine, compassionate, loving community without institution of church. There is a call to pastors and leaders to reflect and change (Hope & Packard, 2015).

Methods
In this study 212 responses from adults aged 18-40 were collected. Qualitative methodologies were employed in an attempt to find out what the disconnect is between their expectations and their actual church experience. The unstructured textual data are categorized into major themes and the findings are compared against those yielded by prior studies using quantitative methods. To avoid bias and to improve reliability, a panel was set up to classify the open-ended responses. A total of six questions were coded by the panel.

Results
For the six coded questions, a frequency table and code relations graph were created to visualize the relationship of the responses. Direct quotes are also referenced.

Conclusion
Because studies like the Barnes Group suggest that there are a significant amount of young people leaving the church, it is incredibly important to discuss why these individuals are discontent with the church. Using qualitative research methods, the research team was able to gather a broader and deeper understanding of this phenomenon as a panel coded the responses of participants regarding their deconversion from the church. Common themes of discontent were found from coding, including, judgement, the prosperity gospel, narrow-mindedness, and misinterpretation. This is consistent with other research that young members of the church are interested in trust and salification (Waters, 2012). While steps in order to change the environment of the church are complex and difficult, the end goal should be one of love and acceptance.

Discussion
Several themes of discontent with the church were found, including:

• The church is too judgmental (especially regarding controversial issues like abortion and the LGBTQ community). Instead of inviting those who are different or marginalized into the church, participants experienced the church judging and separating themselves from these individuals.
• The church confuses cultural norms and scriptural mandates. Participants experienced church members and leaders equating topics such as gender roles that contribute to oppressive tendencies as being scripturally based. With this issue, is the lack of contextualization of scripture that churches sometimes ignore. Participants were frustrated that the church practices they experienced did not agree with a proper contextual reading of scripture.
• The message of the prosperity gospel teaches indulgence. Participants were upset with mega-churches, and the pastor’s of mega-churches preaching that being “blessed” is living a life of luxury.
• Scriptural misinterpretation and narrowmindedness are related to the gradual doubt of some participants. Instead of engaging with questions, churches too often ignore or explain them away.

Steps to address these concerns are complex. However, the tone in which the church must address them is one of love and acceptance. Young people are coming to the church to be a place of refuge, and instead of addressing them with judgement, the church must engage with them, love them, and exemplify the spirit of unconditional love and positive regard that Christ exemplified during his ministry on earth.

Selected References