

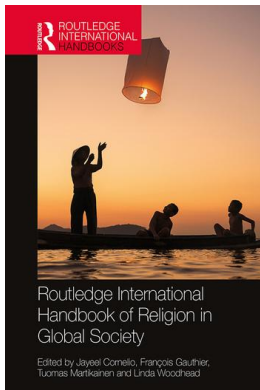
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## A megachurch brand story in Indonesia

*Jeaney Yip, Susan Ainsworth and Chang-Yau Hoon*

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### Introduction

Marketing is a ‘pervasive social activity’ that has been broadened beyond the commercial sector to reach once public, non-profit, welfare and religious institutions and organizations (Kotler and Levy 1969). The concept of ‘branded religion’ (Twitchell 2004; Zinkin 2004) reflects this spread of marketing with some arguing that religions are basically ‘faith brands’ (Einstein 2008) that compete in a spiritual marketplace. These faith brands are ‘spiritual products that have been given popular meaning and awareness through marketing’. Like consumer products, they are packaged and produced to appeal to consumer tastes, which can be reoriented to target specific audiences or market segments.

However, we approach marketing as a set of practices and discourses that reflect, produce and constitute a particular kind of society (Brownlie and Saren 1997; Morgan 1992) and the markets, organizations, consumers and consumption objects within it. Thus, organizations that employ marketing practices, including religious ones, are also engaged in a process of constructing their own identities and those of the consumers they are targeting (Appadurai 1986; Gauthier, Woodhead and Martikainen 2013; Miller 1987).

In this chapter we explore the effects of marketing discourse on a type of church that has experienced phenomenal growth in the Southeast Asian region, megachurches. Megachurches are Protestant congregations of more than 2,000 people (Thumma and Travis 2007), often Pentecostal and/or charismatic in origin or style, but many are increasingly moving towards a strategy of establishing their own brand. The megachurch phenomenon itself is socio-culturally constructed and embraces discourses of ‘Americanness’ (Ahdar 2006) with ideologies of freedom and liberal individualistic notions of a person’s choice of faith. This practice of branding churches is thriving in Southeast Asia, where it is intertwined with marketing. As a business function that is ubiquitous within consumer culture, marketing has permeated religion to operate within this sphere rather than separately from it.

Branding *is* a marketing strategy, but it is also part of management practice (Schultz, Antorini and Csaba 2005). Through brands, organizations attempt to construct a unified, coherent version of their preferred identity to communicate to external and internal audiences. In order to be recognizable, a brand needs to be sufficiently familiar and similar

to what is already known to be comprehensible. On the other hand, it needs to be distinct and differentiated in order to justify its existence. Branded organizations conceive everything they say and do as potential communicators of their identity, including organizational dimensions such as leadership, personnel, architecture and design, policies, practices, product information and so on (Christensen, Morsing and Cheney 2008). Seen in this way, branding is not simply a tool of the marketing department but fundamental to the construction and communication of corporate identity, capable of affecting all stakeholders (Kärreman and Rylander 2008).

Megachurches are arguably ‘branded organizations,’ where the attempt is to brand the organization as one coherent integrated entity (Ind 1997), a recognizable archetype of ‘very large Protestant’ congregational church, yet also differentiated from others. In this chapter we explore the dynamics of church branding in a case study of a megachurch, Jakarta Praise Community Church (JPCC), based in the capital city of Indonesia and how it balances its international affiliation and outlook with culturally and geographically embedded identity that resonates with an upwardly mobile, urbanized middle class in the world’s largest Muslim nation.

### **Context, state of the art, concepts and methods**

Indonesia is a large country in terms of size and population (estimated 260 million people in 2017). It is the world’s fourth largest country by population and has the world’s largest Muslim majority population. Against the backdrop of ethnic diversity, rapid economic growth and modernization in recent years, Indonesia is the world’s 16th largest economy according to McKinsey ([www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/asia-pacific/the-archipelago-economy](http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/asia-pacific/the-archipelago-economy)) and its recent growth has been predominantly fuelled by consumption due to increasing income as opposed to exporting and manufacturing. This increase in consumption is fertile ground for marketers targeting growth for their businesses.

In this context of rapid economic development and expansion of consumer markets, megachurches are experiencing phenomenal growth in Indonesia (Hoon 2013). Megachurches are often Pentecostal in orientation, a non-denominational movement that emphasizes the gift of the Holy Spirit, miracles and certain spiritual experiences, particularly among young people and those aspiring to upwards social and economic mobility. They typically deliver lively worship through contemporary music and media technologies and feature dynamic preachers who convey bite-sized Christian messages that aim to address the practical daily needs of the audience. Furthermore, the Pentecostal work ethic and faith practices resonate with the norms and behaviors of post-industrial capitalism, in particular with the demands of neoliberal economies. Barker (2007) argues that the ‘prosperity gospel’ constituting the crux of many Pentecostal churches filters all economic experiences and material well-being through the spiritual lens of faith and miracles. According to this type of theology, the accumulation of capital is seen as a sign of blessings from God that ought to be celebrated, and they have a ‘cultural mandate’ to bring Christianity into the marketplace and offer churchgoers promises of self-development, prosperity and material growth (Pahl 2003).

Pentecostal and Charismatic megachurches in urban Indonesia are correspondingly a ‘faith of an emergent middle class’ because their practices are able to tap into the aspirations for upward mobility (Chong 2015, p. 218). As well as class, megachurch growth in Indonesia has important ethnic and geographical characteristics. They primarily cater to an urbanized churchgoer, particularly well-to-do Chinese Indonesians. For example, Jakarta is home to the largest number of ethnic Chinese compared to other cities in Indonesia and more than

40 percent of the Chinese Indonesian population are Christian. A majority of Chinese Indonesians are middle class and above (Ananta et al. 2015), including the propensity for the Chinese to be 'rich' (Chua 2004, p. 476). It is deeply embedded in perceptions (Koning 2018) that the entrepreneurial 'rich Chinese' in Indonesia go to churches that promote personal success and multitude blessings, a trend also observed in nearby Malaysia and Singapore (Koning and Dahles 2009). This reflects a multitude of factors including the marginalization of the Chinese minority identity in Malaysia and Indonesia and political forces shaping their orientation towards trade and commerce in these countries. According to Koning (2018), Chinese Indonesians play a major role in leadership, membership and support contributing to growth in numbers in megachurches in Indonesia.

Like their counterparts in Singapore (Yip and Ainsworth 2015), many megachurches have made a strategic choice of using a commercial rather than a religious facility such as a shopping mall, in order to bypass the onerous licensing requirements. Under the 2006 Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religious affairs and the Minister for Internal Affairs, in order to construct a place of worship, applicants need to obtain letters of recommendation from various officials and written consent from 90 members of the congregation and at least 60 members of the local community of another religion. In the absence of strong state institutions, acquiring such permits is often subject to negotiation with politico-bureaucrats who use them as a method of rent-seeking (McLeod 2010). The application for a legal permit often involves certain forms of routinized corruption, such as bribery of state officials and paying local residents for their signatures. Hence, a branded church operating in a mall in Indonesia is not just an example of religion embracing market logic (Chong 2015) but also a response to the context-specific restrictions and regulation of religion. Shopping malls provide excellent security and protection from vandalism and mob attack, as well as the convenience of a one-stop location where church members can worship, shop and dine (Gudorf 2012).

While there is an existing body of literature within marketing and business that regards religious organizations as operating in a spiritual 'market' (Miller 2002; Zinkin 2004), our approach adopts a different orientation. Rather than seeing marketing as merely a set of actions and processes undertaken by organizations to increase customer satisfaction, brand awareness and market share, we understand marketing as a discourse and the 'market' as a social construction, not a pre-existing objective entity. If marketing is treated as a discourse, it becomes possible to analyze and critique the ways in which it structures, organizes, shapes and constructs markets, consumers and organizations rather than simply accepting its pervasiveness as an extension of applicability across contexts. From a discourse perspective, the market is a concept constructed by human actors who draw upon familiar ideologies and discourses. This discourse is a social process that is based on relationships and constructions that are based on the market logic. When this logic gets transferred to a context not previously involved with the market, the result is *marketized* discourse (Mautner 2010). Fairclough (1992) originally described this as restructuring the order of discourse based on the model of the market, an effect of marketization on discursive practices.

Marketization gives rise to practices such as the sale of products and services, advertising the brand, scripting sermons with messages other than Christian theology, selecting groups of customers to cater to, and all other activities that traditionally would not have been involved in a 'non-marketing' context such as a church. In turn, the marketization of religion produces a subject position for the believer that incorporates consumerism, appealing to their aspirational ideals. However, there has been little analysis of the actual

processes of marketization by which a church brand is constructed and even less in non-Western contexts. Accordingly, we focus on how JPCC discursively constructs its church brand, specifically focusing on strategies the church deploys. Two authors conducted field observation in 2012, 2013 and 2017 while a collection of the church's artefacts (music, sermons, books, church newsletters) comprised the dataset from 2007–2017 which informed the analysis of this chapter.

## The JPCC brand story

For Twitchell (2004, p. 24), 'brands are made to be consumed and witnessed.' While Christianity is a belief system, JPCC is a brand. Often dubbed as *gereja orang kaya* (church for rich people) and *gereja artis* (church for celebrities), JPCC constructs its brand using twin strategies of affiliation and mirroring, and translation. Both of these reflect transnational networks among megachurches in the region, particularly the relationship with the Australian-based Hillsong Church. Here, 'strategy' is taken to mean a plan of action with varying degrees of elaborateness and intentionality that is realized in various practices in the discursive construction of a brand identity (cf. De Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak 1999).

JPCC started in 1996 as a 'small prayer meeting' with 10 people ([www.jpcc.org/en/our\\_story.html](http://www.jpcc.org/en/our_story.html)). With humble beginnings in Jakarta, JPCC now draws a 12,000 congregation in two church venues. One of the venues is on the top floor of a shopping mall, *Kota Kasablanka*, while the other is in *Wisma Nusantara* as part of the annexe of the Pullman Hotel located in the central business district of Jakarta. The church arguably competes with shopping and must appeal to the middle class and its aspirations.

Consistent with megachurches worldwide, JPCC is very much driven by the vision and personality of its senior pastor, Jeffrey Rachmat. As founder, he is the church's senior pastor and was educated in the Netherlands. Another senior associate pastor, Jose Carol, joined the church in 1999 after having lived and worked in Germany for 14 years. In their account of JPCC's history, Rachmat and Carol claim it belongs to a denomination called the Jemaat Kristen Indonesia (JKI). JKI denominationally emerged out of the Anabaptist and Mennonite traditions ([www.jpcc.org/en/our\\_story.html](http://www.jpcc.org/en/our_story.html)). However, JPCC in its brand story development and growth neither affiliates nor identifies with this origin and openly claims it is 'non-denominational' (Live in Kharismatic JPCC 2014).

The church added Sidney Mohede to its leadership team as the church's network pastor, who is also the creative director of the church's worship and was educated in the United States. These 'Western educated' pastors contribute to the construction of a church brand that is modern, befitting its location in Jakarta. JPCC sees itself very much as a church for the city of Jakarta and does not have intentions of 'church planting' or expanding to other cities.

Although Indonesia is a non-English speaking nation, in Jakarta, English is often used and mixed with local languages (Tanu 2014). However, the manner and extent of English use varies with style and class. JPCC mainly uses English in its music and preaching signifying their alignment with modernity, 'Westernism' and upward class mobility. The church audience is predominantly young, mainly in their late teens and 20s to 30s, with few older than 50 years of age. Dress is informal and yet stylish while branded fashionable handbags are common among women. Pastors also dress either fashionably hip with leather and denim jackets, or corporate looking suited up, but always looking modern and highly presentable.

JPCC is the only South East Asian (the rest are predominantly U.S. churches) counterpart with an affiliation to Hillsong Church, based in Sydney, arguably the largest non-denominational

megachurch from Australia whose worship music is sung globally. Hillsong itself has expanded directly into 20 countries under its own Hillsong brand and has widespread international connections and a music label that is distributed globally. Interestingly, in 2017, Hillsong opened a branch in Bali directly under its brand and leadership. This was Hillsong's first 'Asian' expansion following rapid widespread growth in Europe, the United States, the UK, Latin America, South Africa and even Israel. Bali is a tropical island which is Hindu majority (rather than Muslim), but also a popular holiday destination for Australians. Hillsong has traditionally focused on 'Western' markets in growing its brand (its first overseas expansion was the UK) and tightly manages its brand expansion strategy which assures consistency, coherence and amplification of its church brand in both global and local settings.

JPCC, rather than being a direct subsidiary of Hillsong or its local base, however, is part of a transnational network of like-minded churches, led by Hillsong. This is constructed by Hillsong as belonging to a 'family' of churches and people, whose members are free and autonomous but 'belong' together in relationships of reciprocal support and shared vision:

The HILLSONG FAMILY is a group of like-spirited, forward thinking, kingdom-building visionaries and ministries working TOGETHER for a greater cause. This group of churches and ministries are joining our 'FAMILY' in an effort to develop and strengthen one another—a family relationship in which to find wisdom and encouragement, spiritual accountability and support as they continue to build the church and ministry that God has uniquely called them to do.

This is not the foundation or beginnings of a Hillsong 'denomination', nor are they 'Hillsong Churches'. The spirit behind the HILLSONG FAMILY is empowering rather than controlling; with each of the churches listed below maintaining their own name, autonomy and identity. In trying to express what this looks like—we are simply formalizing a relationship that has already been communicated through culture, behaviour and word ... These churches see Hillsong as their primary, but certainly not their only relationship or family.

*(quoted from <https://hillsong.com/family/about-hillsong-family/>)*

Hillsong's size and market dominance in both music and church practice has resulted in many smaller churches attempting to emulate what they perceive as a successful role model. However, Hillsong's formal recognition of some as part of their 'family' bestows legitimacy and market recognition on affiliates such as JPCC. This is not part of a co-branding exercise: JPCC is not branded as Hillsong-JPCC but has a separate place-based identity. Nevertheless, JPCC's progress and development mirrors Hillsong in delivery, style and practices while translating this model for its local context. In this way, JPCC *relies* on its affiliation and familiarity with the Hillsong model to be successful. This includes using standardized and 'well-proven' methods of church practices from Hillsong such as producing an in-house music label, organizing annual, themed conferences and musicals, drawing international speakers from a global (often Hillsong) network, merchandising what is preached and crafting sermons for practical living with diluted theological underpinnings as well as featuring successful, highly presentable leaders and worshippers on stage. It regularly draws on guest speakers/pastors internationally, infusing sermons with popular culture anecdotes, humour, role-playing and the use of props on stage similar to a talk show which reconstructs a sermon to be more a form of entertainment rather than about teaching biblical theology. With sermon titles such as 'A Better You,' 'Look Up,' 'Love Yourself,' 'You are Blessed,' 'Personal Freedom,' 'Living Large,' 'The Power of Influence,' 'The Secret of Building

a Healthy Relationship,' 'Overflow,' 'God Wants You to Prosper,' JPCC's sermons promote a sense of pragmatism, a positive psychology peppered with bible verses which provide theological legitimacy.

JPCC has been producing worship music since its first album launch in 1997. Under the label of True Worshipers led by Sidney Mohede, its worship pastor, they rebranded to JPCC Worship in 2011 for communication consistency and to signify that music production was synonymous with the church. Like Hillsong then, JPCC has achieved brand awareness as a church *because* of its music. Hillsong partnered with JPCC in its global music project in 2012 where albums are produced by translating Hillsong songs into local languages. JPCC was also one of the 'stops' as part of the Hillsong Worship Asia Tour in 2015.

Apart from music production, JPCC operates an active women's ministry very similar to Hillsong's Colour Sisterhood and an annual themed conference called Treasures Women which glamorizes women empowerment in a glossy, fairy tale-like tone. The women's ministry is led by the senior pastor's wife, Angela Rachmat, and Hanna Carol (Jose Carol's wife) who are both highly visible and active on Instagram ([www.instagram.com/hchanna-carol/?hl=en](http://www.instagram.com/hchanna-carol/?hl=en)), posting pictures of pretty images, fashion, holiday pictures in Europe and exotic destinations and *makan cantik* (a cultural phenomenon rampant in Jakarta as a form of aesthetic eating where the intention is to be seen dining in fine and beautiful settings for the purposes of social media posting), all displays of glamorous, upper class lifestyles. Indonesians are one of the biggest users of social media (Jurriens and Tapsell 2017). In 2016, Indonesia had 76 million Facebook users, which is the fourth highest in the world, while Jakarta is being called the 'most active city on Twitter' (Lipman 2012). This form of visibility (physically and through social media) displays the flamboyancy of *orang kaya baru* (literally New Rich People in Indonesian). The pastors and their wives use social media to promote church-related events, but also they construct a public imaginary of their personal life. For example, Sidney Mohede, the church's creative director and network pastor, has over 380,000 Twitter followers, a 300,000+ Facebook community and millions who have viewed his (and JPCC's) YouTube performances ([www.hallels.com/articles/12701/20150326/sidney-mohede-shares-about-his-work-with-the-indonesian-church-darlene-zschech-israel-houghton-and-his-new-ep.htm](http://www.hallels.com/articles/12701/20150326/sidney-mohede-shares-about-his-work-with-the-indonesian-church-darlene-zschech-israel-houghton-and-his-new-ep.htm)). Photos of the pastors, their wives and families, celebrations such as birthdays and anniversaries, fine dining and holidays are prolific posts to elicit envy, as a form of invidious consumption. This is evidenced by the comments and responses to these posts. Through postings of positive and beautiful moments (church and personal), these visuals contribute towards the brand's image in positioning itself as a progressive, dynamic and relevant church with leaders who lead successful, happy lives worthy of emulating. This regular visualization of success, positive appearances, beautiful settings is paramount towards brand building. Social media is also a central way the church promotes its 'mega event' spectacles. Mimicking Brian and Bobbie Houston (senior pastors of Hillsong), who are also active on social media, megachurches such as JPCC and Hillsong aptly uses social media marketing in drawing their transnational 'consumers' to its brand and personalities.

Like Hillsong, JPCC stages, packages and produces musical spectacles (with an entry-fee) such as *Bun cerita dari Shangkartta* and *Goodbye Monotown*. Christmas musicals performed by JPCC's Performing Arts ministry (similar to Hillsong) are also part of their regular practice in supporting the spectacularization strategy. As JPCC produces and markets its own brand of church along with its merchandise, this practice is guided by the market discourse that not only elevates the sovereignty of the consumer but transforms church practice into a business-like operation that continuously produces according to market conditions. While the church service is constructed through performance that enhances the experiential aspects

of the ‘product,’ the church actually employs standardization practices in ‘packaging the product’ as every service is audio-recorded in order to be sold straight after each service. Given the size of the megachurch and due to the multiple church services on any given weekend, there is standardization and homogenization of structure that serves two purposes for the church. First, the standardization processes allow the church to package and market the production of its offerings whether they are church services or corporate artefacts such as its music or books. Second, the standardization conditions its consumers to become quickly familiar with the JPCC way of experiencing church as the structure of the service is not liturgical—there is no order of service printed or published, but churchgoers come to know what to expect from their previous experience of the church. A sign of ‘belonging’ to JPCC is therefore familiarity with its particular approach to staging worship, knowing what to do and when. JPCC therefore encourages repeat consumption, which is part of the marketing discourse that, on the one hand, promotes brand loyalty, but on the other, requires continued effort to ensure it occurs. JPCC achieves this through its retail operations, Insight Limited, where it sells its in-house produced church merchandise (books, packaged sermons) including other items such as fashion clothing, home furnishings, accessories and gift items.

Through the Hillsong family and the increasing awareness of its own JPCC brand, the church relies on transnational networks to modernize its church services. Its speaking circuit has included ‘Western’ pastors (predominantly U.S.) such as A.R. Bernard, Rick Goodwin, Paul Scanlon, Holly Wagner, Lisa Bevere, Robbi Sonderger, Casey Treat, Paul de Jong, among others often drawn from the Hillsong network. Likewise, Jeffrey Rachmat has reciprocally spoken in Hillsong congregations. Bringing in Western pastors to its Jakarta services legitimizes JPCC as an international church brand and constructs an ‘imaginary’ for its churchgoers that they are connected to a global, transnational network. This further aligns with class aspirations of the emerging Indonesian consumers yearning for Western modernity and its associated developments.

We argue that JPCC is using twin strategies to construct its own brand of church: *mirroring and affiliating* (with Hillsong) as well as *translating* the Hillsong model in a way that resonates with its Indonesian context and supports its brand story of being an indigenous, place-based megachurch. The similarities between JPCC and Hillsong are many: they both literally perform their brand identity through their approaches to worship, relying heavily on popular culture genres in their services, spectacles and events. The use of popular music in JPCC’s church services deliberately aims to combine enjoyment and worship. In other words, it is part of the church’s practice to orchestrate, incorporate, script, produce and perform in ways with content that constructs enjoyment for the audience. However, the emulation of the Hillsong model takes on a different inflection because of their relationship as part of the Hillsong ‘family’: JPCC can claim affiliation in a way that gives its mirroring of Hillsong’s approach greater legitimacy and meaning. They can claim a similarity of outlook and approach without being derivative of, or subordinate to, the Australian-based Hillsong. At the same time, because of the unique and complex cultural setting, mere emulation of Hillsong would not be workable—it requires translation and adaptation to resonate with churchgoers in Jakarta. This allows it to maintain a sense of distinct, geographically embedded identity—a different source of legitimacy.

Like identity, brands can be thought of as a dynamic set of processes continually constructed through ongoing interactions and relationships between self and others (cf. Hatch and Schultz 2002, p. 991). In the case of JPCC and its relationship with Hillsong, these processes are used to accomplish the essential components of brand identity: establishing sufficient similarity and familiarity to be recognizable; and achieving sufficient



difference from alternatives, both local and global, to appeal to consumers. The two strategies used by JPCC to construct its brand story—*mirroring and affiliating* on the one hand and *translating* on the other—are each important but also intertwined. Both strategies marshal different sources of legitimacy: recognition and validation by a global leader and membership of a transnational network of megachurches that appeals to the aspirational, upwardly mobile consumer; as well as local, culturally-specific and place-based credibility that develops from its own brand story as an indigenous Indonesian megachurch.

## Conclusion and future research

JPCC's brand story operates and thrives in a politically and socio-culturally complex context where Christianity is a minority religion. By disassociating with any denominations, JPCC navigated established norms surrounding denominational churches and instead constructed its brand, drawing on the model of Hillsong. It pragmatically mixes practices and ideologies that combine the most attractive facets of charismatic worship style, the prosperity teachings of Pentecostalism, the modernity of 'Western' speaking and speakers and the currency of consumer culture in constructing a 'relevant' brand that is engaging to the yearnings of urban middle-class Indonesians. Affirming what Cornelio (2008) labels as 'postdenominational,' we suggest that JPCC is a 'new paradigm church' that aspires to be more market-friendly rather than seeking or demonstrating allegiance to any denomination. Instead, the international and transnational networks fulfil a more strategic objective of guaranteeing success, growth as well as contributing to its brand appeal.

JPCC constructs a church brand that is synonymous with lively music, relevant and familiar 'feel good' inspirational messages and offer an attractive one-stop shop for well-being. This strategy ensures that the offerings are not only different from traditional (especially denominational) churches but contemporarily appealing. Through discursive processes of mirroring and affiliating (with Hillsong) as well as translating the model for a Jakarta based context, JPCC locates itself in relation to transnational networks and middle-class aspirations of the 'good life.' This brand is constructed for competitive circulation and its practices and artefacts designed to appeal to current consumer ideals and class aspirations that reflect segments of the population in its particular geographical location.

Our case study suggests a range of areas for future research. Firstly, the megachurch is a form of religious organization that is international, and was popularized in the United States. However, it has been reconstructed in diverse cultural contexts around the globe. Future studies could explore how megachurches mobilize different sources of legitimacy. In this regard, it would be interesting to explore how megachurches whose brand is strongly anchored in a particular place deal with questions of internationalization. Secondly, internationalization can take many forms. This account of JPCC illustrates how important transnational networks are to the growth and identity of religious organizations. In particular, it is important to explore how the relationship between organizations is constructed in public communication as the meaning of brand and identity is relational in nature. Thirdly, rather than being denominational or liturgy-oriented religious organizations, megachurches such as JPCC are pastor-focused. Future research could explore the dynamics of leadership within megachurches and how 'the way leadership is done' (Guthey, Clark and Jackson 2009) varies between and within cultural contexts. Here the concept of the 'human brand' (Thomson 2006) could be useful in understanding the centrality of pastors to the marketing of ministries, their products and services. JPCC is of course only one of several branded churches in Indonesia that are thriving. Comparative studies could investigate the range of similarity and variation in megachurches within this complex and dynamic environment.

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