

Acceptance and Usage of Social Media for Disseminating Religious Messages During Covid-19 Lockdown among Ondo Church Congregations

By

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Abstract

The advancement of technology, particularly the internet, has caused significant transformations across various sectors, including the religious domain. Consequently, this research investigates the acceptance and utilization of social media for sharing religious messages among Ondo Church congregations during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study is based on the Technological Acceptance Model (TAM) and employs qualitative methods, specifically in-depth interviews with 18 informants. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that congregants not only have access to social media but also hold a positive attitude towards its use, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study highlights that the adoption of social media is driven by its fast-evolving nature and convenience, particularly for the younger generation. In conclusion, both the RCCG and Anglican Church congregants in Ondo displayed a high acceptance of social media for religious purposes, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study recommends that church leaders should conduct regular educational sessions to inform the congregation about social media usage policies. Additionally, the implementation of feedback mechanisms will enable leaders to assess the effectiveness of social media use and make appropriate adjustments when needed.

Keywords: Social media, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, Covid-19, Churches.

Introduction

In recent years, technology, especially the internet, has profoundly transformed various sectors, including religion. Throughout history, technology like ink and scrolls were used for gospel spread (Animante et al., 2021). Modern times also saw religious institutions using traditional and new media to share messages (Cunningham, 2019). Social media emerged as a powerful communication tool, enabling global expression and outreach (Johnson, 2019). COVID-19 heightened this trend, with Nigerian churches shifting to digital platforms due to pandemic restrictions (Ridwan, Kazeem & Omokanmi, 2020). Platforms like Facebook Live and Zoom became digital worship spaces, letting leaders connect and share teachings (Alimardani & Elswah, 2020; Falaye, 2020).

Despite widespread social media use for religious purposes during COVID-19, acceptance and usage for message dissemination still require scholarly exploration. This study focuses on social media's role in Redeemed Christian Church of God (Pentecostal) and Anglican (Orthodox) churches in Ondo State during lockdown.

Objective of this study

- a) To examine the extent of use of social media engagement for religious communication during Nigeria's COVID-19 era
- b) To examine the usefulness social media engagement for religious communication during Nigeria's COVID-19 era
- c) To examine the ease of use of social media engagement for religious communication during Nigeria's COVID-19 era.

COVID-19 and Religion

In 2020, Pillay labeled the COVID-19 pandemic as an unparalleled era, causing widespread disruptions across economies, social life, and religious institutions (Pillay, 2020). Churches adjusted their operations due to restricted physical gatherings to curb the virus's spread. Despite pandemic challenges, Falaye argued that churches historically fostered trust, hope, and resilience during crises (Falaye, 2020). Restricted gatherings pushed Christian churches toward alternative approaches, such as social media and live streaming, to sustain worship and connections (Pillay, 2020). Religious groups, including Christians, embraced innovation like live streaming and modified rituals on social media (Wildman et al., 2020). This digital shift, noted by Pillay, gave rise to the digital church with worship, sacraments, and mission transitioning online (Pillay, 2020). Yet, challenges emerged. Some treated religious activities as consumer choices, reshaping the church experience (Pillay, 2020). While digital engagement grew, the digital divide spotlighted unequal technology access (Pillay, 2020).

Adichie's study on Catholic congregations during lockdown revealed the Roman Catholic Church's use of modern technologies, preserving core liturgy via live streams and social media (Adichie, 2021). In a nutshell, the pandemic's impact on religious practices led to transformative changes in worship, embracing digital avenues for connection. These shifts unveiled both opportunities and disparities, sparking reflections on the evolving nature of religious engagement in the digital era.

Religious Communication

Communication is a fundamental aspect of human existence, permeating all sectors, including religion. Authors have varied definitions of communication. Craig (2004) describes it as sharing thoughts through sound or symbols. It establishes understanding (Ottuh & Jemegbe, 2020), a core human need. Religion is defined by Ekpendu and Audu (2017) as beliefs, practices, and values related to sacred beings, and Durkheim (as

cited in Baazeem, 2020) views it as a cohesive system. Echekwube (1984) sees it as encountering the divine to enhance self-realization.

In Nigeria, religion binds people, facilitated by communication (Ottuh & Jemegbe, 2020). Communication encompasses religion, as Arens (2011) asserts. Religion employs various forms of communication—prayer, preaching, worship, sacred texts—to reveal reality and create community. Religious communication involves passing religion to others (Campbell, 2017). It's horizontal when among humans, vertical when with deities. Religion enables self-understanding and societal information sharing (Campbell, 2017). Religious institutions historically used diverse means, like tele-evangelism, to reach congregations. Technological influx enhanced religious communication, notably through social media and the internet.

Social Media and Religion

Technological advancements, including social media, have transformed society, including religion (Roso et al., 2020; Chukwuma, 2018). Social media fosters online participation and community engagement (Destiana & Salman, 2015).

Religious groups utilize these platforms for communication (Kamau et al., 2019). Chukwuma (2018) highlights congregations rapidly adopting Facebook, Twitter, and more for ministry, globally. Congregants create microblogging content to share faith online (Chukwuma, 2018). Buzz Plant surveyed churches, revealing mixed opinions on social media's effectiveness (Pittman, 2012). Facebook integrates online churches, allowing daily interactions and mission work (Kamau et al., 2019). Animante et al. (2021) emphasize Facebook's live streaming and WhatsApp's cost-effective communication. Instagram showcases church activities, Twitter promotes events (Animante et al., 2021). YouTube offers flexible church program viewing (Animante et al., 2021). These platforms complement traditional worship (Animante et al., 2021).

Global Christian resources, from sermons to networking, unite the church online (Chukwuma, 2018). Technologies like Skype and social media enhance communication between leaders and followers (Chukwuma, 2018; Lewis, 2016). Religious social media sites enrich religious knowledge and interaction (Chukwuma, 2018).

Technology Acceptance Model

The study explores the impact of social media-disseminated religious messages on congregations using the Technological Acceptance Model (TAM). TAM, developed by Fred Davis in 1989 as an adaptation of the Theory of Reasoned Action, is a widely used and empirically tested theoretical model that explains user behavior in different computer systems applications (Bazeem, 2020).

Central to TAM are two factors: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use in computer use behaviors (Surendran, 2012). Perceived usefulness refers to the extent to which a prospective user evaluates a specific application system as advantageous or useful in enhancing their job performance. On the other hand, perceived ease of use (EOU) refers to the degree to which the prospective user expects the target system to be effortless to use (Surendran, 2012). According to TAM, these two factors play a crucial role in influencing users' attitudes towards a new technology, which subsequently impacts their intention to use the system and ultimately leads to its actual use (Davis, 1989). The study applied TAM to determine whether the social media-disseminated religious messages are perceived as useful and easy to use by the congregations. Understanding these perceptions will help in evaluating the likelihood of the congregation accepting or rejecting the use of social media for religious communication during the COVID-19 crisis.

By examining the attitudes and intentions of the congregants towards the use of social media for religious messages dissemination, the research provides insights into the potential impact and effectiveness of this approach in maintaining religious connections and engagement during challenging times. Indeed, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) has undergone several modifications and extensions over the years in response to empirical findings and criticisms. Researchers have developed various versions of TAM to address its limitations and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of technology acceptance and usage.

Overall, TAM and its extensions have played a significant role in advancing the understanding of technology acceptance and usage. However, researchers continue to explore and develop new models to address the complexities and limitations of technology adoption in different contexts.

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative research method and utilizes a phenomenological design to explore the impact of social media-disseminated religious messages on congregations in Ondo state. The research population consists of 550 members from Redeemed Christian Church of God and 650 from the Anglican churches in the region, with a total population of 1200 members.

Given the nature of qualitative research, there are no specific guidelines for sample size. However, based on recommendations from scholars like Baker and Edwards (2012) and Creswell (2012), the study interviewed 20 elders from both churches. However, due to data saturation, only 18 elders were actually interviewed. The criteria for selecting the elders included being full members of the church, workers in the church, and having knowledge of the issues being discussed.

The sampling procedure adopted was purposive sampling, where elders from both churches were deliberately chosen based on specific criteria. They were willing participants in the study and were selected to provide valuable insights into the research questions. Data collection involved in-depth interviews with the selected elders, using an interview guide developed from relevant literature.

A member-check method was employed to validate the data, while thematic analysis approach was adopted to analyze the data, through the qualitative software package NVivo 12 to aid the analysis process. By adopting a phenomenological design and conducting in-depth interviews with church elders, the study aims to gain a deep understanding of the impact of social media on religious communication and engagement in Ondo state. The qualitative approach allows for rich and nuanced insights from the participants, contributing to a comprehensive exploration of the research topic.

Findings

The presented thematic analysis is derived from in-depth interviews with ten informants from the Anglican Church and eight informants from the Redeemed Christian Church of God. These interviews were conducted to address the research objectives and explore the acceptance of social media for disseminating religious messages within congregations. The focus of this analysis is on the perspectives of the elders.

The research objectives guided the questions posed to the informants, probing their opinions on the adoption of social media within their congregations. Through these interviews, the study uncovered factors contributing to the acceptance of social media. These findings are categorized into themes and sub-themes using a thematic analysis approach, as employed in this study.

Theme One: Usefulness of social media for religious messages

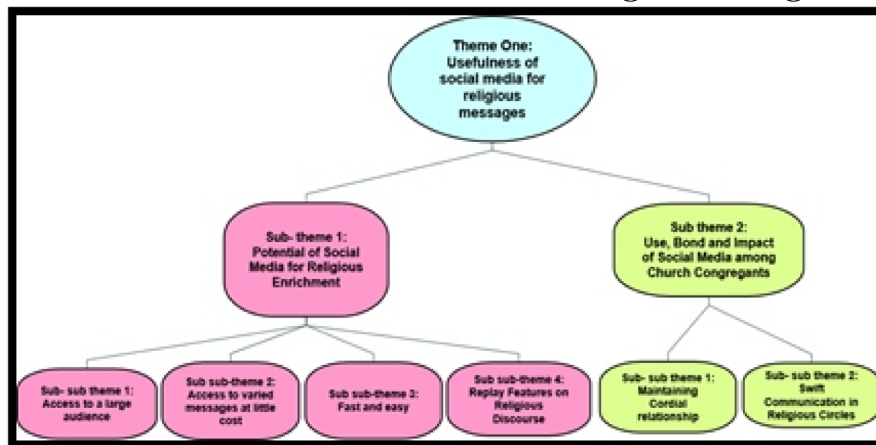


Figure 1. Theme one: General theme and sub-themes of Usefulness of social media for

Sub- theme 1: Potential of Social Media for Religious Enrichment

Sub- sub theme 1: Access to a large audience

Kathambi (2021) underscores the profound advantage of utilizing social media as an efficient and unrestricted global communication channel. Correspondingly, interviewees echo this sentiment, emphasizing that social media constitutes a virtual continent in its own right. The platform's pervasive reach is particularly valuable for engaging a broader audience, especially the tech-savvy youth demographic (inf. R1). Informant A2 highlights the multitude of benefits, including the ability to connect with a vast audience, facilitate engagement with members in diaspora, and extend program accessibility. Social media serves as a pivotal conduit for bridging gaps and reaching individuals beyond the confines of the cathedral church or even outside the Anglican community (inf. A2).

Yet another informant highlights how social media functions as a global connector, uniting disparate corners of the world and enabling seamless communication with both local congregations and those abroad. This digital platform has revolutionized the way people engage with congregational activities, transcending physical limitations and yielding unexpected levels of participation and interaction (inf. A3).

Sub sub-theme 2: Access to varied messages at little cost

The informants unanimously highlight a notable advantage of social media: its ability to grant them access to a diverse array of messages at a minimal cost. Informant R2 underscores the convenience and affordability of social media, emphasizing how it offers access to messages and resources without substantial financial investment. Informant R4 adds to this perspective, acknowledging the pivotal role social media plays in connecting individuals who were previously unable to communicate. While acknowledging that physical gatherings hold their unique value, the digital platform remains invaluable for transmitting religious messages and sermons across distances (inf. R4). Expanding on this, informant R5 emphasizes the exponential reach that social media facilitates. The ability to share messages within groups, leading to successive sharing, enables an expansive outreach that transcends traditional limits (inf. R5).

Similarly, informant R9 acknowledges the advantage of social media in accessing messages, especially when physical gatherings are not feasible. This sentiment is echoed by informant A6, who appreciates the comfort and convenience of accessing services and messages from the sanctuary of one's home (inf. R9, inf. A6).

Sub-sub theme 3: Fast and easy

Continuing to underscore the advantages of social media, informant R6, R10, and A3 highlight its role in facilitating rapid and effortless message dissemination. Informant R6 articulates that social media functions as a catalyst for swift and extensive information propagation, offering a seamless avenue for sharing and distributing information with ease (inf. R6). Similarly, informant R10 attests to the user-friendly nature of social media, emphasizing its role in simplifying communication processes. The platform's accessibility and cost-effectiveness enable efficient message delivery, ensuring widespread awareness with minimal data usage (inf. R10).

In alignment with these viewpoints, informant A3 accentuates the platform's significance in conveying information across vast distances. Whether for organizations, groups, or family interactions, social media stands as a pivotal conduit for rapid and global information exchange, bridging geographical gaps (inf. A3).

Sub-sub theme 4: Replay Features on Religious Discourse

Informant R7 underscores another valuable facet of social media's benefits, highlighting its provision of unrestricted access and the ability to revisit missed content. Similarly, to R7, social media's advantage lies in the free access it offers, coupled with the unique opportunity to review and revisit past messages—an aspect unattainable in physical worship settings. The ability to replay messages and revisit specific points fosters a dynamic and personalized engagement with the content. While direct live interaction with the message deliverer may be absent, the platform's capacity for content preservation enhances the overall experience (inf. R7).

Sub theme 2: Use, Bond and Impact of Social Media among Church Congregants**Sub- sub theme 1: Maintaining Cordial relationship**

Bukovich (2020) highlights that social media has become commonplace in society, resulting in familiarity among members of religious communities with online interaction. This familiarity, combined with the imperative for information sharing and outreach by faith leaders, has seamlessly extended platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as natural extensions of in-person communities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual communities emerged on social media platforms, amplifying outreach and information sharing. These digital spaces evolved into vibrant hubs where members not only engaged in discourse and shared resources but also participated in online conversations and events, forging connections with

fellow congregants they would normally interact with face-to-face. This transition was facilitated by the inherent social networking nature of these platforms, a foundation that had already been laid by religious groups nationwide (Bukovich, 2020, para. 15). Interviewee R1 corroborates this observation, emphasizing how social media aids in mobilizing and connecting people, enabling activities like online prayer and Bible study that maintain cordial relationships among congregants (inf. R1).

Similarly, inf. R4 notes that despite the shift to virtual interaction, the sense of cordiality and familiarity in relationships remains intact, preserving the essence of interpersonal connections (inf. R4). Inf. A3 takes a broader view, emphasizing the indispensability of embracing social media for ministers. Beyond the context of COVID-19, social media has transformed into a pivotal tool for effective communication and engagement, ensuring that ministers remain relevant in an era characterized by ICT compliance (inf. A3). Addressing the financial aspect, inf. A4 underscores the advantage of virtual contact, highlighting how cost-effective digital communication tools enable ongoing relationship maintenance and welfare checks among members, even when physical presence is not possible (inf. A4).

Sub- sub theme 2: Swift Communication in Religious Circles

However, contrasting viewpoints emerged among informants, asserting that the utilization of social media during the COVID-19 lockdown led to reduced communication within their congregation. Informant R2 highlighted this perspective, noting that the use of social media diminished contact between members. Prior to the lockdown, in-person interactions allowed for spontaneous inquiries about each other's well-being. In contrast, the lockdown context created an assumption that everyone was at home, resulting in decreased communication (inf. R2). Inf. R6 echoed this sentiment, stating that communication was significantly curtailed due to the shift to online platforms, which replaced many of the usual face-to-face interactions.

Similarly, inf. R10 emphasized the limitations of virtual interaction, stating that it paled in comparison to the effectiveness and depth of physical contact within the congregation (inf. R10). Expanding on this viewpoint, inf. A7 noted a certain level of emotional distance resulting from the use of social media during the lockdown. The perceived lack of cordiality and the absence of the physical camaraderie characteristic of in-person services contributed to a sense of disconnection among congregants (inf. A7).

Theme Two: Ease of use of social media for dissemination of religious messages

Various scholars hold diverse viewpoints regarding the perceived ease of disseminating religious messages through social media across congregations. For example, Kathambi (2021) highlights the utilization of social media for activities like bulletin announcements, sermon postings, hymns, Bible studies, Sunday school lessons, and counseling. The primary purpose of these ICT platforms is to foster relationships, connect with congregants, and attract new converts.

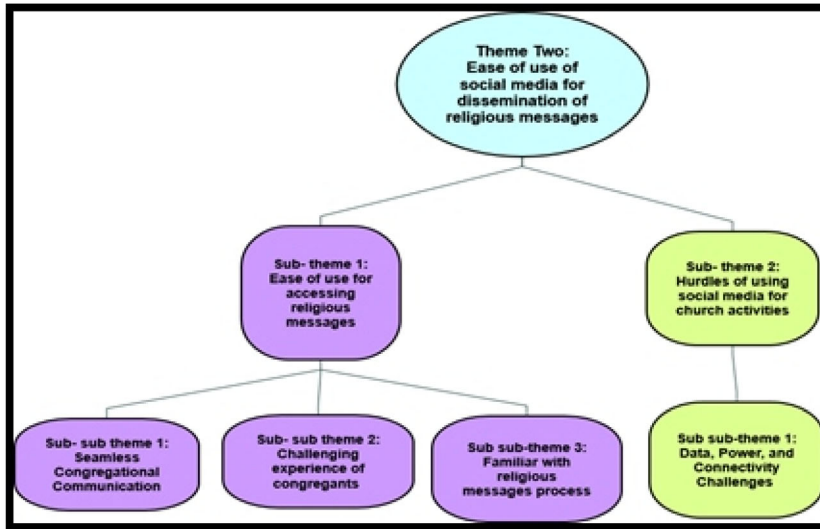


Figure 2. Theme Two: General theme and sub-themes on ease of use of social media for dissemination of religious messages

Sub- theme 1: Ease of use for accessing religious messages

Sub- sub theme 1: Seamless Congregational Communication

When asked about their ease of using social media, a consensus emerged among the informants regarding its user-friendliness. Informant R1, citing personal proficiency in information technology, found social media usage effortless and straightforward, noting its ease of use (inf. R1). Inf. R2 concurred, simply stating, “It’s very easy.” Another informant stressed the importance of data availability, highlighting that as long as there is access to data, using social media is uncomplicated (inf. R3).

In agreement, another interviewee emphasized the simplicity and user-friendly nature of social media platforms. They also cautioned about the potential addictive nature of these platforms if not managed carefully (inf. A3). Informant R5 echoed the sentiment, expressing that they found social media usage to be easy (inf. A5).

However, informant R6 offered a nuanced perspective, acknowledging the ease of

use but also recognizing potential challenges. Network failures or disruptions could impede access to messages, and financial constraints might limit data availability for low-income individuals. Despite these challenges, the informant primarily attributed any difficulties to occasional network and power issues or personal time constraints (inf. R6).

Sub- sub theme 2: Challenging experience of congregants

While some participants found using social media for accessing religious messages relatively challenging, others acknowledged the difficulties while emphasizing the need to overcome obstacles for personal growth. Informant R9 expressed their struggle with social media usage, particularly on platforms like YouTube, often seeking assistance from their technologically proficient children to navigate these platforms (inf. R9). Another informant recognized the inherent complexities, citing potential high costs and intermittent network issues as barriers to seamless engagement with social media. Despite these challenges, the informant emphasized the importance of embracing challenges and converting them into opportunities for personal benefit (inf. A2).

On the contrary, inf. R6 acknowledged the ease of use but noted that occasional network failures and financial constraints could hinder access to messages. Additionally, external factors like power failures and competing commitments might limit engagement (inf. R6). Overall, the participants' perspectives illustrate a range of experiences and challenges encountered while utilizing social media for accessing religious messages.

Sub- sub theme 3: Familiar with religious messages process

While some informants acknowledged acquiring new knowledge through their engagement with social media, the majority found it unnecessary to undergo any formal learning process. Informant R1 reiterated their IT proficiency, implying that their existing skills facilitated their ease of use (inf. R1). Similarly, inf. R4 emphasized the intuitive nature of the internet, remarking that it guided users seamlessly through the process, eliminating the need for dedicated learning (inf. R4). Inf. A1 acknowledged the potential for a slight learning curve, comparing it to acquiring proficiency in video games. They likened the process to understanding the basics of gameplay, implying that social media's user-friendly design simplified the learning journey (inf. A1). In summary, while some informants found themselves learning new skills, the prevailing sentiment suggests that social media's inherent design and user-friendly interfaces often eliminate the need for formal learning processes.

Sub- theme 2: Hurdles of using social media for church activities

Scholars have raised diverse concerns on the acceptance of social media for religious services and programmes ranging from reasons such as distractions, interfaith debates, fears of ineffectiveness and complacency, etc. (Alice, Reuben, Gabriel & Salimin 2021; Ogwo, Asemah & Obidike 2013).

Sub sub-theme 1: Data, Power, and Connectivity Challenges

Okoye (2018) noted some challenges which include inadequate financial resource; lack of technical know-how; electricity; limited internet access, technophobia; lack of maintenance culture; conservative nature of people; inadequate ICT infrastructures. According to the researcher, most of the technological devices need power supply to function well.

Congruently, inf. R1 said “On my own part, I would not say I’m unable to afford data, I’m able to afford data but I usually have network challenge. For instance, there was discipleship training we did sometimes again and we had breaches network but for me I can switch networks when one is not connecting well” while inf. A8 said “Well, I don’t have much challenge with data, I try to manage my data and light isn’t a problem because there’s solar as well as generator for me to use”.

Discussion of findings

Usefulness of social media for religious messages: The informants uniformly recognize the profound advantage of using social media as an efficient and unrestricted global communication channel. They emphasized its pervasive reach, which allows for engagement with a broader church audience. Social media is described as a virtual continent, transcending physical limitations and facilitating communication both locally and with individuals in diaspora. Informants highlighted how social media serves as a pivotal conduit for bridging gaps within religious communities. It enables seamless communication with local congregations and those abroad, revolutionizing the way people engage with congregational activities. This ability to transcend physical boundaries and facilitate interaction is seen as a significant advantage for the church.

Ease of use of social media for dissemination of religious messages: The informants underscored the cost-effectiveness of social media, emphasizing that it grants them access to a diverse array of messages at minimal cost. Social media is praised for its convenience and affordability, particularly when physical gatherings are not feasible, during Covid-19. It allows access to religious messages and resources without

substantial financial investment, making it an invaluable tool for transmitting sermons and teachings. A consensus emerged among the informants regarding the user-friendliness of social media platforms. Most participants find using social media for accessing religious messages to be straightforward and easy. They emphasized the importance of data availability and highlight that as long as there is access to data, using social media is uncomplicated.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is imperative to establish robust feedback mechanisms that empower leaders to assess the efficacy of social media utilization and facilitate necessary adaptations. Social media acts as a virtual continent that unites individuals, including those in diaspora, and fosters engagement beyond the confines of traditional religious spaces. Similarly, it provides an affordable means of communication and resource dissemination, particularly valuable when physical gatherings are not feasible. The convenience and accessibility of religious services and messages from the comfort of one's home are particularly appreciated. However, governmental initiatives are required to ensure stable power supply nationwide, thereby enhancing online services for churches. The informants' insights underscore the transformative role of social media in religious communication and engagement. While it offers numerous advantages, including global outreach and cost-effective access, it is not without its challenges.

To ensure responsible social media usage, continuous education on platform policies should be provided to church leaders. Furthermore, inclusivity should be a priority, and efforts made to extend subscriptions to underprivileged members.

In tandem with this, regular training sessions must be instituted for both clergy and congregation, fostering digital literacy and optimizing the potential of social media for religious endeavors. Through these concerted efforts, a harmonious integration of social media into church activities can be realized.

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