# Religious Communication in the Digital Age: Exploring the Benefits and Challenges of Social Media in Religious Expression in the Nigerian Society

By

**Okoh Blessing Uenosen, PhD**
**Department of Religious Studies,**
**University of Delta Agbor, Delta State**
**+2348038791103**
blessing.okoh@unidel.edu.ng

**&**

**Simon Jeji Maijimre, PhD**
**Department of Christian Religious Studies**
**Faculty of Arts, Kaduna State University, Kaduna**
**+2348037325648,** sjmajimre@gmail.com

## Abstract

In the era of digital communication, social media has transformed the manner in which people interact with one another, and this includes Religious Communication. The rapid development of digital media technologies presents unique opportunities for religious organizations within the modern Digital landscape. However, many controversies, heated arguments and rage have evolved through the use of online medium by religious leaders and adherents, giving rise to the need for sanity and sifting of religious expressions popularized in the social media. More so, in the Nigerian society, it is obvious that many religious organizations have not developed by taking advantage of the online media to foster religious beliefs. This research paper will explore the benefits and challenges of the use of social media for religious expressions. It will delve into how social media platforms have influenced the way religious organizations and their members communicate and how they use these platforms to promote their beliefs and values. Historical-critico methology was employed here. The paper focuses on the opportunities and challenges that social media presents for religious organizations and their members, including the use of social media to engage with others, foster community and promote religious beliefs. The paper recommends the need for explicit policies and guidelines to ensure that religious online

communication is ethical. The researchers conclude by asserting the relevance of the Paper to scholars in the fields of communication, religious studies, and digital media, as well as practitioners in religious organizations seeking to adapt to changing landscape of Communication in the Digital age.

**Keywords:** Religion, Communication, Social Media, Digital age.

## Introduction

These days, social media is becoming the most important platform to meet people's communication demands as the line between the digital and physical worlds becomes increasingly blurred. Social media is being used more and more by people to find the information they require on their beliefs and other issues. The rapid diffusion of social media applications have ushered in new possibilities for religious organizations to communicate with and engage the public (Nah & Sexton, 2024). Religious groups are now using social media to share information with their followers. Social media's introduction has produced a social cyber environment in which individuals, companies, and organizations may easily connect with one another beyond geographic boundaries. Both in affluent and developing nations, social media has given religious activities a new dimension. Religious groups can use social media platforms for a variety of purposes (Owiny, Mehta & Maretzki, 2014). Religious followers can use online social networks to support their communities by combining persuasive and identifying actions, but misuse of these platforms can also result in the demise of both digital and physical religious communities (Verschoor-Kirss, 2012). Thus, this paper examines religious communication in the digital age by exploring the benefits and challenges in the use of social media by religious organizations in the Contemporary Nigerian society.

## Conceptual Clarification

In this section, there is a general overview of key concepts being used in this work. The understanding here is geared towards having an informed focus as it relates to the subject matter of this research.

**Religion**

According to Sani (2007) the term "religion" has various definitions. However, etymologically, religion originates from the Latin words "*relegere*" (to connect or link) and "*religio*" (relationship, bond). Hence, the concept religion, denotes a connection or bond between humans and an entity that is superior to them. In every human society, religion and man are inextricably linked. However, Webster's Dictionary of the English Language defines religion as either a system of belief and practice pertaining to the holy that unites followers in communities or as man's expression of his acknowledgment of the divine. This demonstrates how religion emphasizes the idea of ultimate or total worship. Accordingly, connections between men and the transcendent require complete obedience and subordination (Stott, 2006).

**Communication**

According to Ahmed (2020), the word communication is derived from the Latin word "*communicare*" which means to share or to participate. It is about sending and receiving information or transmission of information from one participant to the other. Giffin and Patten (1976) also define communication as the process of both creating and assigning meaning. It is the interaction and sharing of ideas among group members. Communication is defined as the act of conveying information to others or expressing thoughts and feelings in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (2004). It is acceptable to say that communication is the process of conveying messages and information from one individual to another and from one location to another. Similarly, communication is defined as a two-way process by the Online Business Dictionary. Participants must come to a shared understanding that goes beyond simply processing and decoding news, thoughts, sentiments, and information. It is crucial that they produce and disseminate meaningful information as well. Okenimpkpe (2010) notes that it is also considered a crucial managerial function because an organization cannot operate without communication between levels, departments and employees.

**Social Media**

Social media allows people to communicate with one another by creating, sharing, and exchanging ideas and information via online groups and networks.

Additionally, social media relies on web-based and mobile technology to provide highly participatory platforms that allow users to share, remark, discuss, and edit information created by others (Chiemela, Ovire, Obochi, 2015).

The rise of social media, sometimes referred to as "new media," is one of the biggest global trends. The development and democratization of information and communication technologies is what led to this emergence. It is typified by the use of several communication media, including text, audio, video, and images, and is propelled by the integration of information technology and communication via the internet (Lasica, 2003).

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is a collection of web-based applications that enable the creation and sharing of content and are based on the principles and technologies of web 2.0. They are refer to online social media platforms that let people interact with one another, such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and others. The term "web-based and mobile-based technologies which are used to turn communication into interactive dialogue between organizations, communities, and individuals" can also be used to describe social media. In contrast to television, radio, and newspapers, social media users actively participate in the creation and sharing of information (Sweetser & Laricsy, 2008). Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+, MySpace, Skype, Instagram, Flipagram, and Hi5 are common examples of social media. Interactive features on all of these websites and apps make it easier to broadcast and rebroadcast content. In addition to these websites, individuals can access even more applications on Android and smartphone devices.

**Digital Age**

According to this study, the digital age is defined as the current boom of information and communication technologies and how they impact human interactions, worldviews, beliefs, and attitudes in addition to the collection and processing of information. The Council Fathers initiated the Church's adoption of digital culture by prioritizing the Inter Mirifica (Decree on Mass Media) at the first session of the Second Vatican Council (Sanders, 2015). This move was because of cultural shift which has to do with digital communication, the way it reshapes, how we interact with one another, form and maintain relationships, also gain

knowledge and understanding (Jerome, 2014). The digital age offers the opportunity for a wider range of voices to contribute to conversations (Lewis, 2014).

**Digital Platforms and Contemporary Religious Communication**

Nowadays, a numerous gospel applications are now available for the iPhone, iPad, and Android devices. It is obvious that the number of religiously themed apps is growing. Apps have been created for several congregations, Dioceses, and other religious organizations, and they are accessible to followers of any religion you can imagine. Apps for prayer books, mobile spiritual activities, and other tools that incorporate spirituality into daily life have become quite popular on a variety of digital platforms (Tola, 2013).

A growing body of research demonstrates how religious leaders are using social media into their work. Won Buddhist priests have established personal blogs on Cyworld for the purposes of self-cultivation, empowerment, and the growth of the interaction between laity and leadership, as established by Lee (2009), cited in Cheong (2013). Some of the open diaries of monks and nuns were reported to be used to "indirectly deliver" sermons to young Buddhists and prospective believers, to portray their accommodation and loyalty in the face of the dominant and gendered norms of their organization, or to demystify the ideal life of a priest as pure and pious. "Google, Facebook, and YouTube have been integrated into the working lives of pastors and imams," according to Cheong (2013), who cited Fisher-Nielsen (2012). In an analysis of results from a survey conducted by 1,040 pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, he found that 95 % of them are online daily and a significant proportion (94% of the pastors aged between 25 and 39 years) regarded the internet as having positive influence on their work. Two-thirds of the respondents reported that the Internet had "caused more frequent contact with parishioners" and most endorsed "flesh and blood," "real church practice" in lieu of cyberchurch rituals and web-based services (Cheong, 2013).

In this way, some commentators claim that the internet via social media platforms is an avenue of renewal, rejuvenating the life (and legitimacy) of religious organizations (Cheong, 2013). According to Lomborg and Ess (2012), cited in

Cheong (2013), "the Danish church's Facebook presence was praised in terms of its "progressive," "brand value." According to a different study of podcasts with a Muslim focus, leaders can increase their power by promoting themselves and appearing on multimedia platforms that use podcasts in conjunction with traditional media (Cheong, Halavis & Kwon, 2008). It was specifically stated that by expanding a group leader's influence using podcasting technology, Muslim organizations may spread doctrine and uphold current power systems.

Giving new media's affordances to amplify the religious leaders' ability to reach faith seekers and believers, Lee and Sinitiere (2009) cited in Cheong (2013:13) emphasised how media-savvy evangelical pastors, also known as "holy mavericks," have drawn attention to their high-growth organizations in part by aggressively embracing corporate organisational branding. Because they are seen as able to balance a dual preoccupation with the "other-worldliness" of spiritual life and the "this-worldliness" of new media marketing, support for these religious authorities who usually have a strong online brand presence seems to be strong. Parallel to this, there is religiously biased discourse that supports priests using social media to further their outreach and missions in recent publications with emotive titles like *The Reason Your Church Must Twitter* (Coppedge, 2009).

In many parts of the world, evangelical Christians have been reading the Bible on digital devices more frequently over the past ten years. Christian programmers may now design apps that access, evaluate, and distribute biblical passages at any time because to the popularity of smartphones and tablets. In the summer of 2013, YouVersion, the most well-known of these products, recorded its 100 millionth download on its fifth anniversary. Since then, a lively market of competitors has grown. Digital Bibles correct many conventional evangelical reading patterns, and their production is motivated by traditional evangelical understandings of the Bible as the Word of God, a potent force that transforms readers' lives. But we may also use these Bibles as case studies to identify trends in social and theological transformation. Long-term societal trends have been accelerated by digital technology, which has led to the rise of "the network society" (Castells, 2009) and "networked individualism" (Wellman 2012).

There must be high-quality content when using digital media to spread religious knowledge. Good material will increase your audience's understanding, fortify their faith, spark discussion, and foster a sense of community. In the joyful hope of spreading religious teachings, helping others, and building communities, content creation is necessary (Gateway, 2014). In order to foster "ambient religious communication" and a feeling of connected presence among their members, churches and mosques have integrated Twitter and other microblogging techniques into their everyday institutional procedures in a variety of ways. In certain cases, for instance, the introduction of "Twitter Sundays" prompted participants to tweet their questions and reflections during the service (Cheong, 2010).

Describing this age of digital culture in an interview with Relevant Magazine, Kinnaman (2015) discloses that younger Christians today are living in what he describes as "Digital Babylon" which is in many ways similar to the kind of head-snapping change that Daniel and his peers experienced in Babylon namely – exposure to a broader world, immersion in a whole set of worldviews, beliefs and ideas about spirituality, relating on a regular basis with people who hold different views and perspectives about God, human meaning and flourishing. Lewis (2014) claims that religion is now attempting to interact with digital culture, which many people use extensively on a daily basis. Digital culture is opening up new avenues for social interaction and relationship building through ICT. The internet and smartphone technology have also altered how people think about business and trade. Multimediality (the usage of different media) and its tools open up a world of possibilities in a digital culture. Nigerian religious leaders and followers will undoubtedly be left behind if they continue to rely solely on analog communication in the face of these developments.

**Benefits of Social Media for Religious Communication in Nigeria**

The covid-19 was one of the global pandemics which exposed Nigerians to the need for active religious online presence. During the lockdown most religious organizations lacked the social bonds that existed prior to the pandemic. However, there were few religious bodies that were already acquainted and skilled in the use of social media for the dissemination of information. Following the covid-19 pandemic, the Nigerian religious adherents began to recognize that social media

offer great benefits in our nation. Undoubtedly, people from virtually all walks of life in Nigeria make use of the social media to connect, enhance their businesses, broadcast news, relax and it has promoted religious participation.

Ikpe and Olise (2010) have observed that "social media are new communication technologies which are used as channels of information dissemination to heterogeneous audiences without the constraints of time, space or distance". Social media makes it easy to communicate with people at any time, from any location, and to share and receive information. Soola (1998:87) described the new media (social media) as communication technologies with "impressive array of sophistication, increasing efficiency, reliability, speed, accuracy, cheapness, portability and ubiquity made possible by microprocessors". These days, social media devices are simple, fast, and trustworthy information providers. Soola further notes that "in a complex but increasingly interdependent world, social media offers nearly limitless possibilities of increasing the quantity and enhancing the quality, speed, and availability of information". Hence, through the use of social media, religious adherents are kept up dated on issues or events about their religion taking place anywhere in Nigeria on a minute interval. This is particularly possible because these social websites are interactively accessible with mobile phones. The use of WhatsApp and Facebook on phones for instance, makes this easier, as one can send either images or snapped shots alongside information on the most current events or issues as the case may be, on minute interval.

Digital media can assist churches and mosques in strengthening their Christian and Muslim communities both inside and outside of their buildings if it is used effectively in ways such as; Provide timely information or news; Teach strangers about their religion; Ask congregation members for their opinions; minister to those who are unable to attend, such as the homebound; Plan, promote, and extend invitations to events; share anecdotes to strengthen faith and motivate action. Social media is a real, breathing tool for people to interact with their religions; it is not a digital billboard (Gateway, 2014).

Additionally, social media have contributed greatly to the enhancement of social bonds and relationships among citizens. According to Adaja and Ayodele (2013) "the potentials of the new media are seamless and boundless in terms of

interactions, interrelationships, and information sharing and exchanges". Nche (2012) also notes that social media platforms' primary goal is to improve communication through social interaction. As a result, relationships and social ties among religious followers are preserved and strengthened. Religious followers in Nigeria use social media to stay in touch and connect via exchanging audio, videos, and other types of material without physically meeting (Nnamonu, 2013).

**Challenges of Social Media to Religious Expression in Nigeria**

Firstly, there is a high tendency for church and mosque attendance to drop down. There are concerns that the establishment of an online mosque or church may result in a drop in in-person attendance. According to a survey, less people are attending church in nations like the United States of America because they are too busy using the internet to observe their pastors or imams (Fitzgerald, 2014). Some Christians, particularly the younger generation, have a tendency to be lazy and skip church on the grounds that they can access the services or prayers via mobile apps. The apparent media-mania, in which many people are often online almost twenty hours a day, seven days a week, creates a false sense of being comfortable with the "cyberchurch" or even "cybermosque" than the real Ecclesial Assembly of God's people.

Another challenge of the use of social media for religious expressions is that it has a propensity of having individuals replacing communities. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Yahoo, Gmail, WhatsApp, Snapchat just to mention a few are privately-oriented. Apart from the false sense of community it creates through information sharing and communication with people we may not know or have seen. It appears that creating a religious organization on cyberspace would further entrench individuality. The implication is, the individual replaces community (Tillich, 1958). In this case, the sense of a community is submerged in an individual's whims and caprices.

In addition, the use of social media poses a great threat to human interaction. Human communication through interpersonal and group communication is crucial to human existence. As it were, advocating for a sacred space on the internet seems to threaten basic human communication and interaction (Nilles, 2012). Since social media communication is often a private affair, the sense of real

face to face communication appears endangered. More so, the advent of the internet has further advanced modern ideologies such as subjectivity and relativism (Garza, 2010). A person cannot operate the internet without a gadget, be it a Personal Computer (PC), mobile phone or other such appliances. The implication is that, the usage of these gadgets is subject to the user. For instance, it is up to a person to switch on their PC and phone or not. This implies that given the chance to thrive, it is likely that "parishioners" of the "cyber-church" may choose to be part of it or not at any given time.

Another difficulty with using social media for religious expression is that internet connections might occasionally be problematic. Every human endeavour has its limitations. A potentially active online religious communication could be hampered by internet service outages (Egere, 2012). In rural Africa, where internet signals may go out for days or weeks, the situation is much more concerning. What then happens to the "faithful" who anticipate having online access to God's Word? Lastly, the most threatening challenge of the use of social media in Nigeria for communication is that it is the easiest means by which heresies can be spread and conflicts generated. Undoubtedly, in Nigeria where there a more than one religion, there is the tendency of religious conflict, due to the difference in beliefs and practices. Beliefs determine messages and some messages preached by one religious adherent might be insensitive to another. The social media in this situation can be the fastest means in which these messages can reach a wide range of people from different faiths; thus, causing tension in the society.

**The Interaction between Faith and Digital Era**

The world is undoubtedly changing, and Nigerian religions cannot stay the same. In an interview with Christiane Amanpour of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Timothy Cardinal Dolan of the New York Archdiocese in the United States of America stated that while the Church cannot alter the foundation of faith, she can alter its presentation. He points out that although the goal statement is to conserve in the broadest sense of the word, it does not preclude us from altering its presentation (Krever, 2013). It's interesting to note that Holmes maintains that, as religious believers, we do not need to soften our message to be successful in the digital era (Holmes, 2015).

Communication experts understand the power of packaging in advertisement, the potency of a product lies in its finishing and packaging no matter how good the product is. As such, the religions in Nigeria should take advantage of what the new media is offering. Interestingly, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI surprised the world in 2012 when he joined Twitter with the twitter handle "@Pontifex". The Pontifical Council for Social Communications guided the Holy Father to the new and exciting platform of communication. Also, it is worth noting that Pope Francis has been very active in both broadcast and social media in his pontificate. The pope, who has given several media interviews, is known to speak in "sound bite" style phrases. He has 7.2 million Twitter followers. The exciting photos of young people taking selfies with Pope Francis tell the story more. Little wonder, he calls the internet, a "gift from God" (Lapowsky, 2015). According to a survey which was conducted in United States of America in 2015, 90% of pastors and imams were said to be using a computer while 39% agreed to use the same device to access the internet. The study noted that pastors and other religious leaders confessed to using social media regularly in creating a religious bond between members, even those far from physical reach. It surmised that they are working hard to keep pace with the screen-driven era of communication (Barna Group, 2015). Hence social media can be effectively employed by religious adherents in Nigeria, to improve religious communication without having to lose grip of her religious values.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research paper has explored the benefits and challenges of social media in religious expression in the Nigerian society. Social media has transformed the way religious communication takes place, providing a platform for people to express their religious beliefs and connect with others who share similar beliefs. The benefits of social media in religious communication include increased reach, enhanced interaction, and ability to create virtual communities. However, there are also challenges associated with social media use, such as spread of misinformation, the risk of online radicalization and so on. Despite these challenges, social media has become an integral part of religious communication in Nigeria and has the potential to contribute to the growth and development of religious communities. It is therefore imperative for religious leaders and practitioners to be mindful of the benefits and challenges of social media and to use it in a responsible and ethical manner.

**Recommendations**

Having conducted this paper, the following is therefore recommended in other to enhance the proper use of social media for religious communication in Nigeria. These are:

i. Religious organizations in Nigeria should create guidelines for the responsible use of social media and provide training to their members on how to use social media in a safe and ethical manner.
ii. Social media platforms developers should take responsibility for the content that is shared on their platforms and take measures to prevent the spread of misinformation and hate speech.
iii. Government agencies should work with religious organizations to monitor and regulate the use of social media for religious communication.
iv. Religious adherents should be determined to use social media in promoting peace and a healthy society than spreading inciting messages.

**References**

Adaja, T. &, Ayodele, F. (2013). *Nigerian Youths and Social Media: Harnessing the Potentials for Academic Excellence*. Kuwait Chapter of Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review (Vol. 2) No.5, pp.65-75.

Ahmad, M. (2020). Definitions of communication. Retrieved on the 4th of July, 2024 fromhttps://www.researchgate.net/publication/346031905_Definitions_of_communication

Chiemela, A. Ovute, O., & Obochi, C. (2015). *The Influence of the Social Media on the Nigerian Youths*: Aba residents experience; *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* Volume 3, Issue (3) :12-20

Barna Group, (2015). Cyber Church: Pastors and the Internet. www.barna.org. Accessed June 4,2024.

Cheong, P.H. (2013) Authority. In H. Campbell (Ed). Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds. P: 72-87. NY: Routledge.

Cheong, P.H., Halavis, A. & Kwon, K. (2008). The chronicles of me: Understanding blogging as a religious practice. *Journal of Media and Religion*, (7): 107-131.

Daniel, A. (2013). Communi ation as socio-cultural meaning exchange. The example of Richard Wright's Black Boy. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literatur*e, 2, (5):173-177

Egere, I. K. (2012). Inculturation in cyberspace: A new portal for the "Good News" In *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, 13 (1):3-22

Fitzgerald, S (2014). Study: The internet use keeping people out of Church. www.newsmax.com Accessed June 2, 2024.

Garza G, (2010). The Internet, narrative and subjectivity. *Journal of Constructive Psychology*, 15 (3):185-203

Holmes, P. (2015). One Voice on Christian Social Media. Retrieved from www.desiringgod.org/srticles/one-voice-on-christiansocial-media, Accessed June 4, 2024

Jerome, D. (2014). Connected toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age. Liturgical press: Collegeville, MN.

Ikpe, H. & Olise P. (2010). The era of new media technologies and the challenges of media relations practice in Nigeria. *Journal of communication,* 1 (2):59-68

Kaplan, A.M. and Haenlein, M. (2010). *Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media*, Business Horizons, Vol. 53 (1): 59-68.

Kinnaman, D. (2015). How Spirituality is Changing in the Digital Age – An interview – www.rlevantmagazine.com/god/god-ourgeneration/how-spirituality-changing-digital-age. Accessed June 1, 2024.

Krever, M. (2013). Cardinal Donald for pope? You 'Might be Smoking Marijuana'- Interview with Christiane Amanpour - cnn.com/2013/02/28/cardinal-dolan-forpope-you-might- be-smoking-marijuana/. Accessed June 5, 2024.

Lapowsky, I. (2015). What does the Pope think about Technology?# Its complicated–www.wired.com/2015/09/pope-francis-technology/. Accessed June 9, 2017.

Lewis, B. (2014). The digital age: A Challenge for Christian Discipleship? www.academia.edu/8724570/The_Digital_Age_A_Challenge_for_Christian_Discipleship Accessed June 3, 2024.

Nah, S. & Saxton, D. (n.d.) Modeling the adoption and use of social media by non-profit organizations. Available online at:https://arxiv.org/abs/1208.3394. Retreived 2nd June, 2024.

Nche, G. C (2012) *The Social Media Usage Among Nigerian Youths: Impact on National Development*. International Journal of Advancement in Development Studies, 7 (5):18-23.

Nilles, M. (2012). Technology is Destroying the Quality of Human Interaction. Retrieved from www.thebottomline.as.ucsb.edu/ 2012/01/technology-is-destroying-the-quality-ofhuman-interaction on June 5, 2024.

Okenimkpe, M.N. (2010). Communication for Business. Lagos. National Open University of Nigeria

*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. 2004. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Owiny, S. A., Mehta, K. &Maretzki, A. N. (2014). The use of social media technologies to create, preserve and disseminate indigenous knowledge and skills to communities in East Africa. *International Journal of Communication*, 8:234-247.

Sanders, C. (2015). *The Church in the Digital Age*. Retrieved June 3rd, 2024, from www.saltandlighttv.org/blogfeed/getpost.php?id=634 25.

Soola, O (1998) *Modern Business Communication*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited.

Sweetser, D. & Lariscy, W. (2008). Candidates make good friends: an analysis of candidates' uses of Facebook. *International Journal of Strategic Communication,* 2 (3):175-198

Tola, C. (2013). Religion and social media. Retrieved May 30th, 2024, from file:// /C:/Users/samsung/Desktop/SOCIAL%20MEDIA%20EVANGELISM/Religion20an%2social %20media.htm.

Tillich, P. (1958). *The Religious Situation*. New York: Meridian Book.

Verschoor-Kirss, A. (2012). Even Satan Gets Likes on Facebook: The Dynamic Interplay of Religion and Technology in Online Social Networks. *Journal of Religion & Society*, 14:1-12.