Evangelism in the Era of New Media: A Study of Select Evangelical Churches in the Port Harcourt Metropolis

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Abstract

Considering that a great many new media users can be gratified by contents other than religious messages on the Internet, one wonders how evangelism will fare in this era of the new media. This study was, therefore, carried out to examine the practice of online evangelism by select evangelical churches in Port Harcourt metropolis. To accomplish this objective, the study adopted a triangulation method of research (the survey design and personal interview). From the population of 805, a sample of 261 subjects was drawn using the check market online sample size calculator. The questionnaire and structured interview schedule were used as the study's instruments for data collection. Data generated from the survey were analyzed using frequency distribution tables, simple percentages and weighted mean scores while the interview questions were analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Findings showed, among other things, that the social media are veritable instruments in sustaining old members and wooing new

ones. The study concluded that the churches that use the social media platforms are up-to-date; the social media used in evangelism are perceived as attractive and satisfactory; but that the cost of maintaining the new media workability is prohibitive. It was then recommended that despite the unethical and immoral posts that can be found online, the new media should not be avoided because of its potency in fostering bonds among old church members and evangelizing prospective ones.

Key Words: Church, Evangelism, New Media, Internet and religion.

Introduction

The developers of the Internet would have envisaged that the technological innovation will blur the barriers of time and space, but beyond their expectations is the burgeoning and pervasive posture it has attained especially in the 21st century. It goes without saying that the Internet has spread its tentacles in virtually all spheres of human endeavour. Like a necessary evil, this Internet is fast becoming indispensable. This might not be unconnected with its growing acceptability and usage by peoples across the world.

Imperatively, developments in technology are fast expanding the frontiers of communication so that many more persons are reached through the various channels of communication than previously imagined. The 21st century has ushered us into the era of convenient, yet effective communication. The Internet (social media) has become weapon of mass communication and letterised speech (M'Barek*et al*., 2015). The Internet has assumed the status of a mass medium as it is able to break distance and time barriers to communicate to the people. Producers and audience on the Internet have increased geometrically in recent times (Amannah&Mba-Nwigoh, 2014).

Interestingly, religious organizations do not only see the Internet as one of nature's greatest gifts to humanity but a tool primarily designed to facilitate

the spread of the gospel. In whatever shape or form they are, religious organizations are expected to propagate the doctrines of their faith to people across the world, with a view to wooing them. For instance, the Great Commission in Christendom is a demand that Christians spread the gospel of Jesus Christ across the world. "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15). This great task had been seemingly herculean until the advent of the Internet and other technological innovations. Many religious organizations with wider followership are beginning to find respite in reaching them through Internet-enabled communication channels.

The development in communication technologies appears to have addressed the challenge of getting to travel from one area to another. In the case of religious organizations' Internet-enabled channels of communication, they could transmit much information with little noise, at a great speed over a reasonable distance to many locations at the same time. Until the late 1980s, technical constraints limited the media's ability in this regard. To transmit a high quality usage over existing (twisted pair copper wire) phone lines took about 10 minutes using a 2400-band modem or two minutes using a 9600-band modem. Given these specifications, it was not possible to send 'real time' 'moving' images over the phone lines (Poster, 2001). All of these limitations have been addressed by the Internet.

Beyond laws as an instrument for regulations and conformity is the place of religion. Like culture, religion is a major determinant of people's ways of life; ideology, relationship, perception and social interaction. Its influence on society cannot be easily wished away. It is as old as humanity. It is seemingly impracticable to extricate our everyday activities from religion. For religion, no one stands akimbo. In fact, every individual has religious consciousness. Saying this consciousness is not there amounts to pretence. It is either one identifies with the indigenous religion of Africa (IRA), Islam, Christianity or atheism. The point here is that while the first three religions believe in the existence of a supreme being or deities, the later (atheism)

does not. Yet this is what makes it a religion – one that chooses not to believe in any Supreme Being or deity.

Over time, religious organizations have been known to wield some reasonable degree of influence on their followers and society. With available resources at their disposal, they have consciously continued to sustain the communication flow between them and their (intending) adherents. Television, radio, newspapers, billboards, among others, have served as veritable channels for the propagation of religious messages. The Internet broadens the chances of reaching them. In fact, many churches have gone virtual. Just as religious organizations (especially Christianity) are fast establishing more branches across nations that is now their extended branches on seen on the various social media platforms. As churches continue to embrace the internet and create virtual branches, it does appear that this is fostering the ties between churches and their members. The Internet is creating an opportunity for a psychological link between churches and members; an opportunity that the physical church has not sufficiently created. Digital communication is giving us the opportunity to form more relationships and deepening existing ones (Smith, 2015). This study critically examines how the Internet is shaping and redefining evangelism in the era of new media.

Statement of the Problem

The influence of the Internet has become an undeniable reality in the modern communication process. This is because the Internet has helped to bridge some hitherto insurmountable challenges in human communication in terms of time, space, reach, spread, distance and so on. Today, the Internet is providing a faster, affordable and a more convenient means of communication. Its impact on religious organizations in reaching their members across the world is remarkable.

Despite the innovativeness and unbridled efficiency of reaching many within the shortest possible time through the internet, not many Christian organizations have embraced the latent lofty disposition of the Internet. The

reasons might not be unconnected to the financial constraints and some peculiar dogmatic disposition of the leaders. The cost of sustaining evangelism online is prohibitive in terms of time, money and humans. That is why some relatively smaller churches are yet to see this as an option.

Again, many Christian organizations, either out of sheer religious fanaticism, apprehension or misinformation have written off the Internet as some "unrighteous" thing that is apparently not fit as a channel for religious messages hence they have literally thrown away the baby and the bath water. While this is not unconnected to the many ignoble activities taking place on the Internet via the social media platforms, like any other medium, what one does with the technology is purely one's choice. The medium itself is not the problem.

Meanwhile, the number of new media users in the society is soaring and a number of other organization which are supposedly 'anti-Christ', are cashing in on the unrivalled advantages of the Internet to reach a large audience and winning over the 'professed' Christians to their ideological camp. And, it is the number of people that a church will be able to reach with the gospel that will determine how far-reaching and engaging the messages via the Internet will be on its members. This will also determine how the church will fare in carrying out the great commission as assigned to her by God himself. This is especially as it is not practically possible for the church to manually reach all the persons in the world. It is argued that since most new media users are seemingly youths, their gratifications could be from contents other than religious messages. This in itself is one of the core concerns of this study; hence the need to determine the place of the new media in evangelism.

Objectives of the Study

In specific terms, the study set out to achieve the following:

1. Investigate the purposes for which the select evangelical churches in Port Harcourt metropolis use the new media.

2. Determine the level of usage of the new media for evangelism by select evangelical churches in Port Harcourt metropolis.
3. Determine the extent to which the use of new media by select evangelical churches in Port Harcourt metropolis helped in sustaining old members and wooing new ones.
4. Investigate the effectiveness or otherwise of the new media in fostering the bonds among members of the select evangelical churches in Port Harcourt metropolis.
5. Identify the limitations in the use of new media as channels of communication by select evangelical churches in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. For what purposes do select evangelical churches in Port Harcourt metropolis use the new media?
2. What is the level of usage of new media for evangelism by select evangelical churches in Port Harcourt metropolis?
3. To what extent has the use of new media by select evangelical churches in Port Harcourt metropolis helped in sustaining old members and wooing new ones?
4. How effectively or otherwise are the new media used by select churches in Port Harcourt metropolis in fostering the bonds among members?
5. What limitations are inherent in the use of new media as channels of communication by select evangelical churches in Port Harcourt metropolis?

Theoretical Framework

Technological Determinism Theory

Propounded by McLuhan (1962) and cited in Edogor, Jonah and Ojo (2014) the technological determinism theory, contends that "changes in

communication technology inevitably produce profound changes in both culture and social order" (p.57). McLuhan, maintained that the new technology age is one that has never been experienced. The theory states that technology of communication shapes the way individuals think, feel and act and how societies organize themselves and operate (www.wongkeenling.com, cited in Asadu, 2014). The emergence of the new media into our communication ecology is fast revolutionizing the way people interact in society. It goes to mean that the new media (social networking sites) exercise some powers on their users' patterns of exchanging information, opinions and messages. Due to the interactive feature of the media, they offer their users distinct favour of communication unlike what is obtainable from other media genres (Edogor*et al*., 2014).

Featherstone and Burrows (1995) cited in Laskewicz (2008) observe the growing impact of the new media in our everyday lives and submits thus:

> Technology is beginning to mediate our social relationships or self-identifies and our wider sense of social life to an extent we are only beginning to grasp. The portable telephone, the portable fax, the notepad computer and various other forms of electronic/human augmentation have become "essential" for social life in the densely networked centres of the global cities and increasingly beyond (p.58).

The implication of this theory is that new media technologies are fast setting the line for social interaction. Conversely, arguments are rife that this theory adds to the debate that on information society. The emphasis placed on information overtly reveals that the world is moving into an information age. As a result of this, people have become news conscious, data-minded and entertainment-crazy; a distillation of that will certainly reveal that news, data and entertainment are virtually products of the media (Okon, 2007). The emergence of the new media contributes to information overload. Again, Okon (2007) observes that:

> This flood of information has been described by contemporary scholars as "Infoglut" – an information overload on the average individual. At this rate, individuals in the society may progressively become informative, informatory and hyper informed. Teleconferencing and telecommuting are just windows into the information society phenomena (p.274).

Accordingly, the social media sites, a form of the new media, are shaping communication and social interactions even in religious circles.

Conceptual Review

The New Media Concept

The world's communication ecology is experiencing dramatic evolution that only goes to confirm McLuhan's thesis of the effect of a medium on communication and the audience. The new media are taking their tools in changing the paradigm of communication and its effect on the audience members. The new media comprise the internet, computers, laptops, mobile phones among others. The revolution brought about by the invention of new media technologies have seen our social lives been taken beyond our immediate environment (Ese, Njoku&Chukwume, 2014). McLuhan (1967) cited in Asadu (2014) describes this technological innovations as occasioning a global village. A situation where technology has blurred the impediments of time and space in persons communicating around the world.

Fidler (1997) citing in Ikpe and Olise (2010) define new media as "all emerging forms of communication media. They have to do with the convergence of technologies. They are new communication technologies that combine the computers and telecommunication technologies and are used as channels for the dissemination of information to a heterogeneous audience regardless of time, space and distance (Olise, 2008). For McQuail

(2007) cited in Nwanne (2014) "new media are disparate forms of communication technologies that share certain features apart from being new, made possible by digitalization and being widely available for personal use as communication device" (p.34). Citing Olise (2011), Nwanne (2014) further describes the new media as "Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and their associated social contexts, incorporating the artifacts or devices that enable and extend our abilities or practices engaged in, to develop and use the devices; and the social arrangements or organizations that form around the devices and practices" (p.34).

More so, Nwabueze (2014) explains that "the new media are ICT-based media which have enhanced the performance and widened the frontiers of the traditional "old" man media and other communication channels" (p.163). A number of features had distinguished the new from old media. As noted by McQuail (2008) and cited Nwabueze 2014) these features include: "their interactivity, their multiplicity of use and open-ended character and their ubiquity and delicateness" (p.163). Proponents of the new media had maintained that its feature of interactivity, makes the new media in more democratic media than the old media. Unlike the lope-sided nature of the old media that mainly throws information at the audience with little or no opportunities for immediate feedback and interaction, the new media tends to place more powers in the hands of the audience. Ross & Nightingale (2003), cited in Oladepo (2014) in the new media "sources of power available to people as audiences are linked to their simultaneous participation in three interlocking spheres of activity: in the public sphere, in consumption and in the media sphere. They explain that, in terms of public sphere, by virtue of their humanity, nationality, ethnicity, citizenship or other right bestowing affiliation in the public sphere, audiences are able to lobby the broadcasters, governments, advertisers and others to intervene in broadcasting (Ray & Nightingale, 2003, cited in Oladepo, 2014, p.139-140).

Similarly, list of characteristic of the new media are mentioned in Nwabueze (2014). They are as follows:

- They are primarily online. Most of them do not have conventional or traditional media version (i.e. they are web-only media)
- They are interactive
- They are interconnected
- They have multiplicity of use i.e. they are multi-purpose channel which could combine audio, video and textual materials
- They could be owned or started by anybody who owns a computer
- They could be operated from anywhere without having an identifiable physical base (delocatedness)
- They make more information available to an average internet user. They have more capacity to contain more information on a story than any other medium.
- They have both interpersonal and mass communication qualities
- They are flexible
- They have the immediacy feature – web media offer an immediacy in four ways: variety, expansion, depth and content.
- They are permanent media. The web media have in fact been described as the most permanent media, because once the content in its electronic form is properly archived and maintained, it can exist far beyond any tangible medium (Stovall, 2005, cited in Nwabueze, 2014, p.165).

Suffice to say that the internet is the backbone of the new media in the succeeding section; we will be discussing the concept of the internet and new media.

Social Media Use by Religious Organizations

A good start will be to do a cursory review of the social media in Nigeria. It is instructive to note that social media is not synonymous with the new media even if it is one of the types. The advent of Social Networking Sites (SNS), such as Facebook, Twiter, Friendster, and Myspace provides a

platform for social interaction with peers and friends from around the globe (Raacke& Bonds-Raacke, 2008, cited in Ese*et al*., 2014). In contextualizing the social media, Agichter, Carlos, Donato and Aristides (2008) and cited in Chukwu and Uzoma (2014) define it as a form of electronic communication (such as internet, websites or mobile phones usually for social networking and blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content (like videos). Yet Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of internet based application that build on the ideological and technological foundation of web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (p.61). These sites are called social, primarily, for their ability to connect like individuals in a manner that have never been seen before (Arens, Weigold&Arens, 2011, cited in Nyekwere, Okoro&Azubuike, 2014).

Social media encompass a wide range of electronic forums, including blogs, microblogs (e.g. Twitter), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), creative work-sharing sites (e.g. YouTube), business networking sites (e.g. LinkedIn), collaborative websites (e.g. Wikipedia) and virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life). Among these social media, social networks and microblogs are the most popular, accounting for 22.7% of all time spent online in the United States (Eun, 2011, cited in Nyekwere*et al*., 2014). For a website to termed a social network website, some basic features are necessary. The site must contain user profiles, content, a method that permits users to connect with each other and post comments on each other's pages, and join virtual groups based on common interests such as fashion, polities, entertainment, religion, among others. Acquistte, 2005; Ellison, Steinfield& Lampe, 2007; Lenhart& Madden, 2007; Winder, 2007; Boyd & Ellison, 2007 cited in Cox, 2010). Social media differs from traditional/industrial media in many aspects such as quality, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy and permanence all of what are enhanced by the internet (Tang *et al*., 2012; Nigel, Graham & Hodges, 2012, cited in Nyekwere*et al*., 2014). Again, the Honeycomb Model of Smith (2007) cited in Khan & Jan (2015) identifies

seven functional blocks of social media websites: identity, conversation, sharing, presence, relationship and groups. Khan & Jan (2015) maintain that "each block allows us to understand the structure of the social media site based on the facilities it provides to its users" (p.13). The diagram below represents the seven functional blocks of social media websites.

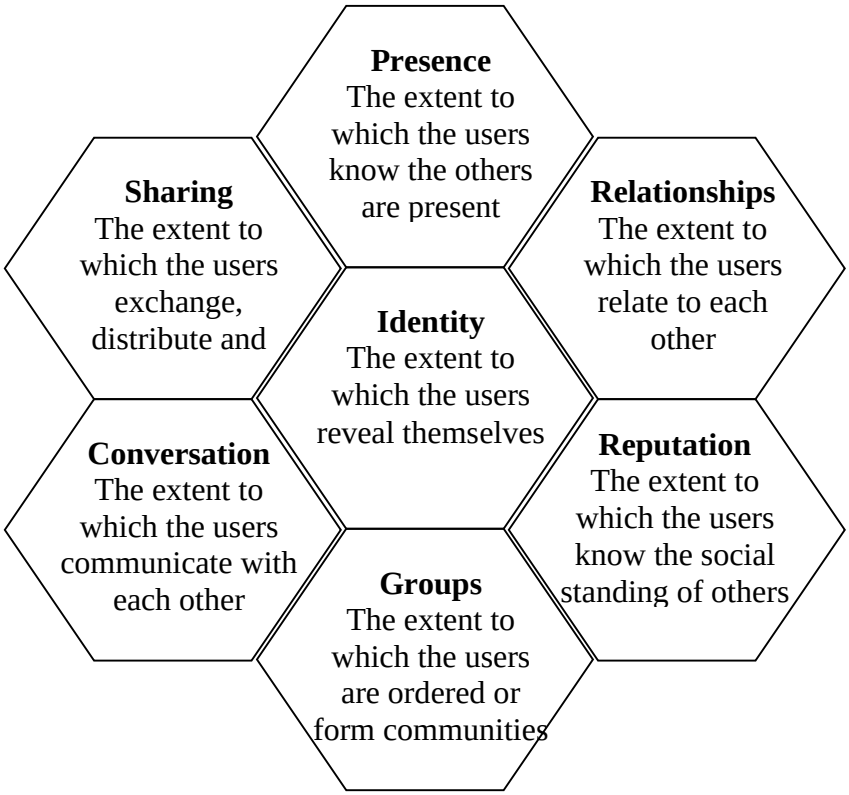


Figure 1: Diagram showing the seven functional blocks of social media sites

1. **Identity:** This dimension is about the extent to which individuals or organizations make their identity public by disclosing personal or corporate information (i.e. name, age, gender, profession, location) in a social media setting. Individuals also tend to reveal other

information – consciously or unconsciously – about themselves that make them portrayed in certain ways through self disclosure of subjective information such as thoughts, feelings, likes and dislikes (Kietzmann*et al*., 2011, cited in Khan & Jan, 2015).

2. **Conversation:** This dimension is about the extent to which each individual communicate with one another in a social media setting. Most social media sites' primary purpose is to facilitate conversation among individuals and interest groups (Kietzmann*et al*., 2011, cited in Khan & Jan, 2015).
3. **Sharing:** This dimension is about the extent to which an individual exchanges, distributes and receives content in a social media setting. As the term social implies, exchange between individuals is a crucial functionality on social media sites. At the end of the day, social media is about people sharing their identities and lives by sharing relevant content (i.e. groups, text, videos, pictures, audio, links) (Kietzmann *et al*., 2011, cited in Khan & Jan, 2015).
4. **Presence:** This dimension is about the extent to which an individual can know whether his/her peers are available online. The dimension includes information as to where each-individual-in-one's-network is in the virtual world and/or in the real world. This dimension in a way, functions as a bridge that connects the real and the virtual realities (Kietzmann*et al*., 2011, cited in Khan & Jan, 2015).
5. **Relationships:** This dimension is about the extent to which each individual can be related to other individuals in a social media setting. The word 'relate' is used to indicate the type of association formed between individuals (i.e. befriending, joining groups, co-presence on a social media site) which in turn may lead to conversations and shares (Kietzmann*et al*., 2011, cited in Khan & Jan, 2015).
6. **Reputation:** This dimension is about the extent to which each individual is able to identify one's relative position (including one's own position) in the society in a social media setting. In social media,

reputation is not something that can be earned through shared content, expressed thoughts, likes and dislikes. The same is true for an organization seeking to build or strengthen their reputation through implementing social media strategies (Kietzmann*et al*., 2011, cited in Khan & Jan, 2015).

7. **Groups:** This dimension is about the extent to which each individual can form communities and sub-communities in a social media setting. The more social a network is, the higher the number of groups, communities, followers and contacts (Kietzmann*et al*., 2011 cited in Khan & Jan, 2015).

Consequently, like other media of mass communication, emphasis is shifting from the social media to what the users do with them. This brings to tool the concept of consumer social media activities (CSMA). The social media is mainly seen as a social interactive media. So that the purpose of their usage is for socializing and entertainment. All of that is changing as social media use is becoming pervasive, even beyond socialization and entertainment. For instance, Tuten and Solomon (2014) provide a hint on the main activities of social media users. They noted that "the core activities consumers engage in social media are converse, share, post, tag, upload, content, comment, be entertained and so on" (p.3). Citing Heinonen (2011), Tuten and Solomon (2014) further categorized into three broad consumer social media activities: seeking for information, having social connection and being entertained" (p.3). Suffice to say that the social media has advanced from simply providing a platform for individuals to stay in touch with their family and friends (Paquette, 2013). Now, it is becoming destination of choice for persons seeking to reach the public and even those beyond their physical geographical locations.

Several scholars have submitted that Nigeria is not trading behind in the social media frenzy. In fact the country is fully in tune with the technology and is making good use of it. The influence of the social media in the modern day (Nigerian) society is immeasurable. In fact, it has become the most accessible source of information in the present day (Nigerian) society

(Oyenuga, 2015). The most visited online social network is Facebook, founded in 2004 and with over 600 million users and presence in over 70 countries (Carlon, 2011; Techtree News Staff, 2008 cited in Ramsaran-Fowdar&Fowdar, 2013). The networking sites provide an immediate and personal way to deliver programme, products and information. The average user creates go pieces of content every month, and 50% of active users log on to the site on any given day (Facebook, 2011, cited in Dunu&Uzochukwu, 2015). Other popular sites used by many Nigerians include LinkedIn, Myspace, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Imo, Instagram among others.

Evangelism in the Era of the Internet

Evangelism is an improved form of Pentecostalism. Anderson (2014) cited in Kuponu (2015) writes that Pentecostalism began just over a century ago and the movements continue to expand into the 21st century. Pentecostals believe in the possibility of the gifts of the Holy Spirit with great emphasis that the 'Bible pattern' of baptism in the spirit was an experience subsequent to salvation and evidenced by the ability to speak in tongues, perform miracles and manifest the other gifts of the Holy Spirit as stated clearly in the Bible (Ojo, 2006 cited in Kuponu, 2015). Kuponu, is of the view that "the power of influence of 'evangelisation' in Pentecostal outreaches has often been hinged on the demonstrative effect of miracles claimed by some of their leaders and founders and they continue to have wider impact because of the contextualization of their emphasis and appropriation of traditional elements" (Kuponu, 2015).

In defining evangelism, the Encyclopedia Britannica Online (2015) cited in White and Asimeng (2016), says "it is the use of television for evangelistic activities" (p.2). It refers to the deliberate efforts by religious organizations and interests to buy airtime for the purpose of mediating their activities to the public for the very specific ends, including the "winning of souls" (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2012 cited in White &Assimeng, 2016). This definition limits evangelism to television as the name implies. But there is more to the

concept of evangelism, especially in the face of emerging new information and communication technologies like the Internet. If evangelism is restricted to television then Asamoah-Gyadu (2012), talking about building virtual communities beyond physical audiences will not suffice. Asamoah-Gyadu (2012) submits that:

> Evangelism has become a means of participating in religious globalization, and for a continent that feels marginalized in the modern world events, its contemporary Christian representations feel obliged to make their presence felt on the world stage. A lot of that happens through placing religion in the media and building up new virtual communities beyond physical audiences (p.126).

The above statement implies that the author was hunting about the use of the internet for evangelism. It is common knowledge that the television is restrict by coverage. It is this limitation in coverage of television for evangelism that given rise to internet evangelism. It is therefore imperative to state that within the context of this study, televangelism is synonymous with internet evangelism. Moreover, it is expedient to note that the internet is the best way to share the gospel in a digital age. It is one of the only ways for global evangelism (Doss, 2002, cited in Amanze&Wogu, 2015). Evangelism is therefore caught up in a paradoxical situation; it is dependent for its very existence upon the same technologies of mass communication that have been instrumental in structuring and maintaining a world that conservative evangelists see as fallen or inauthentic, and evangelical programmes are therefore forced to share a media space (the airwaves, cable networks, and now the space of the digital) with the major channels and representatives of secular culture (Denson, 2011).

Evangelism has ushered Christian organizations and their followers into evangelical sphere. The evangelical sphere, is not situated outside but very

much within the modern world; it is articulated through large religious media networks (including print media, cable television channels and websites) (Denson, 2011). Conversely a number of challenges still tail the use of the internet in evangelism. For instance, there are concerns about the role the internet in fraying religious music lies given how some commentators have noted that the momentum of religion is increasingly in the practices of "autonomous selves as individuals choose to consume online religious experiences and withdraw from houses of worship (Lyon, 2000; Giddens, 1991, cited in Cheong, Halavais& Kwon, 2008). And then, there is the issue of the attractiveness of the sending religious messages on the internet, this is in view of the fact that most social media users do that mainly for entertainment and socialization purposes. However, are convinced that "the Internet is seen as a place of revival given the waning influence of religious institutions (Cheong *et al*., 2008, citing Cobb, 1998). There is also a positive relationship between religiosity and internet use. Recent studies argue that internet use by individual believers may be attributed to the extent to which religious communities spiritualize and socially shape the internet through evangelism in line with their discourse, worldviews, and practices (Barzilai-Nahon&Barzilai, 2005; Cheong & Poon, 2008, cited in Cheong *et al*., 2008).

Consequently, there are several approaches to Internet evangelism as Wright (2011) cited in Amanze and Wogu (2015) correctly confirms:

> Internet evangelism offers … a dazzling array of possibilities to communicate Christ. Writing articles is just one method. You may want to interact with unbelievers in a chatroom, correspond via email, communicate on a blog, design your own website, pray for and/or support web outreach financially.

From the foregoing, approaches to internet evangelism as listed in Amanze & Wogu (2015) could involve the following: (1) Websites – church websites, online books, online bible study, written sermons; (2) weblog sites; (3)

Social Networking sites; (4) Christian download sites; (5) Podcasts and online radio and television programmes(p.156). All of these in place, it is imperative that churches have the know- how on the operations and the technicalities of websites. Churches need to be technologically savvy and create websites that can be found through popular search engines such as Google (Riley, 2009).

Empirical Review

Evangelism has attracted a number of researchers to study the emerging phenomenon in mass communication studies. Some of these studies, especially those carried out in Africa fall under Helland's religion online. There are categorizations, like those that seek to show the globalization dimension of religious groups (or the projection of religious image and messages through the new media). Others fall under the category of online religion, like those that show how Africans, especially those in the Diaspora, are constructing their identities through the new media (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2003; Haron, 2004; Myer, 2001; Van Dyik, 2001, 2004, cited in Ihejirika, 2008).

Campbell (2007) examined the influence of the Internet and the extent it is challenging religious authorities. The study examined the concept of authority and how religious engagement online exerts authority on Internet users. The study aimed at providing more insight on religious authority and power relationships within online environment through a qualitative analysis of three sets of interviews with Christians, Jews and Muslims about the Internet. The study showed the different layers of authority in terms of hierarchy, structure, ideology and text as well as how it is discussed and contextualized differently to each religious tradition in terms of these four layers of authority (Campbell, 2007). The study argued that researching the question of authority in studies of religion and the Internet requires researchers to approach the concept of authority as multi-layered. It notes that there is a need to distinguish the different expressions of authority at play within online content (Campbell, 2007). The study probed into how

the Internet affects religious authority, the need to identify clearly what specific form of authority is at play and possible danger of failing to capture the complexity of the relationship between the online and offline religious communities.

Another study by Cheong (2008) looked at blogging as an interesting site of online religious communication. The study analyzed the content of 200 blogs with mentions of copies related to Christianity, as well as interviews of a subset of these bloggers, suggesting that blogs provide an integrative experience for the faithful, not a "third place" but a welding of the personal and communal, the sacred and the profane. The study reveals that by chronicling how they experience faith in their everyday lives, the bloggers aim to communicate not only to their communities and to a wider public but also to themselves.

More so, Ihejirika (2008) in a paper sought to investigate the use of New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs) by the Catholic Church in Nigeria. The paper was first presented in Nenary at the Sixth International Conference on Media, Religion and Culture, at the Methodist University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, July 11-14, 2008. The paper examined the level of application of indirect religious application of NICT otherwise referred to in the paper as an-in-line religion, while advancing a new perspective in studying the application of new information and communication technologies in religious belief and praxis in Africa. The paper revealed that there are 101 preachers, healers, counselors, exorcists and singers who identify with this burgeoning movement within Christianity, and who buy airtime on national, local and private radio and television stations to proclaim their fundamentalist messages (Ihejirika, 2008). The paper further indicated that the Catholic Church has accepted and embraced the new information and communication technologies. The paper noted that there are still worries among some traditional Catholics about the possibility of the Internet to dilute essential catholic doctrines and practices, even though it admitted that the current attitude of the Catholic Church with regard to the new information and communication

technologies is very positive (Ihejirika, 2008). The study had purposefully chosen Mater Cyberworld, an Internet Café owned by the Mater Ecclesial Catholic Diocese, Ahiara Mbaise, in Imo State, Eastern Nigeria. The choice of the cybercafé had been informed by the rural nature of the community in which it is located and the fact that it remained functional several years after its take-off. Although the Mater Cyberworld is a one-case study, it does reflect the appreciation of the new information and communication technologies by the Catholic Church in Nigeria. The paper made the following conclusions: (i) that the Pentecostal churches unlike the Catholic Church, are still ready to invest huge sums of money in setting up these new media technologies; (ii) Pentecostal websites are richer and more elegantly built than Catholic websites which just present the essential; (iii) Pentecostal use of the new media is directly religious in intent – providing users with Christian messages (through e-mails and SMS), while the Catholic use has indirect religious intent and that (iv) the Pentecostals target audience in the middle class and upward mobile young adults, while the catholic effort seems more directed at the rural youths and the marginal urban dwellers (Ihejirika, 2008).

Meanwhile, the rapid upsurge in the use of information technology in all facets of life, including among religious organizations, informed the study by Amanze and Wogu (2015). The study investigated the use of the Internet for evangelism by the Seventh Day Adventist Church, Nigeria. It showed that the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Nigeria has not yet harnessed the potential of the Internet even amidst its ubiquity (Amanze & Wogu, 2015). The study examined the use of the Internet as an outreach method, while explaining the various ways by which the church in Nigeria can use the Internet as an evangelistic approach and outlined the benefits to this approach (Amanze & Wogu, 2015). The study advocates the need to include Internet evangelism as an evangelistic strategy and provides information for the effective use of the Internet in evangelization in the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Nigeria. The study concluded that the changing times

in which we live as well as the attendant benefits of the Internet for soul winning makes its use imperative.

Methodology

The study adopted the triangulation method of research. In this study, the survey method and the structured interview questions were used for the study. The population of the study comprised ordained or full pastors in the following churches: Anglican Church, 427 (Church Year Calendar, 2019) and Living Faith Church, 378 (Administration Office, State Headquarters, 4, Kaduna Street, Port Harcourt) summing up to 805. The sample size of the population was determined using the check market online sample size calculator. The margin of error was put at 5% while the confidence level was 95%. Inputting the population 805, margin of error (5%) and confidence level (95%), the calculated sample size was worked as 261 (see www.checkmarket.com/ sample size calculator).

The purposive sampling technique was used to administer the research instrument to pastors who were new media-literate or compliant. For the interview segment of the study, 15 interviewees were drawn by accidental sampling from workers in the Media/ICT units of the studied churches to investigate the workability of the new media in online evangelism.

The questionnaire and semi-structured interview questions were used as the study's instruments for data collection. Data generated from the survey were analyzed using frequency distribution tables, simple percentage and Weighted Mean Scores from a four-point Likert scale. The interview questions were analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Data Presentation and Analysis

The study was conducted on a sample of 261 subjects. Owing to close monitoring of the completion of the instrument and because the respondents were highly disciplined people, all the 261 copies of the questionnaire were returned. For the qualitative section, 15 church workers in ICT department were interviewed.

Analysis of Psychographic Data

The following is the presentation of the psychographic data collected from the field through the questionnaire.

Table 1: Awareness of the Internet

S/N	Awareness	Response	Percentage
1.	Yes	261	100
2.	No	-	0
	Total	**261**	**100**

From table 1 above, it is clear that all the respondents were aware of the existence of the Internet technology.

Table 2: New Media Use

S/N	Usage	Response	Percentage
1.	Yes	225	86.2
2.	No	36	13.8
	Total	**261**	**100**

Table 2 above shows the usage of the Internet by the respondents. Of the 261 sampled respondents, 225(86.2%) said they use the new media, while 36 (13.8%) of them said "No", they do not. For that reason, subsequent analysis was based on the 225 that use the new media as only that number that used the new media was capable of answering questions on the new media by the churches studied.

Table 3: The purpose for which the new media are used by the studied churches

S/N	Purpose	Response	Percentage
1.	Educational	58	25.7
2.	Entertainment	69	30.6
3.	Information	42	18.6

4.	Socialization	30	13.3
5.	Evangelism	26	11.5
	Total	**225**	**100**

Table 3 shows that the new media are used by the churches under study for entertainment, educational and information purposes and that socialization and evangelism are even the least purposes for which the new media are put to use.

Table 4: New Media used in the Church for Evangelism

S/N	New media used in Church	Response	Percentage
1.	Social media	110	48.8
2.	Websites	50	22.2
3.	E-mail	32	14.2
4.	Podcasts	27	12
5.	Video conferencing	6	2.6
	Total	**225**	**100**

As can be seen, the social media are the most used new media for evangelism by the churches under study.

Table 5: Social Media platforms used by the church

S/N	Networking sites	Response	Percentage
1.	Facebook	88	39.1
2.	Twitter	25	11.1
3.	WhatsApp	60	26.6
4.	Instagram	25	11.1
5.	Youtube	27	12
	Total	**225**	**100**

According to the respondents, the churches used Facebbook most for evangelism, followed by WhatsApp.

Table 6: Level of usage of new media for evangelism

S/N	Level of new media usage	Response	Percentage
1.	High	99	44
2.	Very high	58	25.7
3.	Undecided	30	13.3
4.	Low	11	4.8
5.	Very low	27	12
	Total	**225**	**100**

As table 6 shows, the level of usage of the new media by the select churches is high.

Table 7: Effectiveness of New Media Use for Evangelism

S/N	Effectiveness of New Media	Response	fx	WMS	Decision
1.	Strongly agree	80	320		
2.	Agree	76	228		
3.	Disagree	50	100	2.96	Agree
4.	Strongly disagree	19	19		
	Total	**225**	**1179**		

The respondents agreed that the use of the new media for evangelism by the churches under study is effective.

Table 11: New Media use in the Sustenance of Church Membership

S/N	Social media Members sustenance	Response	Percentage
1.	High	111	49.3
2.	Very High	70	31.1
3.	Undecided	22	9.7
4.	Low	08	3.5
5.	Very low	14	6.2
	Total	**225**	**100**

Table 7 above shows that the extent to which the use of new media by evangelical churches has helped in sustaining old members and wooing new ones is high as demonstrated by 49.3%.

Table 8: Perception of Church Use of the Social Media for Evangelism

S/N	Perception of media use	Response	Percentage
1.	Lack old time religion	36	16
2.	They are up-to date	135	60
3.	They are worldly	39	17.3
4.	Not sure	15	6.6
	Total	**225**	**100**

The table above shows the perception church members have about the use of the new media for evangelism. Their conclusion is that the practice of evangelizing through the new media shows that the churches are up-to-date.

Table 13: Perception of Christian Messages posted on Social media

S/N	Perception	Response	Percentage
1.	Attractive	81	36
2.	Satisfactory	114	50.6
3.	Negative	28	12.4
4.	Not sure	2	0.8
	Total	**225**	**100**

Table 8 above shows the perception of respondents about Christian messages posted on social media platforms. They found it satisfactory.

Table 9: The Effectiveness in the Use of Social Media by evangelical Churches to foster Bonds among Members

S/N	Effectiveness	Response	Percentage
1.	Highly effective	108	48

2.	Effective	63	28
3.	Undecided	14	6.2
4.	Fairly effective	32	14.2
5.	Not effective	08	3.5
	Total	**225**	**100**

Table 9 above shows the use of the social media by evangelical churches to foster bonds amongst members. Respondents said it is highly effective.

Table 15: Use of the New Media by Christian Organizations and Individuals may engender Individualism

S/N	New Media and Individualism	Response	fx	WMS	Decision
1.	Strongly agree	32	128		
2.	Agree	30	90		
3.	Disagree	124	248	2.24	Disagree
4.	Strongly disagree	39	39		
	Total	**225**	**505**		

Respondents disagreed that the use of the social media by Christian organizations and individuals may engender individualism.

Table 10: Limitations inherent in the use of the new media as channels of Communication

S/N	Limitations in the use of the social media	Response	Percentage
1.	Public reluctance to be exposed to Christian messages	32	14.2
2.	Restriction to only those with access to social media platforms	28	12.4

3.	Cost of maintaining websites and social media presence	101	44.8
4.	Lack of expertise to manage social media sites	42	18.6
5.	Negative impression about the inherent limitations in social media	22	9.7
	Total	**225**	**100**

The most disturbing cost of maintaining websites and social media presence is the most disturbing limitation of the use of the new media.

An open-ended question further asked respondents to suggest ways of addressing the challenges enumerated above for an effective social media use for evangelism by evangelical characters. The responses by the respondents converged at the point where they said the social media platforms should not be entirely relied upon as fluctuating networks, lack of power and other unforeseen circumstances may hinder the use of the platforms thereby affecting the spread of the gospel.

Analysis of Interview Results

The analysis here was done under themes.

The Use of the New Media

All the 15 interviewees encountered were not just aware of the Internet technology but were also new- media savvy. They confirmed that their churches use the new media, particularly social media platforms, for evangelism. For them, churches which are ignorant of the potency of online evangelism are missing out on what is supposed to help them broaden the frontiers of fulfilling The Great Commission. In their view, despite such unethical practices as cyber bullying, rumour peddling, incivility, sexting, pornographic transmissions, posting fake advertisements, online time wastage and cyber fraud/scam, the Internet

should not be avoided because these practices are man-made, not inherent in the Internet technology. On the platforms used for evangelism, they variously gave Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, and Instagram as the channels employed.

How is evangelism done online? According to the interviewees, it is done through posting evangelical messages on Facebook and WhatsApp and through chats with converts who are being followed up. Nowadays, they stated, video and audio clips of live testimonies are posted on social media platforms. So are notices of crusades, personal evangelism, special programmes, campus evangelism, fellowships and services uploaded to relevant platforms as a constant reminder of the evangelical activities. Testimonies that touch on the challenges of the target audience members encourage the listeners or viewers to build their faith more firmly in the same God who has visited others and necessitated the testimonies. The effectiveness of online evangelism is rated 65%, 62% and 60% by the interviewees. This means that online evangelism is succeeding above a mere average level.

Limitations/Challenges of Online Evangelism

There was a heated debate over the issue of the gratifications of online users. Because a great many of the target audience members of evangelical messages are youths, many believe as what stated in the statement of the problem in this work, that new media users could be gratified by contents other than religious messages. For instance, the answers given to the research question that sought to know the purposes for which the new media is used generally, were entertainment, followed by education. Evangelism was the least consideration after socialization.

Other challenges or limitations are high cost of sustenance of the enterprise of evangelizing online in the form of constant data subscription; erratic power supply or battery running low in the case of the use of mobile devices; and errors attendant to quick responses during chatting as one may want to type letters different from what the keyboards on mobile devices

could suggest. Added to these is the inaccessibility of online messages to uneducated members and prospective members.

Suggestions on Overcoming Challenges of Online Evangelism

Among the suggestions offered for overcoming the challenges are:

(1) that there should be a budget for data subscription to avoid impulse buying that can affect the budget meant for other activities;

(2) that some well-to-do members can commit themselves to serving God in the area of data provision; and

(3) that there should be basic literacy training for the illiterate members of churches.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question I

For what purposes do select evangelical churches in Port Harcourt metropolis use the new media?

The new media is as multi-purpose as it is multi-channeled. It is for education, entertainment, information, socialization and for evangelism. For instance, the Internet.

First from the data collected and presented, it shows that more of the respondents were aware of the Internet and three hundred and sixty seven (367) (97%) of the respondents alluded to this fact. On the usage of the Internet, more of the respondents representing 298 (79%) use the Internet against the 21% that said they do not use the Internet. This figure agrees with Obayi's (2012) finding that "over 50% of the respondents know that the Internet, cable television, cell phones, ipads and iPods are new media of communication". Also, this finding was supported by the result of the interview which revealed that respondents were knowledgeable about the new media of communication.Also, more of the respondents said, they use the Internet often (34%), and very often (37%). This data were further buttressed by the interviewees who said they are aware of the Internet and that they use it for evangelism and that it is very effective in evangelism.

In the same vein, a greater percentage of the respondents reasoned that the Internet is used for educational, entertainment, information, socialization and evangelization purposes. Details of this could be seen in table 8 in the Data Presentation Section. The data further shows that church members use the new media for evangelism. They mentioned such media as social media, websites, e-mail, podcasts and video conferencing, Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Instagram and Youtube. The interviewees also corroborated the data from the questionnaire when they mentioned the same platforms as where they source their evangelical messages. These data have shown that there is greater awareness of the use of the social media in church evangelical activities.

Research Question 2

What is the level of usage of new media for evangelism by select evangelical churches in Port-Harcourt Metropolis?

This raised a few questions in the questionnaire to ascertain the level of usage of the social media in the evangelical churches from the data in the Data Presentation Section particularly in table 13, level of usage of the social media is high as represented by 37% and very high as demonstrated by 29%. This is agreeable with the responses from some of the interviewees when they said the social media are used in most of their outreaches, church crusades, personal evangelism and campus evangelism.

The above view agrees with Nmai's (1997) finding that "television stations throughout the country were involved in extensive religious broadcasts, and although countless religious groups and evangelists package, sponsor and encourage such programmes, very little is known about who view the programmes, how often they view, why they view and what they do with the contents of the programmes, as well as the extent of the impact of the programmes on their lives, spiritually or otherwise".

Ihejirika (2006, p. 227) notes that there seems to be a general agreement among scholars that the Pentecostal/ charismatic strand of Christianity has taken a commanding position in the mass media. Describing the African

scenario, Maxwell (1998) notes that what is new about African Pentecostalism is its "recent growth, enormous vitality and its appropriation of the electronic media to the point that it has almost become a part of Pentecostal self definition." Asamoah-Gyadu (2005, p.340) in this regard posits that for Pentecostal churches, the mass media are seen as constituting an important means for their religious self definition. For Ihejirika (2005, p.40), religious broadcasting in Nigeria has become synonymous with Pentecostalism. Walton (2009) deductively sees evangelism as a 'growing and predominantly Pentecostal phenomenon'. Also, gauging the effectiveness of the new media use for evangelism, respondents strongly agrees that they are effective as shown by 37% of hem in table 14, as 29% agree also that they are effective.

Research Question 3

To what extent has the use of the new media by select evangelical churches in Port-Harcourt metropolis helped in sustaining old members and wooing new ones?

Table 15 in the data presentation section clearly explains the rating of respondents about the use of the social media in sustaining old members and wooing new ones. One hundred and twenty one (121) (40%) of the respondents said it was high while 24% said very high. This data shows that social media are veritable instruments in sustaining old members and wooing new ones.

On the perception of church use of the social media for evangelism, 76% of the respondents said churches that use the social media for evangelism are up-to-date. While on the perception of Christian messages posted on the social media, 76% of the respondents said the messages are attractive, and satisfactory. This shows that greater majority are embracing the use of the social media in pastoral communication and evangelism. Obayi (2012) in his research project had also discovered that that the social media have their place in pastoral communication in South-Eastern part of Nigeria.

In a survey by Okon (2012) on 'evangelism and the socio-political mobilization of Pentecostals in Port Harcourt metropolis: a *KAP* Survey, considering the perception of Pentecostals as regards if televangelism is favourable, he discovered that evangelism holds gratifications for them in the sense that ithelps in the formation of Christian faith habits. This seems to substantiate findings byKamate (2009, p.146). According to him, Pentecostalism has emphasized a variety offorms of direct control over ones religious experience including the encouragementto read the bible and have direct experience of the personal inspirations relevant toone's personal life at the moment. The justification for eliciting responses on this matterfrom Pentecostals is hinged on Ihejirika (2006, p.186). His findings revealed that theuse of evangelism is an integral part of the Pentecostal culture. According to him,the more committed a person is in the Pentecostal church, the greater the use of thesereligious programmes.

Similarly in Ghana the liberalisation of the Ghanaian media since the 1990s has drastically changed the media landscape of Ghana and given rise to the use of mass media for evangelism purposes. In this are on "evangelism: A study of the 'Pentecost Hour' of the Church of Pentecost" This article has made a case for how the Church of Pentecost has used the media for evangelism and discipleship purposes. This was executed through the study of the Pentecost Hour (a televangelism programme) of the Church of Pentecost. The findings revealed that Pentecost Hour had a positive effect on the viewers. The study also indicated that through 'Pentecost Hour' broadcasts, about 1415 souls were won, with 311 of the converts undertaking water baptism in the year 2013 (The Church of Pentecost 2014). It was also established that the programme affected the respondents in terms of their character and attitude towards soul winning and discipleship. It can be concluded that most of the members of the Church of Pentecost who watch Pentecost Hour on regular basis are affected by what they watch.

Research Question 4

How effectively or otherwise is new media used by select Churches in Port-Harcourt metropolis in fostering bonds amongst members?

The research questions verified the effectiveness of the use of the social media by evangelical churches to foster bonds amongst members with respondents who said highly effective, 36% and effective, 34%.

On how the social media by Christian organizations can bring about individualism, 34% disagree while 16% strongly disagree. This data shows that the use of the social media by Christian organizations may bring about individualism.

This investigation lends support to the interrelatedness of television use motives, the identification of instrumental and ritualised patterns in how television is used and the generalisability of these patterns to evangelism which is a unique form of programming.

As with secular programmes viewing (Rubin, 1983, 1984), many regular viewers of religious programmes appear to be purposeful and selective information seekers. Instrumental use of evangelism programmes typically reflects the viewing of informational programming, which includes progammes that have adopted secular formats (e.g. talk shows, drama/Soap Opera) and programmes indigenous to religious broadcasting, such as sermons and televised church service. Ritualised television use is also apparent among viewers of evangelism programmes, with some interesting deviations in the motives that are reflected in this form of viewing. As has been suggested in the literature review, ritualised television use encompasses the habitual nature of using the medium itself and reflects a strong association with the medium. In this study of evangelism programme viewers, a strong religious belief was associated with ritualised viewing as well.

Evangelists' faith in the power of television to surmount cultural barriers to world-wide evangelisation is supported by the result of this research. In a study conducted by Nmai (1997) data shown in Table 7 show us that 50% of respondents view often while 30.9% view occasionally. This finding is of

considerable interest particularly to those who may have thought that nobody or few people view evangelism programmes. Nevertheless, most regular viewers are Pentecostalians who have already been reached through other ways, with the content of these programmes. This may leave much to be desired by evangelists whose principal target audiences may be the uninitiated in pentecostalism and adherents of other religions and Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholics. That this set of viewers is clustered near the other end of the continuum of the least consumers of evangelism fare shows that viewers are highly selective in their exposure to media fare. Most of them will expose themselves to information that corroborates their convictions or dispositions.

Research Question 5

What limitations are inherent in the use of the new media as channels of communication by select evangelical churches in Port-Harcourt metropolis?

This research question investigated the limitations inherent in the use of the social media. From the data it can be seen that cost of maintenance of websites and social media presence are the limitations as represented by 33% followed by lack of expertise to manage the social media sites.The above position agrees with Obayi (2012) finding that "there are many problems hindering the use of the new media in Christian pastoral communication. These problems include: illiteracy and high cost of accessing the internet, inadequate power supply and low pastoral desires on the part of the people. From this analysis, it is obvious that illiteracy and high cost of surfing the Internet are the major hindrances to new media usage in pastoral communication. In the same vein, the interview indicated that there are challenges confronting the use of the new media for pastoral communication. These challenges include ignorance, ethical problems and the slow nature of band width allocated for network services (Internet) in Nigeria". According to Internet Evangelism Day, 2011 the evangelistic Web-pages may include a website defending the accuracy of the Bible,

someone discussing their faith in a chat-room, evangelical messages or advertisements on the home pages of Christian organizations, or other methods of using the internet to spread Christianity.

On the effective nature of this method of evangelism and outreach, Nathan Black (2011) reports of a study carried out by Global Media Outreach. The study revealed that online evangelism is "producing real disciples for Christ" as over half of those who made decisions for Christ through the internet have in turn shared their faith with others.

The ubiquity of the internet and its usage suggests that there are various methods that can be employed when it comes to using the internet for evangelism. Approaches however differ from church to church and from one outreach ministry to the other.

There are several approaches to internet evangelism as Wright (2011) correctly confirms: Internet evangelism offers… a dazzling array of possibilities to communicate Christ. Writing articles is just one method. You may want to interact with unbelievers in a chat room, correspond via email, communicate on a blog, design your own website, pray for and/or support web outreach financially. From the foregoing, approaches to internet evangelism could involve the following (1) Websites- church websites, online books, online bible study, written sermons; (2) Weblog Sites; (3) Social Networking sites; (4) Christian Download sites; (5) Podcasts and online Radio and Television programmes.

On how to remedy the challenges and limitations, respondents agreed that the social media platforms should not be relied upon entirely as networks, lack of power and other unforeseen circumstances may hinder the use of the platforms thereby affecting the spread of the gospel.

Recommendations

This study made recommendations as follows to churches/ministries, the general audience and researchers:

1. Churches and ministries should realize that times are fast changing and that most people have changed their means of accessing

information and a majority of people now use new media of communication. Efforts, therefore, should be made by churches to create their own websites and blogs and even virtual communities.

2. The people should see social media evangelical communication as a new trend or forms of communication squarely packaged for their benefits and predispose their minds to enhance it by using the same new media outfits to access information on evangelism.
3. The study focused on evangelism in the era of new media by select evangelical churches in Port-Harcourt. It would be imperative to conduct an expanded study purposively around the South East to evaluate the extent of acceptability of the new media beyond just evangelical activity to other areas of the church.

Conclusion

On the basis of the findings of this study, it can be concluded that evangelical churches often make use of the social media for their evangelical activities; the Internet is used for education, entertainment, information, socialization and evangelism; the social networking platforms used for evangelism by evangelical churches are Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and Youtube; the churches that use the social media platforms are up-to-date; and that while the social media use in evangelism is perceived as attractive and satisfactory; the cost of maintaining Websites is prohibitive.

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