

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A VERITABLE TOOL FOR CHRISTIAN EVANGELISM IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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Abstract: *Social media is a computer based technology that aids in the facilitation of ideas, thoughts and information through web- based communication networks which include facebook, instagram, twitter, youtube and TikTok. These networks especially, facebook , instagram and twitter have been integrated into most Christian missionary activities because of their abilities to expose their doctrines, ideas and practices almost unrestrained to all nations of the world. Infact, nations that hitherto have been classified unreachable by the gospel are being penetrated through social media. This paper therefore examines Christian evangelism, social media, social media and Christian evangelism, highlighted observations on how social media is being used, with recommendations for proper usage towards fulfilling the divine mandate of reaching all nations with the gospel.*

Key word's: Social Media, veritable tool, Christian, evangelism

Introduction

The world is saturated nowadays with information technology media which makes people to refer to it as “a global village”. This is because information can easily be disseminated to reach the whole world in a matter of minutes. It is in realization of this phenomenon its ability to distribute signals to several audience coupled with its universal acceptance cum peculiarity that enables it to break the barrier and social class which nowadays make it a veritable tool in Evangelism.

Christianity as a religion has its origin within Christ teachings over 2000 yrs ago, and its doctrines are enunciated as the Holy Bible. The spread of the faith is driven by Christ's final injunction stipulated in the book of Matt. 28:19,20 “Go ye therefore and teach all nations... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have command you ... Hence reaching out the world to with the gospel is seen as a divine mandate by all Christians, with the emergence of social media and its peculiar characteristics of information dissemination, it therefore becomes a veritable tool

for Christian evangelism in contemporary Nigeria. Christian evangelism and social media have therefore become water-tight compartmental tools in vogue to fulfill Jesus command to Christians social media is seen as a God given tool to humans as a means to reach the all nations with the gospel.

Christian Evangelism

Evangelism etymologically is derived from greek words “evaggelion”- interpreted to imply good news, and “euaggelizo “meaning to announce, declare, bring or preach the good news (Ellen.1995) Evangelism as a word may not have been mentioned in the bible, but it's theme is woven throughout the New testament in the Bible- all rooted in the four gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is premised on the fact that Jesus Christ has a message rooted historically in the Old testament- Isaiah, 52:7,10, fulfilled in the New testament, and every believer is mandated to spread the gospel in no uncertain terms. Christian evangelism is therefore the spreading of the Christian gospel, a zealous advocacy or support for

the Christian cause, and an art of witnessing or preaching ultimately with the soul motive of propagating the doctrine of Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations.

Spreading the Christian faith began with a few soul winning strategies, but many more approaches have evolved over time as to spread the faith. Some of these approaches are open- air preaching- crusade, Trickle down evangelism, Door to Door evangelism, Ashes to go evangelism, sermon evangelism, friendship evangelism,, lifestyle evangelism, child evangelism, gospel tracts distribution evangelism/ Literature evangelism, Teles evangelism, Radio-evangelism, internet evangelism, personal evangelism, archeology evangelism and social media evangelism. (Wikipedia.org. 2021).

It is because of the explosion of various approaches that Pope Francis once said social networks are human forms of communication, stating that wherever and however it takes place, has opened up broader horizon for many people to be reached with the gospel. Hence he concluded that all the approaches particularly those evolving with new technologies as gift of God portending great responsibilities for believers to explore and exploit for gospel propagation. (catholic news.com.2021).

Social Media

Scholars have attempted to define social media from various perspectives. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) describes social media as a group of internet based applications built on ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, which allows the creations and exchange of user generated content. Whereas Carr & Hayes (2015) sees social media as internet based channels that allow users to opportunistically use internet and selectively self present, either in real time or aschroniously with broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user- generated content and perception of interaction with others.

According to Margetts, John, Halez & Yasser (2015) they opined that social media is any internet based platform that allows the creation and exchange of user generated content, usually using either mobile or web – based technologies. Jean Burogess & Poel (2017) describes social media as technologies related to digital platforms, services and applications built around convergence of

content showing public communication, and inter-personal connection.

The definitions of some scholars on social media could be summed to mean and interconnection of networks related to computer application which aids to disseminate ideas, thoughts, and information through various designs of communication networks. In short social media is a bye product of the internet which facilitates users' fast access in the realm of electronic communication. This is a more apparent in the field of videos, photos, documentaries and social information.

The social media has demonstrated that it is related to ethnological development which speeds up the sharing of thoughts and share information with everyone on earth or with many people simultaneously. This is made more plausible as users engage with friends, family members, colleagues, and partners via a computer, tablet, smart-phones, with web- based soft-wares and applications. Social media is a dynamic, ever-changing evolving field with new applications. No wonder it's been adopted by established companies, churches, mosques, and other enterprises for it's potency in the realm of new/ modern communication to reach a large audience universally.

According to statistica (2021), the underlisted are good examples of prevalent social media.

(1) Facebook	-	2.74 billion users
(2) Youtube	-	2.29billions users
(3) WhatsApp	-	2billion users
(4) Facebook messenger-		1.3 billion users
(5) Instagram	-	1.22billion users
(6) Whatsapp	-	1.21 billion users
(7) Tiktok	-	689 million users
(8) QQ	-	617 million users
(9) Douyin	-	66million users
(10) Sino weibo	-	511million users

Other forms of social media are twitter, Zoom, Skype to mention a few

Statistica, (2021) averts that social media do engage in photo-sharing, blogging, social games, social networking, video sharing, business networking, virtual worlds, and reviews. In view of these functions social media becomes an

inseparable tool in modern realities in the following areas.

- Social media is helpful for human beings to be in touch with , colleagues, and family members.
- Social media applications help to network career opportunities, and people of like-mind, across the globe, share thoughts, opinions, feelings, insights and emotions.
- It aids companies to find customers, engage companies to drive sales through advertisements, promotions, gauge customers trends, and offering customer's service/ support.
- Social media also facilitates e - commerce in marketing- collection of market efforts/ Research , promotion of products/ services, distribution of targeted, timely and exclusive sales.
- It also helps companies to secure and maintain loyalty programme relationship building.

Good as the functions of social media is to humanity, it's has some divisive tendencies which calls for caution. In this regards statistica (2015) states that it's been over used by users - youths spending 145mins – as an average daily social media usage of internet world wide is worrisome. This according to their findings contributes to inattentiveness, stress and jealousy.

Also, the National centre for Biotechnology in its publication asserts that social media users are younger people between 18-29years old. They are better educated, relatively wealthy, and this disposition is linked to users depression, conduct leading to misleading information, and falsehood on social media.

Social Media and Christian Evangelism

Nearly 2000 years after Jesus Christ commanded his followers to go into all nations and make disciples an increasing number of Christian gospel messengers are doing their missionary travels by way of social media. This is made move plausible because by the push of a botton/click of a mouse, spiritual seekers

globally can begin a personal relationship with God. In other words, by having a cell-phone one can reach those you can't otherwise reach with the gospel via online outreach which is effective.

Studies by Carr & Hayes (2015) indicates that between 350,000- 2million people on the average reads the gospel message via the social media, while 15% surrender their lives to Christ. Hence they concluded that social media outlets are channels meant for sharing the gospel (meeting the goal set by Jesus Christ) as a means of fulfilling the great task of preaching and teaching all nations.

In his contribution, Essig (2017) opines that those who commit their lives to Christ via the web read the Bible more often than the average Christian and often more often share their faith which shows that they have a genuine experience with Christ.

More so, it's been asserted that online followers are more versatile in gospelling than the sedentary Christians- in a survey by Essig.(2017) around the world with 100,000 participants it was revealed that such people shared their faith – 51% do so thrice more, while 37% do so once. During the era of Covid 19 pandemic, more – channels resulted to virtually having their services- using facebook, whatApp, Zoom, and skype platforms.

Using social media has been used to make more people to join in worship service, get inspiration, get healings, deliverances, and lots more. It is interesting to note that countries that are closed to the gospel are been penetrated with the aid of the social media- a message of hope from Jesus Christ.

The use of social media to carry out evangelism can be further buttressed as findings revealed that more than 50% of the world's population are under 30 years old, who own mobile device of which most are college students said to spend an average of 3.5hrs everyday on the social media. Therefore social media serves best as an avenue to reach the campus and the world.

It is imperative to note that social media has some comparative advantages using it for Christian evangelism. Firstly it secures peoples privacy. With social media platform people find

out easy and more comfortable to relate privately about their faith in a private space online it could be likened to Nicodemus private visitation to Jesus Christ by night (Jn. 3:2). It affords individuals to be contacted directly, paradoxically there is a distance, yet it's use of private message makes proximity and distance to collapse.

In another vein, social media offers a trust relationship approach, which is a kind of prior knowledge with someone known already by faith. This often engenders a level of trust that inspires respect to receive required answers posed by challenges. Also social media offers an approach that makes Christian messages available and easily accessible online. This may not be so on google.com, but on Christian websites of Christian missions and churches.

In view of the foregoing social media roles in Christian evangelism has made many Pentecostal Christians to view it as part of their human right. It is seen as an integral part of a lot of peoples lives and inseparable to Christian calling in the "mission dei" i.e mission of God in the world.

Recommendations on the Use of Social Media in Christian Evangelism

It should be noted that the usage of social media for evangelism has tremendous advantages that serves to fulfill the divine mandate of "go ye to all nations- Matt.28:19-20, however because of the anonymity of the internet, in which case it's often filled with unrestrained posts, it makes it vulnerable to be used to cause undue criticism of the Christian faith. This coupled with the fact that the church is still struggling to adjust to the new environment in the technological advances of the 21st century- in proclaiming the gospel afresh to each generation makes matter worse.

The use of social media in Christian evangelism portends the danger of replacing the church, and church activities related to congregational fellowship many nowadays because of accessibility and availability of social media – Christian faithful now sits at home, at a time when they ought to be in fellowship. This at times makes attendance scanty in church fellowship programmes which is tantamount to Christ's injunction that we

should not discard or disdain the gathering together, as God delights in the multitudes of his people. We therefore recommend that for social media to form an integral part of Christian evangelism, the following should be noted.

- Care must be taken to determine the ability or and potentials of each social media (blogs, social networks, text messaging etc.) as to conformed with the motive and the needs of the church or ministry.
- Constant input and monitoring with effective church presence on such website.
- Integrate social media to the commission strategy, but should not be used to replace church and church activities
- The various ministry that desires to incorporate social media in their evangelism outreaches should endeavour to set up ministry website with internet website/tool created by and maintained by the church's clerics or volunteers for the sole purpose of conducting church affairs.
- Do not share personal identifiable information on social media, this is a public domain and can be viewed or heard by any one – never post birthdays, phone numbers, or such names of member/ non members on the social media.
- The church should be aware of copyright laws. It's illegal to use articles, photos, ,music etc on internet without permission.
- Avoid posting information that is confidential, e.g prayer requests, including names/ addresses of people in needs. Don't post information on missionaries in foreign lands, or military personnel as not to further endanger them
- Create social media ambassadors team to coordinate social media consumption pattern in your church.
- Put in place a social media policy that will spell out the proper and improper use of social media especially among the youth

and older members

- Efforts could be put in place to have digital missionaries whose roles will be to communicate with web posters as to help them in delivering good content and promoting the site of other missions.
- Learn to understand that social media entails socialization in the realm of sharing through electronic conversation. Therefore it is imperative to learn the need to be willing to listen to others and converse with them.

Conclusion

The foregoing discourse has highlighted how social media has been adopted as a veritable tool for evangelism by the Christian / church. It is being used as a God- given channel for reaching out to all nations, thus fulfilling the divine mandate of preaching and teaching world- wide. We observed that there are intricacies, criticisms, and misrepresentation involved in the usage of social media to propagate the gospel. Despite the challenges, social media technologies has become potent veritable tool (s) in Christian expansion, if Christ missions carefully implement the listed , (though not exhaustive) it's usage will continue to be veritable tools for modern Christian evangelism.

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