

The Impact of Social Media on the Lived Religious Practices of Dominion House Church Congregants

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Abstract

In an era when COVID-19 took over the world and physical-spiritual activities in church were curbed and shutdown, the social media revolution became a tool for the church in Nigeria. The use of social media platforms for religious activities sustained the interaction between the church and members. This paper analyzes the impact of social media on the lived religious practices of Dominion House International congregants. As a result, their online engagements and participation are the central themes. This will feature Online/Electronic-church activities such as online devotion, bible teaching, and online evangelism. The aim of the paper is to explain how these online platforms influence adherents' religious practices and their lived experiences. The Dominion House International church social media platforms, especially, Telegram, WhatsApp, and Zoom were used for content analysis, while literature review corroborated the findings of the study. The result provides information on how the lived experiences of the adherents are strengthened through content shared on social media which either strengthens or reduces their level of religiosity.

Keywords: Internet Church, Lived Experiences, Social Media, Fourth Industrial Revolution

Introduction

This paper examines the impact of social media on the practices of adherents of Dominion House churches. There is a plethora of research on the influence of social media on religion and vice versa, but there have been limited approaches on the reliance of social media, which have both negative and positive impact on lived experiences (Dawson and Cowan, Oderinde, Wise).

Social media was developed to establish connections between family, friends, acquaintances, businesses, etc to strengthen socio-economic relations. However, it became the quintessential tool for religious organizations and their members during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria (Oderinde, 2023:1). In 2023, social media platform such as, Facebook, Instagram, and X are now being used to promote religious events and strengthen the religious outside the four walls of the church.

The objectives of the research are to understand the impact of social media the tool to promote religious activities in the church (Dominion House Churches), and the lived experiences of adherents of Dominion house churches.

Social media refers to a constructed communication platform where people connect, interact, and exchange ideas or opinions and other valuable contents that contributes to human endeavors. Howard and Parks posited that social media consisted of three major concepts; the first refers to the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content; secondly it refers to the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, and cultural products; and thirdly it refers the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume digital content" (Howard and Parks, 2012:362).

However, Carr and Hayes also postulated that social media can be defined from four spheres which are internet-based, dis-entrained persistent channels, perceived inter-activity, and user generated value. Internet based refers to the mother board which consist of the world wide

web (www) that connects computer system to the global community (Carr and Hayes, 2015:8-12). Dis-entrained persistent channels refer to asynchronous communication level of users without physical presence required. Perceived inter-activity states the communication level of users to be based on the algorithms that guides the programming behind sending and receiving messages, including the use of emoticons such as stickers, emojis and Graphics Interchange Formats (GIF). Lastly, the user generated value requires the contribution of an individual or an organization that utilize the medium for communicating their dire need online (Carr and Hayes, 2015:8-12).

The employment of online interactive spaces by Nigerian Pentecostal churches have led to the creation of prioritized online platform to promote religious practices by freely expressing their faith, expanding their religious network and the attracting of new converts through media space (Oderinde, 2022:6-7). Social media has created online spaces for religious bodies to occupy and establish online presence to bridge a gap between the church and members, revitalizing the concept of internet churches.

Internet churches (E-Church) refers to churches that operates spiritual or religious activities online through the use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, YouTube, Mixlr e.t.c they are also referred to as Online churches, Digital churches, Media churches or E-churches. The burning flame of the COVID-19 spread ignited the emergence of E-churches in Nigeria and globally. Oderinde (2023) stated that a member of Redeem Christian Church of God affirmed the use of Mixlr and Whatsapp before the beginning of the pandemic and the subsequent use of Facebook, Twitter and Youtube to promote the gospel by the church members during the pandemic. The COVID-19 era stimulated the need for social media platforms to aid the growth and engagement of religious practices and online activities by adherents. There have been rapid religious activities and spiritual engagement online during and after the COVID-19 period (Oderinde, 2023: 7).

Hitherto religious activities which are also refers to spiritual or holistic activities such as counselling, prayer and fasting, bible training, confessions, receiving of the Holy Ghost, which were restricted to physical monuments and structures, were shifted and integrated into online religious activities through the utilization of media platforms. This means members can attend church services from the comfort of their homes or workplace. Oderinde Peter in his research on digital spiritualities described the following religious practices as evolving into online spiritual engagement (Oderinde, 2022: 126-127). The belief in online healing online by a member of a church seeks prayer for her mum who was ill on WhatsApp revealed the existence of online lived. There was also online fasting conducted by church leaders to members which were observed and accounted for. The Pastor of Glorious Vessels International, Pastor Rook, on several posts spurred her mentees to fast to fulfil the spiritual act of cleansing and edification (Oderinde, 2022:132-133). Oderinde further stated that there were online public engagements as online members also willingly participate in spiritual activities on social media platforms by raising and joining urgent prayers and fasting held on social media space. One of the major online spiritual activities is the Electronic-evangelism (E- evangelism), this is widespread amongst the megachurches. Megachurches refers to churches that have churches in Nigeria and are international in nature utilizing the internet to spread their tentacles. Oderinde (2023:17) reveals the importance of the internet to the church from the standpoint of evangelism stating that “the period of COVID-19 created a space for churches on the internet to reach people and this made the pastors more comfortable with the social media for mission”. Online evangelism engages in the democratic evangelism style which enables members of the church to display the new convert won on different social

media platforms unlike the centralized evangelism which forbids such and are limited only to the church glory (Oderinde, 2022:149).

Religious practice is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Religious practices in this context refers to spiritual activities that influences adherents' mindsets. It also refers to the belief systems that shape an individual's perspective making up the component of a person's mind. (Hayden, 2011 and Oderinde, 2022:11) asserted that religious ideas over the internet affect people both in the host and the receiver both online and offline. This reveals the strength of religious practices on the perspectives of adherents of different religious organizations who build their mindsets on the doctrines and ideologies derived from religious perspective guarding and directing the types of information they garner from social media. The perspective of an adherent composes of the information, belief systems, opinions, convictions and thinking patterns that guide pattern of daily activities. The comments of believers or non-believers on social media are generated from an institutionalized body of information in the mind either religious or otherwise. Oderinde stated how both believers and non-believers assemble under a comment section to share their opinions of their faith. As a result, social media has become a tool where the individual shelter in his or her opinion, which is a reflection of the body of knowledge gathered from both online and offline social interaction (Dias qtd in Oderinde, 2023:7).

Lived experiences indicates the religious practices of adherents on a daily basis, which is an agglomeration of the fragment of their social lifestyle. It is defined as daily human encounter, understanding, and interpretation of social practice. Religion has become social, organized and institutionalized (Primiano, 1995:44). Online Lived Pentecostalism refers to a broadly Christian tradition anchored on doctrinal beliefs, social practices as well as practices that focus on spiritual and material wellbeing of members in the online space (Oderinde, 2022:7). This can convey a wide range of activities that include both spiritual and secular affairs.

Method

This article draws data through the use of content analysis from "Dominion House Churches" social platforms. This Pentecostal church has online territorial base which are used to reach people globally. The intention is to target individuals who are socially driven with knowledge on social media. The lived practices of some DHC members that were assessed include: online evangelism, bible school, morning devotion, spiritual challenges monthly, prayer marathons templates, and execution of different projects. DHI members are also encourage to invite others to join any of their organizations, such as Dominion House Global Home Churches, Pathfinder Discipleship Program, Campus Invasion Movement, and International Women Prayer Banquet (Arifalo, 2020: 171). Literature is used to substantiate the findings. Content analysis was culled from DHI church' social media platforms. Qualitative research design was drawn from the literature reviews and contents from the social platform mostly used by the church "Telegram" and adherents' responses were assessed for this research.

Information was gathered from contents and texts from group chats created on Telegram and WhatsApp. The content analysis was used to relate texts and contents from previous researches, existing theories, and the knowledge of experts in the field of internet spiritualities (Krippendorff, 2004:173).

Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behaviour

This theory was developed in Social Psychology by Icek Argen and Martin Fishbein in 1975. The main theme of the theory started with the theory of Reasoned Action which states that

human behaviour can be predicted, explained, assumed and observed under a jurisdiction of proposed belief system, attitudes, ideologies, and notion derived from intention to act or behave under a circumstance. The central of this first theory is the intention of an individual behaviour to act but not yet a decided behaviour but a leap or motivation to behave.

Theory of Planned Behaviour originated when the theory of reasoned action did not evaluate why people take action under pressured circumstances or social influence (Ajzen 1991:179-221) developed TPB under three prospect of the mind which includes: behavioural intentionality, attitudinal factor and subjective norm. Behavioural intentionality refers to the factors that spur and intrigue an individual to take a behavioural action. The degree of potentiality and strong conviction of an individual determine their behavioural action or performance. Attitudinal factor refers to the appraisal an individual might receive after taking a behavioural action. This can be either a positive or negative appraisal. Belief systems, values, shared ideologies, thoughts and comments make up an individual attitude. Subjective norm reveals the influence of social effect on individual's choice, belief system and behavioural action either to instigate a behavioural task or decline. This refers to the social motivation behind a behavioural action (Ajzen 1991:179-221).

Dawson argues that virtual societies are identified amicably with the type of presence they create online including; written texts, emoticons, and actions-stimulating messages which display an intensify degree to create social interaction and also take a behavioural action which motivates them over a long period of time. (Dawson, 2006:21)

Reasons why adherents of religion need social media cannot be overstated, Karen-Marie stated that social media has high effect on the spirituality of adolescents and emerging adults alike as they utilize it as a third party where sincere conversation can occur (Karen-Marie, 2014).

Social media is a major factor that contributes to the development of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. At the same time, it plays a role in religious adherents who are far away from religious gatherings to use of social media for participating in religious activities. Adherents are able to discover their own reading through the scriptures shared on social media websites rather than sitting and listening under the doctrine of religious leaders. Adherents of religion get in-touch with their fellow members who are absent from religious gatherings or activities through the use of social media. Also, first-hand information about religious activities is received by adherents on social media rather than those who are not. Nowadays, donations are mostly paid through social media platforms, such as the use of electronic banking. Adherents must register in these platforms to participate in the act of donations. Social Media religiosity includes inspirational quotes, short sermons, reflections, songs, and videos of dance during praise-worship sessions. Adherents of religion can be actively engaged by liking, sharing, commenting, or recommending their content to others. Interestingly, the followers of Dominion House Churches are interdenominational. The interdenominational nature of the online church helps in supporting non-profit organizations, by encouraging their adherent of religion to donate (Joanly, et al 2022).

The Advent of Social Media

Asaad in his evolution of web 1.0 to web 4.0 postulated that the first generation of social media was a one-sided social interaction, which was named the Web 1.0. Its structure was composed of HTML pages that were in 1995 created for easy access to the global web. Users on this web were not involved in any social interaction, Web 1.0 allowed only viewership and identification. Users only use the web for research of specific information and not communicating. (Asaad, 2021: 21-23).

He further acclaimed that Web 2.0 was first used by Dale Dougherty in the year 2004 at a conference with Media live. Web 2.0 motivated the creation of social media platforms to establish communication between people using the web. As a result, the creation of 2go, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter came into existence.

However, he buttressed that Web 3.0 came dislodged Web 2.0 under the guise of the 'WWW' in the year 2006. It helped in the regulation of searching content online and receiving of valuable information from the global web. Web 3.0 was also called the smart Web as it became a faster interconnectivity and more effective than the early webs. Web 4.0 was called Industry 4.0 in relation to the Germans quest of advanced technology in the year 2011. Web 4.0 is specifically divided into ultra-intelligent electronic agents, symbiotic webs, and ubiquitous webs. The nature of the revolution is asynchronous and not a synchronous web usage compared to its predecessor making it usage a complex and interesting concept and tool to the modern world of technology (Asaad, 2021: 21-23).

Ehlebracht stated that technology, innovation and social media are tools which are characterised by neutral bodies that are powerful of shifting religious or societal norms independently, instead are apparatus that humans utilize (Ehlebracht, 2022:70).

The advent of the internet brought a unique way of interacting with one another, and it has developed into what we call social media in the second decade of the 21st century. First, it was email messaging, and later the introduction of YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter in the early 2000s made it easier for people to co-interact at an accelerated pace. These social media platforms inspired the invention of others like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Telegram. Social networks have evolved over the years to the modern-day variety which uses digital media (Edosomwan, S. et al 2011:23). The social media was created for networking, connecting people of different perspectives and backgrounds to interact on these social platforms.

Dominion House Church and Its Founder

The founder of Dominion House church is Pastor Vincent Arifalo (PV) and his wife Reverend Dotun Arifalo (RD). The church is a frontier church with a vision to raise world class leaders, a people of purpose, passion and power, who are empowered by God's word and Spirit to reign in life as kings, taking territories and establishing the rulership of Christ in every place. PV is a trained medical doctor, but now pastors Dominion House Disciple-Making Movement with a mandate to plant churches everywhere by making disciples (Arifalo 2021:285). RD is a prolific speaker, author, life, business and lifestyle mentor, whose passion is contagious, initiating transformation in everyone that comes in contact with her. She is the president of the Dotun Arifalo's Ministries and the Co-lead pastor of Dominion House churches. The church movement is mostly dominated by both parties but more influenced by RD. The church is located primary in Nigeria but also in UK, Trinidad and Tobago, Kenya and still advancing its spheres of influence.

They have both founded a few organizations through the influence of the church in empowering men and women for kingdom leadership, significance and generational impact. During the COVID-19 era, most of these organizations were administrated through online, social media and internet means. Some of the organizations include the International Women Banquet (WPB), a global prayer platform for equipping women for kingdom leadership, significance and generational impact through the ministry of the word and prayer. Leading Ladies Foundation (LLF) was established with a vision to inspire and empower women for leadership in ministry, career, business and in life. Women in Ministry Mentoring Network, a Mentoring network for empowering and preparing called women as kingdom laborers for greater effectiveness in the global harvest fields. Also, the Business Women's Prayer

Network, a network of female entrepreneurs who are being empowered for kingdom building through monthly prayer conferences and kingdom partnerships (Arifalo. 2020:174-176).

Impact of Social Media on the Religious Practices in the Dominion House Churches

The advent of COVID-19 in Nigeria in 2020 created a void for churches who weren't prepared for technology to take over social interaction. Appadurai postulated that the third component of global cultural flow termed "technoscapes", which refers to the widespread of technology that Pentecostal churches use to reach their members (Appadurai qtd in Oderinde 2022:12). DHC and its churches utilize Telegram to organize morning devotion which starts every 6am, every Monday morning. The sessions are conducted by the General Overseer, Rev. Dotun Arifalo, while the prayer group is called Prayer Ark Community which every pastor, leaders, disciples and mentees must attend to be empowered for the week ahead.

Pauline Prayers & Confession for the Intentional Believer

Ephesians 1:17-21

"I declare that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, has given me the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him. That the eyes of my understanding are being enlightened and I know the hope to which God has called me. I declare that I know the riches of God's great inheritance in me."

Philippians 1:9-12

"I declare that my love abounds yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgement, that I approve things that are excellent, that I'm sincere and without offense till the day of Christ."

MORNING DEW WITH RD

27.11.23,6.01: RD: Good morning Family, who is ready for this morning empowerment!! Let start giving God thanks.

27.11.23, 6.01: Ngozi Ikejiaku: Good morning RD

27.11.23, 6.01: Adebawale Folorunsho: Hallelujah

27.11.23, 6.01: UMEH IJEOMA: Fire@emoji

27.11.23, 6.02: Madam P@: Good morning ma, I'm so glad to be alive

27.11.23, 6.02: Mary: Good morning all

27.11.23, 6.30: RD: Let decree and declare the Pauline Epistles, kindly post it

27. 11.23, 6.34: Pst J: I declare I have spiritual wisdom and understanding

Figure 1

In the table above, the event that is taking place is an online morning devotion, which is audio-visual and was held on the Telegram account named the "Prayer Ark." It is a 24-hour prayer

chain from Monday to Friday weekly. Every Monday morning by 6am, RD conducts a one-hour session with every member until 7 am, strengthening them with the word of God and Pauline prayers taken from the Bible. Members interact and express their spiritual acts through scribing and use of emoticons such as fire emojis, stickers or Graphics Interchange Formats (GIF).

Figure 2

Name:
Date:
Bible Reading (At least a chapter)
Meditation (At least one scripture)
Praying in Tongues (At least an hour)
Pauline Prayer and Confession (At least once daily)
Fasting (At least once a week)
Review of recommended book (A book will be given)
Evangelism (At least one person)

The fire@emoji in Figure 1 chat shows how members are active and are committed to the lived experience that they are being engaged online by RD. In Figure 2, the Pauline Epistles is a major prayer focus amongst the Dominion House church members, it is derived from Pauline Epistles such as

Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians. In Figure 2, members decree and declare by scribing and stating what is posted on the Telegram platform typing out on the platform to reveal what they are declaring from the posted bible verses. Every member are required to type or use emoji to show they are engaging in the spiritual activity to display a committed online lived religion.

There is also room for online evangelism has members are encouraged to invite and post on their social media to advertise the presence of the church as a moving church and not a settling church. Their goal is to reach saints, convert their souls and hold claim to them as a body building them to become disciples and sending them forth as an instrument to win more souls for the body Christ (Oderinde, 2022:149). He also stated that from his research that different informants ascribed the posting of daily spiritual contents on their social page convicts' backsliders to return to the fold. There is also receiving and filling of the Holy ghost for newbies in the fold online as there is no barrier to the manifestation of the spirit realm.

Lived Experiences of the Adherent of Dominion House Churches

The adherents of DH churches have made a lifestyle from Online religious activities that have been organized by the founder and co-founder as they groom their members to raise leaders from discipleship and mentorship programs that have coordinated in their various established organizations which have root through the use of social media platforms.

The founders groom members on praying lifestyle, studying the word (bible school), raising leaders and evangelism. A daily growth plan is giving to each disciple and members to submit to a superior or leader for accountability. A format is displayed in figure 3.

Pauline Prayers & Confession for the Intentional Believer

Ephesians 1:17-21

"I declare that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, has given me the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him. That the eyes of my understanding are being enlightened and I know the hope to which God has called me. I declare that I know the riches of God's great inheritance in me."

Philippians 1:9-12

"I declare that my love abounds yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgement, that I approve things that are excellent, that I'm sincere and without offense till the day of Christ."

Figure 3

This growth plan is submitted by all members, leaders, mentees and even RD to an assigned accountable partner in a scale of preference in the church making a most of their lived experiences. There are other organizations for different age-grade on social media platforms especially Telegram hosted by Dominion house churches which they engage in this accountability package and must be submitted through a social media platform that a member can access either Telegram or WhatsApp. They include: Pathfinder Discipleship program, Campus Invasion Movement (CIM), Men of Honor, Joshua Generation International for Teens, The Next Network Internship program for fresh graduates or youth corp members etc.

My CIDP Intermediate Growth Plan (The extent to which I grow is dependent on Me)

Name: Unknown

Date: 13-02-2023

Empowerment Hour (6am): >emoji Attended

Bible Reading: Psalm 70 >emoji Read

Meditation: Romans 5:1 By faith I am justified, through the blood of Jesus I have peace with God

Praying in Tongues:> emoji 2 hours

Pauline Prayer and Confession: >emoji

Fasting: >emoji

Figure 4

This figure 4 shows a submission of a disciple to a WhatsApp group for accountability to the leader. The use of social media platforms by Dominion House member have made religious practices a lived experience with ease utilizing social media to their advantage.

Conclusion

There have been many positive feedbacks and comments made from users, believers, mentees, followers, and members of the Dominion House churches as their religious lived experiences has taken a progressive and fire filled transformation as a result of them joining the church online platforms.

I remember for some years now I had been struggling with praying long hours. The most I did was 30 minutes and it was such a chore but this changed after I joined the online discipline training at the Pathfinder Discipleship Program. Suddenly, I found

myself praying 3 hours, 4 hours easily and I realized my moodiness stopped. (Respondent 1)

I needed a reawakening spiritually and God sent WPB my way. From praying morning and night to praying always. God bless WPB, God bless RD.... (Respondent 2)

My prayer life before Pathfinder Discipleship Program was nothing to write home about and I knew it. While the program was on, my prayer life received spiritual rejuvenation after being taught why, how and when we should pray.... (Respondent 3)

I joined the Campus Incubators Discipleship Program (CIDP) in May and everything has been different for me since then, not only "for" me but "to" me... (Respondent 4)

Long hours prayer was a challenge for me as I grew up.... Since I joined WPB and then attended Pathfinders my attitude towards prayer changed... (Respondent 5)

Arifalo (2020:132-152).

This paper argues that social media have impact on the lived experiences of DHC members which reveals how they observed religious activities such as prayer, bible school e.t.c with ease getting spiritual awakened even from social media platforms building members religious life through online religion. Therefore, the advent of industrial revolution 4.0 has influenced not only the sciences, business, finance, creativity and innovation but have spread it tentacles to the religious body in a way that necessitate the growth of religious activities globally. Web 4.0 asynchronous nature have proved that online space can be occupied for lived experiences has members who are not within the jurisdiction of a physical church can make a religious lifestyle and commitment to religious practices without restraint by the use of social media to relate and interact with the religious body.

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