

LEADERSHIP, MISSION AND CHURCH GROWTH IN AFRICA

A Festschrift in Honour of



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DR. SAMUEL CHUKWUEMEKA KANU UCHE

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ADEKUNLE O. DADA
OLUMUYIWA O. FAMILUSI

OLUGBEMIRO O. BEREKIAH
HONOR SEWAPO

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Dr Samuel Chukwuemeka Kanu Uche

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Edited by

Adekunle O. Dada
Olumuyiwa O. Familusi
Olugbenro O. Berekiah
Honor Sewapo

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zbookhouse@gmail.com

@Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria,
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Chapter Thirty-Four

ICT and the Ubiquitous Church Missions: The Emerging Religious Space on Social Media

OLUWATOYIN ADEBOLA GBADAMOSI

Religion and Science have played important roles in human history, and have also shared a unique history because of the peculiarity and importance of the two fields and their exceptional relationship. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is a product of science and it has proved to be a *sine qua non* in all areas of existence. As science, is progressing through ICT, the recognition, as well as the usage of social media is enormous in the 21st Century. The Nigerian society, both in public spaces and private spaces, is not left out of the massive use of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Telegram, Periscope, 2go and the likes. Thus, social media wield a lot of influence in the society today, and like other aspects of living, it is being used in the propagation of religion by removing constraints of space and time, making both the message and messenger of religion highly ubiquitous. However, there is scant attention on the examination of the religious space within social media, especially in the Nigerian experience, thereby creating a lacuna this research intends to fill. This study seeks to examine the subject of "religious space" in social media and its emergence over time in this ICT-driven age, with the view to discussing its roles in church missions, the challenges associated with it, and the implications for church missions' policies.

Keywords: Religion and Science, ICT, Social Media, Church Missions

Introduction

Social media has grown to become a must-have globally, regardless of race, age, gender, education, and social status as it has become very popular in most societies. In fact, in this age and generation, it is somewhat impossible to imagine living without social media. Social media wields so much influence in today's world that sometimes it is somewhat difficult to admit that people once lived without twitting, chatting or any other activity associated with social media.

Interestingly, it is not only the youths who make use of social media because its usage is beyond mere entertainment as people do serious activities on different fora online. Social media usage spans from government agencies, parastatals, business organisations and religious bodies to individuals, regardless of age, social status, education, or gender, who all have social media

accounts and online presence. As social media is used for social activities and entertainment, it is also used to promote businesses, religious messages, education and several other activities.

Unimaginable technological advancements in the past few decades have been massive and people, regardless of age, race, economic or social status, are embracing these developments head-on. These developments which would have been mere figments of science fiction generations ago, have become realities today.

Thus, undeniably, human communication has metamorphosed over the years. The evolution is remarkable and irrefutable, citing a common example, it is now possible for someone to have friends and followers from different parts of the world. Interestingly such friendship or followership, though virtual, wields a lot of influence in the daily lives and activities of the owners of social media accounts.¹

People use diverse social media platforms. The most popular ones are Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, 2go, TikTok, among others. According to Statista, as of January, 2021, Nigeria had approximately 33 million active social media users. WhatsApp is reported to be the most popular, with over 90 million users. Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram follow as the most used social media platforms in Nigeria.² There are millions of registered users on different social media platforms, but only a fraction of them are active on such fora. An active user is someone who logs in to the social media site and completes some sorts of activity regularly. This could be every day, every few hours or every other day. The Statista report shows that only a few millions of the over 90 million accounts registered on WhatsApp use them regularly.

A global overview report of social media usage by Datareportal published 27th January 2021, reveals the following: "(a) more than half of the world now uses social media. (b) 4.66 billion people around the world now use the internet, of those users, 316 million new users have come online within the last twelve months."³ It is the colossal popularity and strength of social media that makes it a necessity for any person or corporate body who wants to remain relevant or wield any significant influence in this world to be social media-minded. Things are no longer what they were a decade or two ago, the

¹ Oluwatoyin, Gbadamosi. Selfie Tradition and the "like" Syndrome: A Religio-Cultural Assessment of the Power of social media on Nigerian Young Women. *IQRA JOURNAL: Theological and Religious Studies* Volume: 2 Issue: 3 July 2022 www.igrajournal.net, 2022

² Simona, Varella. Number of Active Social Media users in Nigeia 2017-2021. March 23, 2021. <http://www.statista.com>

³ Dave Chaffey. Global Social Media Statistics research Summary 2021. July 2021. <http://www.smartinsight.com>. (accessed 10th August 2021)

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) driven evolution is huge and undeniable.

In the scope of things, religious organisations are not left out of this social media train. Gone are the days when religion tags science, or its product anti-religion. Science and religion have come a long way in their unique relationship. Rudolf Bultmann famously said "It is impossible to use the electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries and at the same time believe in the New Testament worldview of spirit and miracles."⁴ Today, however, regardless of our skepticism or beliefs, science has made outstanding and undeniable feats in medicine, geology, agriculture, technology and many other fields in human endeavour. Also, regardless of Bultman's reaction to scientific discoveries, today, even the clergy are in the forefront availing themselves of sophisticated gadgets in their propagation of the "new testament world of spirit and miracles", courtesy of science. Thereby creating a "religious space" within the current scope of things in an ICT-driven age, especially social media. Things are simply not what they used to be, it is true that it is possible to look back with nostalgia and begin to long for the "good old days", before the computer age. The reality is that these developments are not static and only God knows what will be obtainable in decades to come.

It is within this milieu that this paper seeks to converse on the subject of "religious space" in social media, and its emergence over time in this ICT-driven age. This is with the view to discussing its roles in church missions, the challenges associated with it, and the implications for church missions' policies. This is premised on the fact that ICT, through social media has become an undeniable reality in the modern world, thereby creating a lacuna this study intends to fill especially within the Nigerian religious context. Since Nigeria is a multi-religious state, the focus of this paper will be Christianity.

Prevalent Use of Social Media and its Popularity

Social media are "internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others."⁵ The internet refers to the interconnected computer networks across the globe, and refers predominantly to the system infrastructure, while the World Wide Web (www) is one of many applications using the Internet's infrastructure to communicate through audiovisual hyperlinks and accessed through a

⁴ New Testament and Mythology, cited in Hanswerner Bartsch ed. *Kerygma and Myth*. New York: Harper Torchbook. 5. 1961

⁵ C. T., Carr, & R.A., Hayes. "Social Media: Defining, Developing, and Divining". *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, (2015). 23(1). doi: 10.1080/15456870.2015.972282

browser.⁶ The 21st century is experiencing a communication explosion, sparked by social media.⁷ The term social media refers to a wide range of internet-based, mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content and join online communities. Common internet services related to social media include the following:

Blogs-online journals in which pages are displayed in reverse chronological order.

Wikis- a collective website where any member is allowed to modify any page or create a new page.

Social Bookmarking- these sites allow users to organize and share links to websites.

Social Networking Sites- Web-based services that allow individuals to; Construct a public or semi-public profile, articulate a list of users with which they share a connection and view and transverse their list of connections and that of others on the site.

Status Update Services- Known also as micro-blogging service. It allows people to share short updates or events about themselves, e.g Twitter

Virtual World Content- they offer game-like or imaginary world environments for people to interact.

Media Sharing Sites- These allow people to post videos or photographs, e.g YouTube.⁸

Social media has proven to be a must in business places and organisations in the past few decades. According to Sedigheh Moghavvemi, quoting Chen *et al*, the use of internet technology has become a common practice in the workplace and the internet enabled communication media, as it helps organisations to conduct business anytime from anywhere.⁹ According to Sedigheh Moghavvemi, while discussing the factors motivating the use of social media by SMEs, he highlighted the popularity of Facebook. He believes that the use of social media, especially Facebook as a platform for business, has become a must nowadays. He stressed the factors influencing the popularity of Facebook among business owners. These are, it allows communications to go beyond a private 'one-to-one conversation and now

⁶ C. T., Carr, & R.A., Hayes. "Social Media: Defining, Developing, and Divining". *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, (2015). 23(1). doi: 10.1080/15456870.2015.972282

⁷ David L. Williams, Victoria L. Crittenden, Teeda Keo and Paulette McCarty, "The Use of Social Media: An Exploratory Study of Usage among Digital Natives" *Journal of Public Affairs* (2012) Published online in Wiley Online Library (www.wileyonlinelibrary.com) DOI: 10.1002/pa.1414

⁸ Michael, Dewing. *Social Media: An Introduction*. Ottawa: Social Affairs Division, Parliamentary Information and Research Service. 2010

⁹ Sedigheh, Moghavvemi. *Factors Influencing the Use of Social Media by SMEs and its Performance Outcomes Industrial Management & Data Systems* Vol. 115 No. 3, 2015 pp. 570-588. Emerald Group Publishing Limited 0263-5577 DOI 10.1108/IMDS-07-2014-0205

becomes a conversation of many-to-many'. It serves the commercial function of selling, advertising and even marketing at a much cheaper cost, compared to the traditional means of commerce. Businesses can promote their products, services and brands through social media functions of 'sharing, tagging, messaging, commenting and notifying'. He says further that Facebook can be used in any businesses because of its low cost and requirement of low IT skills.¹⁰

Social media should not be seen primarily as the platforms upon which people post, but rather as the content that are posted on these platforms. Social media is today a place within which we socialise and not just a means of communication. ¹¹ Daniel Miller (*et al*) used the approach of ten key areas in their discussion on social media: i. Education and young people ii. Work and commerce iii. Online and offline relationships iv. Gender v. Inequality vi. Politics vii. Visual images viii. Individualism ix. Does social media make people happier? x. The future.¹²

Undoubtedly, social media through the internet, has come to stay and almost all sectors in the society are conscious of the new breed of consumers, which is internet driven. This has influenced their decision-making process and it is no longer business as usual. In their research, David William *et al* examined this new breed of consumers, whom they refer to as 'Digital Natives', within the context of their actions in the extensive world of social media. These digital natives are described as technologically savvy, and the most visually sophisticated of any generation.¹³ Religion and religious organisations are not ignorant of this trend of communication, thus, they strive to include these 'digital natives' in their policies. Besides this, the success and advantages of social media have made its usage very popular in different sectors including in religious circles.

Roles of Social Media in Church Missions and the Emerging Online 'Religious Space'

The foremost significance of the entrance of technology to religion like other life sectors, is the unlimited outcome it has introduced to Church missions. ICT

¹⁰ Sedigheh, Moghavvemi, *Factors Influencing the Use of Social Media by SMEs and its Performance Outcomes Industrial Management & Data Systems*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited. Vol. 115 No. 3, 2015 pp. 570-588 0263-5577 DOI 10.1108/IMDS-07-2014-0205

¹¹ Daniel, Miller (*et al*) 2016. *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press University College. x

¹² Daniel, Miller (*et al*) 2016. *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press University College.

¹³ David L. Williams, Victoria L. Crittenden, Teeda Keo and Paulette McCarty. "The Use of Social Media: An Exploratory Study of Usage among Digital Natives" *Journal of Public Affairs* (2012) Published online in Wiley Online Library (www.wileyonlinelibrary.com) DOI: 10.1002/pa.1414

through social media has made the message and the messenger of the gospel to be ubiquitous. When Jesus used Peter's boat to preach to the multitudes waiting to hear from him, he moved further away into the water and one could wonder how the crowd could hear him without any public address system (Luke 5:1-11). This experience and several other ones in Jesus' ministry were remarkable and the same success was experienced by the apostles in the Bible, given the standard of this generation, and their obvious lack of technology. If Jesus or Peter were able to give a live broadcast, there would be millions of viewers and it is enthralling to imagine how the whole experience would have been. Communication is the bedrock of church missions and the effectiveness and strength of the communication strategies employed often determine the spread of the Christian message. When Jesus Christ admonished the apostles before ascending into heaven as follows, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you, and surely I am with you always, to the very end of age" (Matt.28:19-20). There are three important directives in this injunction: go, baptize and teach. The apostles have run with this vision using different communication strategies appropriate for each age, allowing the spread of Christianity to different parts of the world. Horsfield, expresses this succinctly in his book, *From Jesus to the Internet*, as he showcased how different media methods and procedures have shaped and developed the Christian traditions through a period of over two thousand years of the existence of the religion. This account starts from the time of Jesus and ends in this digital age. He used retrospective hindsight from a contemporary mindset of media to discuss the development of Christianity from the time of Jesus, the Apostles, the works of Origen in the 2nd Century, the letters of Bishop Cyprian and so on, to the present age.¹⁴

The Covid-19 pandemic further stressed the importance of ICT to Christianity as it allowed mission work to continue regardless of the global lockdown. Church leaders were able to promulgate the gospel to members of their flock and anyone who had access to the media platforms, thereby defying the rules of space and time. ICT through social media plays a huge role in Christianity and a few of the contributions to Church missions is as follows:

Preaching of the Gospel: Social media has expanded the meaning of the term "local assembly" as members of the church, potential members, and anyone anywhere in the world can have access to sermons or podcasts from churches. Non-members and non-Christians can easily 'stumble' on messages on their social media pages such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram or any other social media platforms, and out of curiosity, most times, the message of the gospel is shared.

¹⁴ Peter, Horsfield. *From Jesus to the Internet: A History of Christianity and Media*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. 2015

Connectivity with Members and Potential Members: Connectivity is an important factor for Christian growth as Jesus enjoins believers in John 15:4. Social media can play a huge role in making Christians abide in Jesus. Daily tweets and devotionals can be uploaded on social media platforms thereby the Church can remain connected with members outside the walls of the Church and during regular church services. A quick glance at the Google Play store shows that most churches have devotionals that can be easily downloaded by anyone, anywhere and at any time.

Communication with Members: There are several innovative means of communication that Churches can exploit on social media and social networks online, which can effectively supplement or replace paper bulletins. This is cost-effective and also encourages feedback which may not have been easy in traditional means of communication. Tweets, podcasts, blogs and networking groups such as WhatsApp make dissemination of information very easy and effective.

Church Growth: Social media has an extensive wide coverage and this makes it possible to reach a huge number of people regardless of space and time. Churches can reach new members by sharing resources online on social media platforms like Pinterest or Facebook. Churches can also improve their social media presence by generating contests online that can be re-posted or re-tweeted. These activities increase awareness and traffic to the media sites of the Churches and such visits have the potential of translating into membership. Churches can also start specific user groups targeted at specific demographics such as youths, women, teenagers, retirees, business people and other specific groups and programs will be created to meet identified needs of the particular social group. It is a lot easier for members of these user groups to become members of such churches at the long run.

Fundraising- Social media platforms are effective means of generating funds through social campaigns for particular church projects. These campaigns usually have a video or photos to share a compelling story for such projects and followed by links for donations. The donation process is often simplified and appeal is mostly small amounts from potential donors. The small donations here and there cumulate into a huge funds as little drops make a mighty ocean.

Ease of Access to Messages: Through social media, members and potential members of a church can have access to any message that has been preached in the church regardless of date anywhere and anytime. This has simplified the whole experience of accessing the gospel. YouTube, Facebook and other social media platforms serve as a huge repository for church messages uploaded to them. In addition, members unable to attend church services can

still benefit from services without being physically present through online platforms.

Meeting of Spiritual Needs: Through social media, churches and ministries have created platforms to meet the spiritual needs of people such as prayer lines, counselling and other needs via online social networks. New Season Prophetic Prayers and Declarations (NSPPD) is an online prayer network anchored by Pastor Jerry Eze with over nine hundred thousand subscribers on YouTube, ranked by CNN as the largest online prayer platform in the world.¹⁵

Challenges of the Use of social media for Church Missions

As versatile and beneficial as the use of social media is for Church missions and Christianity generally, there are some challenges associated with it. Like any other human venture, bound to have one or two disadvantages, some drawbacks of using social media by churches include the following:

Problem of Internet Connectivity: Although there have been improvements on internet connections through technological innovations and deployment of improved network services by internet providers, users still experience fluctuations in internet connections and network downtimes. This is a big downfall of relying solely on social media for church missions.

Problem of Manpower: As most members that provide service in the church are mostly non-re-numerated, it is easy to expect that members of the church skilled or passionate about ICT will automatically provide service freely like ushers, or choir members. This assumption and expectation will limit the benefits that churches can garner from their social media platforms. It is important to source for high versatility in ICT skills especially social media to maximize its benefits to church missions. This is neither cheap nor readily available, thus, it can be a problem to the deployment of ICT in Churches.

Cost: Maintaining an effective social media presence is not a cheap feat. Companies pay huge amounts of money for social media marketing. To replicate same activities for mission work, churches must be ready to invest in good cameras, constant power, internet connection and others. It is not every church that can afford what it takes to project their services live or maintain an effective social media presence.

Complacency to Church Gatherings: Social Media, if not effectively coupled with adequate physical presence may lead to detached or passive membership. As the religious space is evolving online, if not well coordinated, it may endanger the need for physical fellowship. According to Dyikuk, "Human communication through interpersonal and group communication is

¹⁵ Nimi, Princewill. "The YouTube Prayer Channel Started During Covid that's become a Global Movement" 21 August, 2022. Accessed 23 September 2022 from www.cnn.com

crucial to human existence. As it were, advocating for a sacred space on the internet seems to threaten basic human communication and interaction. Since social media communication is often a private affair, the sense of real face to face communication appears endangered.”¹⁶

Exposure to Fraudulent Activities: The entrance of religious organisations into social media platforms have made such ministries and their leaders susceptible to fraudsters which may be in form of identity theft or hacking. It is very easy for anyone to get access to digital photographs of religious leaders, which they can easily use to create fraudulent social media accounts and use it to solicit for funding fraudulent or non-existent projects.

Public Scrutiny of Personal Opinions: Religious leaders like every human being are expected to have their personal opinions on issues of national or global concerns. These opinions are most times personal which may or may not be popular. Once such opinions are shared on Twitter, Facebook or any other social media platform they may be misunderstood, misquoted or shared to discredit the personality or subjected to undue scrutiny or misrepresentations. Recently, Pastor Poju Oyemade made a tweet on politics and what was understood as disparaging of one of the presidential candidates, his tweet generated a lot of reactions and criticism and the incident was reported in the dailies.¹⁷ This was a comment that he would have gotten away with if it was made to his congregants and not aired on social media even though he later deleted the supposed controversial post.

Distractions: The internet is made up of both beneficial activities and unscrupulous ones. It takes a lot of discipline to be able to refrain from unplanned acts that prompt up suddenly and without solicitation on one’s social media page. A person that has set out to listen to a sermon or read a religious post may end up doing something totally different if care is not taken. There are a lot of offending contents, gossips, obscenity and lewd characters on social media that may be harmful to spiritual development of believers.

Regardless of the ills of social media it has a lot of benefits that can be maximised for mission work. The internet has come to stay and technological advancements in different spheres including social media will keep on evolving. It is important therefore to examine some of the implications of the reality of social media for the policies of church missions.

¹⁶ Justine, Dyikuk. “Christianity and the Digital Age: Sustaining the Online Church” *International Journal of Journalism and Mass Communication* Vol. 3(1), pp. 043-049. 2017

¹⁷ Na. “Pastor Oyemade deletes Controversial Tweet amid Backlash from peter Obi’s Supporters”, Vanguard Newspaper. July 1,2022. Accessed 23rd September, 2022 from www.vanguardngr.com

Implications of Social Media Usage for Church Missions' Policies

The Future of Christianity: Churches in Africa must learn from the experience of the European Church and Churches in the West, where cathedrals are becoming empty and a lot of Churches are closing down. Emphasis must be on the future of the Church, therefore, church missions' policies must be centred around the youths and the future generations. To do this effectively, the policies must be in the language the youths understand.

Influence on the Youth: Since the power of social media is massive and undeniable, it is important to seek them where they can be found and, in this case, the 'where' is online. Interestingly, it is not only the youths that are addicted or prone to use social media, as statistics reveal that Nigerians and Filipinos spend the most times on social media in the world where the average user spends 4 hours per day which is 70% above the global average of 2 hours 27 minutes per day.¹⁸ To be able to influence this huge population, it is important to inculcate 'where' they can be found and positively influenced in church missions' policies.

Discipleship takes Time: Mission work is keyed on making disciples and this is not an activity that can be done in a haste. It takes dedication and regular follow-up, unfortunately, time is a luxury in this age and it would even be more luxurious years to come. Churches should be cognizant of this reality and develop discipleship and mentoring programs for new converts and believers patterned on the structure of social media.

Social Media makes both the Message and Messenger of the Gospel Ubiquitous: Millions of people in different parts of the world can listen to or watch someone preach at the same time or at different times via social media platforms. The great commission to reach the ends of the earth can therefore be easily done without physically going to different parts of the world if the power of social media is recognized in mission policies.

Regular Relationship: Social media allows the spiritual community to maintain relationships with members regardless of their location. People travel for different reasons and sometimes unforeseen circumstances make it impossible for members to attend church services. The use of social media can mitigate this challenge.

Schedule of Physical Interactions becomes Attractive: The population sceptical about attending services physically may eventually become enthusiastic about their physical presence in churches. Over time, when the

¹⁸ Josh, Howarth. "Worldwide Daily Social Media Usage (New 2022 Data)" in *Exploding Topics*. <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/social-media-usage> Accessed 23rd September 2022

spiritual needs of people are met online, they can develop some form of attachment to such ministries which may make them look forward to being at such meetings physically. Thus, at the long run, the online mission work has become successful.

Dedicated Staff to Manage Social Media Platforms: If any church wants to gain from the benefits of social media, it is important for them to realise the need to employ dedicated staff to run and manage their social media platforms religiously. Such dedicated staff will be saddled with the responsibility to develop quality video, images, graphics and regular blog contents for the church. These services may not be achievable free of charge, but the cost of equipment and personnel should be factored into the budget of such churches.

Competition is stiff: The internet and Social Media generally are flooded with varieties and options abound readily. It is important therefore to know that people have options and if their needs are not met, there are ready alternatives which are just 'a clique away'. The video, visuals, texts and all other contents should be developed with the mindset that people (including members) have options thus, social media contents should not be boring or unattractive.

Church leaders should be Technology Savvy: It is high time ministries included knowledge of ICT in seminaries and church leadership trainings. This is important to be able to minister effectively to people of all ages and climes. This knowledge is also important for them to be aware and able to monitor their social media handlers or accounts. It is not right for another person (no matter how trusted) to be typing, posting, tweeting or sharing in the name of a religious leader because he/she is not conversant with social media.

Conclusion

Religion and Science undoubtedly can have a symbiotic relationship whereby both fields stand to benefit from the relationship they have with each other. In the case of this paper, emphasis has been on the gains religion can garner from the development of science, specifically in the area of ICT through social media. No one should underestimate the power of social media in this age as it has become influential in most developed or developing communities. The religious space has grown to become prominent on social media. This paper has attempted to discuss social media and its emergence over time in this ICT driven age, its roles in church missions, the challenges associated with it and the implications for church missions' policies. Without mincing words, a post on social media wields more power than thousands of bulletins, pamphlets, tracts or any other paper publication. One single post can be re-tweeted, shared, liked or broadcasted to millions of people and the same process can be

repeated multiple times in the future. This is very powerful for church missions.

Evidently, it is pertinent to realise that regardless of the shortcomings and disadvantages of social media like any other human endeavour is liable to have, it can still be maximised for religious purposes and in this case, mission work. Notably also, it could be argued that regardless of the popularity of social media, there are still people ignorant of the ICT or those who do not know what social media is. To them, they do not know what is called Twitter or Facebook, this set of people are also in the agenda of God and He has called and is still calling labourers in the vineyard to cater specifically for them. The emphasis of this paper is not targeted at them thereby making such concern to be outside the scope of this paper, but at the same time worthy of examination in future research.

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