

Use of Social Media Platforms in Youth Ministry Activities by Protestant Churches in Kenya: A Case of Kesses Sub County, Uasin Gishu County

By

Joshua N. Mbithi¹, Regina Kinuthia (PhD)² & Alex Kamwaria (PhD)²
P.O. Box 342 – 01000, Thika, Kenya

¹ Doctoral Candidate, School of Social Sciences, Mount Kenya University

² School of Social Sciences, Machakos University, Kenya

Corresponding author: mbithijosh@gmail.com

Abstract

The advent digital information technology platforms for socialisation and its influence on young people across social spheres cannot be overlooked including Church. Statistics from Pew Research has shown the majority of youth spend their large amount of leisure time in the social media and therefore churches have to adjust their reach by reaching out to the young people in these platforms. This paper looks at how social media platforms are utilised by Pentecostal churches in Kenya to advance youth ministry activities. The study is domiciled among selected protestant churches in Kesses Sub County, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. The study uses a mixed methodology approach by utilising quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study is anchored on diffusion of innovation theory. The respondents for the study were 80 youth pastors and 320 youth leaders from 80 Pentecostal churches in the area. Data collection was through use of questionnaire and interview schedule. Analysis of data has been done using descriptive statistics for quantitative data with the help of SPSS. Qualitative data was analysed thematically using content analysis. Research result showed that there was significant usage of social media platforms for Church youth ministry programmes after Covid-19 was declared a pandemic and fellowships or Church services were suspended. There before, the usage of social media was low amongst churches in the study area. The paper concludes that Nevertheless, significant strides had been made by the Churches under investigation to maximise the social media as a tool of evangelism work in these dynamic times of technological revolution across the world. The study recommends that Church leadership needs to support youth departments to procure required technological appliances to enable them broadcast their services to different social media platforms.

Key Words: Kenya, Uasin Gishu County, Youth, Technology, Social Media, Usage

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Introduction

social media is a combination of digital media plus mixture of moving images, sound, graphics and electronic texts to form an ordered computerised atmosphere that allow persons to work together with data to attain the necessary objectives (Chainarong, 2018). Use of social media has become a usual place in present day civilisation, with 4 out of 5 individuals who have access to Internet utilising one or more social media applications (Lim 2017). Vidyakala and Nithyakala (2016) reported that internet users utilise more time in the social media than they are on the internet for other reasons and many actually spend a lot of time on social media platforms daily. According to Bowman (2019), this upsurge in social media use presently integrates billions of people across the world, offering vast potential for bringing change in the community. According to Chainarong (2018), 72.0% of internet users are currently using the social media with 71.0% accessing social media through their mobile phones. A 2015 investigation done by Pew Research Center in United States of America observed that 71.0% of youth utilised at least more than one social media platforms, compared to 22.0% who utilised only one platform (Lenhart, 2015).

Accordingly, most people have successfully utilised social media effectively as an instrument of promoting community change, even in the religious (Deaton 2015; Lim 2017). Using this channel of influence, Churches have utilised social media for evangelising with respect to commandment from the Bible on taking the faith to all places of the earth (2 Corinthians 5:11-20; 2 Timothy 4:1-2). Youth appear to come up across religious information through social media more regularly compared from what they receive religious teachings from their churches and families (Bowman & Sheppard, 2021), demonstrating a higher potential for this influence through social media. Moreover, youth might hear more persuasion via social based according the frequency at which they access those social media platforms (Kelly 2015). The youth use social media every day; they provide information and communication services and offers the opportunity to set up new relationships or preserve existing ones (Botou & Marsellos, 2018).

The emergence of various different social media platforms has their significant influence on Church programmes (Hess, 2019). Social media use results to individual and church groups' growth (Brubaker & Haigh, 2017). They indicated that social media is an expressive channel where users can obtain spiritual nourishment, materials and entertainment. Social media also provides outlet in which spiritual desires and needs are articulated and accomplished in virtual platform. To the youths it helps them to be closer to one other in extending critical values, extent individual friendships and relationships and enable youth to communicate more effectively amongst each other and facilitate information sharing (Nkomazana, 2020). The platforms also perform an essential role in improving the health and wellbeing of believers as they benefited from scriptural message shared and divine healing and restoration. This paper therefore looks at

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the extent to which social media is used in youth ministry activities among protestant churches Kenya.

Purpose of the Study

To establish the frequency to which social media platforms are used in youth ministry among protestant Pentecostal churches.

Review of Related Literature

Agnor (2018) pointed out lack of incorporation of technology in today's religious practices may make young people feel out of place. Therefore, churches have to make plans on how their services can be transformed through social media integration. Studies conducted have shown that this is a growing field of study since opposition by fundamentalist and conservative voices have slowed down the adoption. However literature on how Pentecostal churches are utilising social media in youth ministry activity remains inadequate and formed the basis for conducting this study. In USA, Thompson (2014) did an investigation on what twitter users were deliberating by focusing on five churches. Thomson examined all hash tags (tweets) that were posted by the five churches in a period of sixteen days. The researcher categorised the tweets in a pre-arranged content group. The research also determined whether use of twitter as a channel was advantageous in ensuring the five churches execute their mission agenda. The tweets shared by the churches were analysed to see if they related with their mission statements for each church.

Finally, the findings showed that the tweets (hash tags) reflected themes that were advantageous to each individual church growth. Nevertheless, the hash tags (tweets) tagging from three churches did not relate with the mandate of the three churches. The number of social media uses by the youth increases each day with statistics appearing overwhelming every day in Nigeria. Majority of them are getting spiritual information and knowledge online rather than in physical Church structures. Ononogbu and Chiroma (2018) found out that in spite of advantages of social media use in transforming youth generation in the Church, Nigeria appeared not to device effective methods which will facilitate harnessing of immeasurable opportunity of social media in youth ministry. Further, Ogidi (2015) noted that Church youth department steered the youth to know their individual identity in God and prepared them to impact their peers (online and offline) and associate members in the system. Ogidi further observed that social media being a digital content also generated a stage for youth ministry to influence and incarnate youth self – identity through sharing of theological and biblical values that had the ability to assist develop a nourishing formation of self – identity.

In South Africa Kgatle (2020) examined the utilisation of live-streaming through social media sites like YouTube zoom, Facebook, Twitter among other applications by various churches as a response to Covid 19 lockdowns. Results showed that of Pastors utilised to go live in the internet by sharing streaming their services using open broadcaster software to Twitter, YouTube and Facebook pages. This meant that live-stream services using assorted of social media platforms considered beneficial in reaching out to the members of the Church during the period of lockdown and suspension of in-person fellowship of believers. The gap created here is that it was conducted after Covid while this research focuses before and after Covid 19 restriction to establish how the social media platforms were utilised in youth ministry. Tarimo

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(2016) examined evangelisation in Moshi Tanzania Catholic Diocese in the period of social media. The research involved a survey of 220 youth drawn from four Moshi vicariates. Findings showed that 84.4% of the youth used Facebook. The youth used smart phones to access social media and they regularly used the social platforms for faith sharing. The research by Tarimo was in Tanzania Catholic Church that operates distinctively from Protestant Churches.

In Kenya, Mungai (2018) assessed ICT role at CITAM Church and how it was adapting with the new technology in offering services to its members and followers. A descriptive survey design was used to get information from CITAM members using mixed methods technique. Questionnaire and interview were used to collect data. Additionally, key informants were selected using purposive sampling method whereas other members of the church were selected using stratified random sampling technique. The study also used observation checklist to collect information. It was found out that intranet was used at CITAM for internet communication while social media were utilised to reach a large audience. The main platform used for internal communication between members of the Church was Whatsapp. Through Whatsapp, members shared Bible passages and this platform also influenced others to join CITAM.

The study concluded that technology improved the way CITAM church communicated with its members in addition to evangelism to the unreached. Nyaboke (2015) research focused on how televangelism influenced worship habits in Nairobi city. Nyaboke used a descriptive research design approach that was mixed in methodological basis. It was found out that more than 93% of worshipers' habits had been influenced by televangelism services offered through the TV.

The study found out that based on the effect of televangelism towards attendance of Church by faithful in Nairobi, only seven percent viewed televangelist messages as substitute to attending Church service. Further, less than 12% of believers favoured viewing telecast theology or messages transmitted through television. This made televangelism to be preferred more compared to information from Church hence pointing to a potential risk towards social norms that have been founded on profound theological doctrines and principles. Research by Nyaboke was on televangelism while this research will be on social media use. In addition, studies on frequency of social media use in youth ministry in the local context appear to be inadequate.

Materials and Methods

This study employed concurrent triangulation mixed method research design which allows use of qualitative and quantitative aspects. In terms of research design, this research employed descriptive survey to collect data on utilisation of social media in Church youth ministry in Kesses Sub County Protestant Churches. This study was conducted in Churches located in Kesses Sub County, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. The target population for this study included 240 Protestant Churches in Kesses Sub County. The respondents to be targeted were Youth Pastors (240) in those Churches together with four youth (960) leaders per local Church which may include either the (Chair, Vice, Secretary and Treasurer). At least 30% of the target protestant Churches (240) were selected as the sample (80) for the study. Thus, 80 Churches were sampled for the study. Four 4 youth and 1 youth ministry pastor were selected randomly and purposively selected respectively from the 80 Churches making a sample of 400 respondents (80 Youth Pastors and 320 youth leaders). Data was collected by means of questionnaires and in-

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depth interviews. Questionnaires were meant for the youth while interviews for Youth Pastors in the sample Churches in the sub county. At first, quantitative data were coded and entered in SPSS database (SPSS Version 26.0). Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive (frequencies, means, standard deviation and percentages). Qualitative data from interviews and open-ended questions was analysed using content analysis which is a primary message centered methodology.

Results and Discussions

The objective of the study was to determine the frequency at which social media was used in youth ministry among Protestant Churches in Kesses Sub County. To collect data, the study used questionnaire and interview schedule. At first, the research asked the Youth Pastors to indicate the social media platforms that they utilised in ministering to the youth. Majority of pastors (53) indicated that they utilised various social media platforms in their youth ministries as indicated by Pastor No. 23 below: *WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, SMS and Skype/Zoom*.

Another Pastor No. 46 mentioned the following: *We use WhatsApp and Facebook*

In addition, Pastor No. 14 also said the following social media apps were used in their youth ministry: *YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp*. According to many Youth Pastors of different Protestant congregation, the social media applications that were mainly used were; Facebook, WhatsApp, SMS, YouTube and Instagram. The study findings agree with Wanjiku (2020) who found out that Facebook and Twitter were the common social media platforms used by Infinite Fellowship Ministries to reach their members and the unreached.

Further, with the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic in the year 2020, the World Health Organisation recommended that social distances should be highly encouraged to manage the spread of virus and this made many church leaders across the Kenya to suspend in-person physical meetings for more 5 months (March to July 2020) in line with Inter-religious consultative forum. The alternative means of reaching to their members was through the various mass media platforms that existed; TV, radio, internet among others. This study looks at how social media was incorporated in youth ministry programmes in the period before Covid-19 pandemic and after. Therefore, the researcher asked the youth leaders to indicate the frequency to which they utilised social media platforms before the pandemic came. The results are presented in Figure 1.

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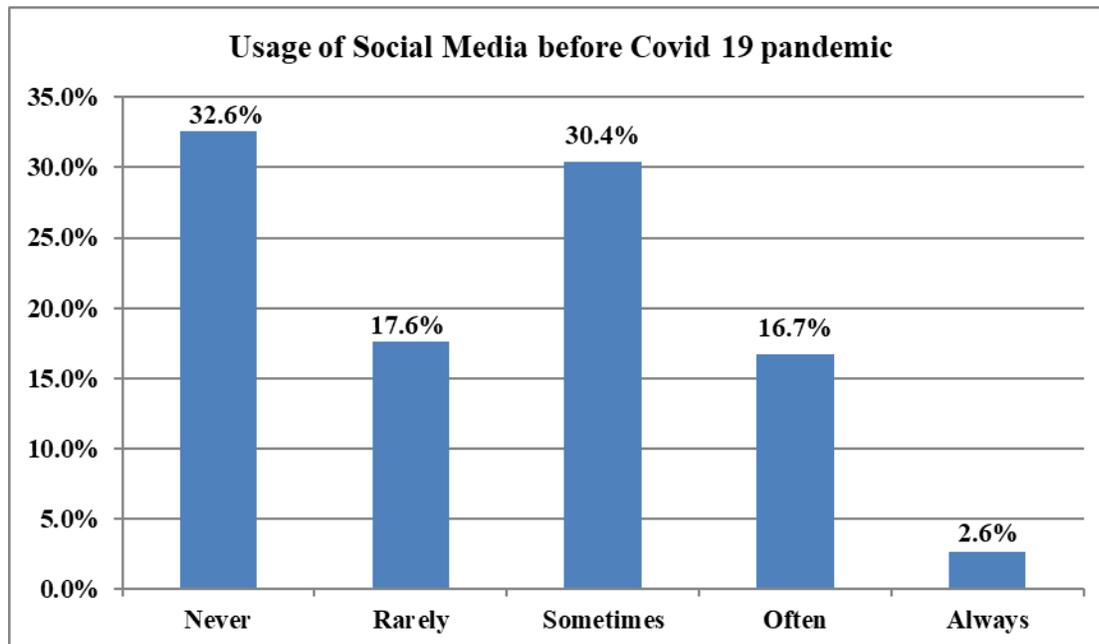


Figure Frequency of Social Media use by Protestant Churches before Covid-19 pandemic

Result show that 100 (32.6%) of youth leaders agreed that they were not using social media before Covid-19 pandemic, 54 (17.6%) rarely used, 93 (30.4%) sometimes used social media platforms, 51 (16.7%) often used social media platform while only 8 (2.6%) indicated that they always used the platforms before Covid-19. The result shows disparity with social media use by youth ministries department among Protestant Churches before Covid-19 which was low and the uptake was high after Covid-19. In line with the study results, Parish (2020) looked at the church response towards the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic in the year 2020 an especially the Easter festivities. The author looked at the spiritual, emotional and practical responses between the people and the Church through online interactions. Parish found out that Easter 2020 was a highly challenging period for Christians and their churches relationship as incidents of psychological and physical presence were highly affected. In linking the frequency of usage before the pandemic, the youth leaders were asked to provide their responses on how social media platforms were used before the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic and after. The responses are summarised in Figure 2.

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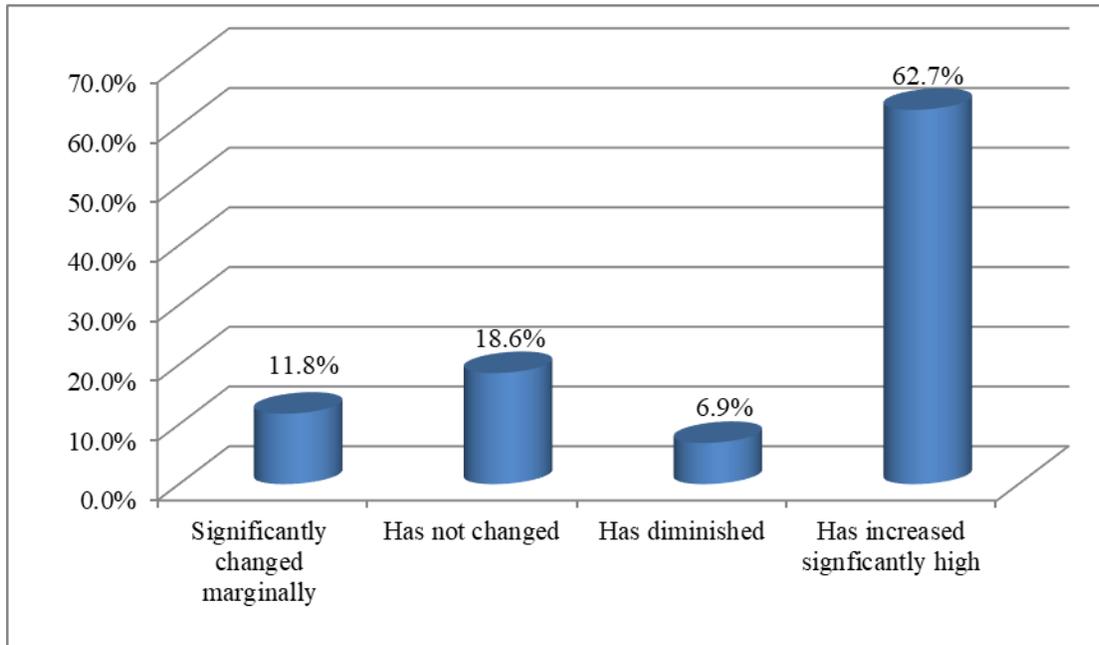


Figure 2 Comparisons of Social Media Use Before and After Covid-19 pandemic

Results in Figure 2 show that majority 192 (62.7%) of respondents agreed that as a result of Covid-19, the usage of social media as platform for youth ministry increased significantly, 36 (11.8%) indicated that it had increased marginally, 57 (11.8%) believed that the usage had not changed and only 21 (6.9%) said that it had diminished. This means that the partial lockdown and closure of face-to-face fellowship made majority of youth departmental pastors and leaders to migrate their services from physical form to digital form hence utilising the available social media platforms. The reasons that they gave for their answers are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Reasons for Change of Social Media Use before and After Covid-19

Reasons	Frequency	Percent
Corona resulted to halting of physical services for corporate worship	126	41.2
Many now consume content since the information is accessible	66	21.6
Has not changed, it has remained the way it was because the level of commitment from Church leadership and members was low	48	15.7
Social media was not given priority before corona unlike now	18	5.9
Social media is becoming a basic need like other needs	9	2.9
Those who are at home or abroad can follow the ministry through social media	9	2.9
Non response	30	9.8
Total	306	100.0

Source: Field Data 2023

Results in Table 1 show that most 126 (41.2%) of youth leaders mentioned that they resorted to social media application use because the pandemic resulted to halting of physical services for

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corporate worship. Another (21.6%) mentioned that many youth now consume content online since the information is available and accessible from their digital gadgets. However, 48 (15.7%) felt that the situation has not changed because the level of commitment to support social media use in youth ministry by Church leadership and parents was low in their Churches. Moreover, others indicated that social media was not given priority before Covid-19 pandemic struck unlike now. The others indicated that social media has become a basic need like other needs and therefore their Churches have to use the platforms. Further, 9 (2.9%) said that they resorted to social media use to reach their youth who were studying in faraway Colleges and Universities in addition to those who were working away from their Churches.

Through interview, the researcher also requested Youth Pastors to describe their usage of social media before and after Covid-19 pandemic. Most of them indicated that they had increased their focus on virtual services through use of various social media platforms to broadcast their messages to the youth. One Youth Pastor No. 20 remarked that:

There is significant increase of social media after Covid-19 than before because it discourages large gatherings. Therefore, there is a big difference.

This feedback was supported by a number of Youth Pastors who indicated to have seen an upsurge in social media use by their youth leaders in Protestant Churches in Kesses Sub County. To others, social media had made the work of the youth ministry to be easier as noted by Youth Pastor No. 50 who said:

Yes, there is difference since it has made some youth ministry programmes to be easier than before.

Others Youth Pastors also said that it has now become mandatory for their youth ministry to co-opt social media platforms after Covid-19 pandemic. This means that even if there are limited and controlled physical services, a resolution was made that the content of the proceedings is broadcasted, streamed or uploaded on social media app platforms. Another pastor No. 5 also supported the issue that increased social media use has been prevalent in their youth ministry Churches:

Yes, increased, there has been a difference since more of information has been addressed using social media.

This means that the content of the message has increased when social media is used unlike the previous period of physical fellowships. This has made sure that ministerial information is accessible to reach many youth at the same time. However, some pastors disagreed that there has been an increase with some maintaining that they have not changed while others are totally against the social media use. For instance, pastor No. 66 indicated that: *No, there is no change.*

According to the pastor, they have not experienced significant change because the social media app they were using (WhatsApp) is what they continued to use even after physical fellowship services were halted in late March 2020. This argument was supported by Youth Pastor No. 50 who also said that there is no difference at all since adoption and usage of social

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media was at optimal level in their youth department ministry even before Covid-19 pandemic struck. Moreover, Youth Pastor No. 10 also said that the social media usage in youth ministry work has not changed and it was only used as described below:

This social media is used to give awareness on signs and measures to take protect themselves.

According to the pastor, messages on Covid-19 prevention and management are the ones that are communicated via social media platforms to their youth in Church. Another pastor also communicated the negativity that surrounds social media use by youth. Youth Pastor No. 19 said:

We at our Church, we are yet to buy the idea of use of social media in our meetings and preaching, you know encouraging the youth to use social media will lead them in watching un holy videos and even engaging in programmes which are unbiblical, in fact it is harder to develop a deeper relationship with most youth today even though it is much easier to contact and connect with them via these platforms.

This means that some Churches are still opposed to the use of social media for fear that they may watch, hear or see things that are unbiblical.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It was found out that the social media platforms were lowly used in youth ministry work in the study area. The researcher established that social media usage peaked among Churches when the Covid-19 pandemic struck and slowed down when measures of relaxation were announced on phased reopening of places of worship. Nevertheless, significant strides had been made by the Churches under investigation to maximise the social media as a tool of evangelism work in these dynamic times of technological revolution. The first thing that the churches should do is to make sure there is internet connectivity in their Churches. The internet infrastructure should be the one that has higher bandwidth and always reliable. In addition, the Churches should consider purchasing of the right facilities (computers, network adapters, standby generators, lighting system, sound mixers among others) would also beneficial not only to youth ministry but Church as a whole in using the social media platforms to evangelism.

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