

Impact of social media on youth ministry in selected mainstream churches in Vihiga County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream churches across the globe have deployed technology in some specific areas, like communication, record-keeping, and information sharing. However, youth play an integral role in ensuring that the technology adopted works as needed. The main aim of this study was to examine the impact of social media on youth ministry in selected mainstream churches in Vihiga County. The study was anchored in secularisation theory, which depicts the decline of traditional religious practices due to modernisation, as exemplified by technology. The study deployed a descriptive survey research design. The study targeted youth, ordinary elderly members, clergy, and departmental leaders from selected mainstream churches in Vihiga County, totalling about 4,503 congregants. The study sample comprised 404 respondents from selected mainstream churches. Out of this, 140 youth and 130 elderly members were randomly sampled, while 24 clerics and 90 departmental leaders were purposively sampled. Data was collected through semi-structured questionnaires, focus group discussions, interviews, and observation. Data was analysed using descriptive data analysis techniques and presented in narratives and tables. Findings indicate that social media can impact youth ministry by enhancing evangelisation, prayers, Bible study, and communication. Furthermore, the study established that technology in mainstream churches has not been fully embraced due to tension between the leadership, the elderly, and the youth. The study concluded that social media has the potential to advance youth ministry, but the tension experienced acts as a drawback, calling upon key players to re-evaluate the need for social media adoption. The study thus recommended that church leaders should change their perception and stop perceiving the negative side of technology on the youth and focus on its positive side as well in order to help the youth ministry build on its strengths and grow.

Keywords: Social Media, Technology, Vihiga County, YouTube, Youth Ministry

I. INTRODUCTION

Youth are an integral part of the church and have been referred to as the cream of the Church. As an institution, the Church is meant to mentor youth who ought to assume overall leadership responsibilities. This implies that leaders take over responsibilities as others hand them over, creating a chain of leadership transitions (Dunaetz, 2023). However, this transition is affected by the fact that mentorship today is not working as expected due to differences in preferences between youth and their mentors, leading youth to leave the Church. Technological advancements and their implication for the stability of the Church cannot be ignored during this digital era (Ojo et al., 2024). Mainstream Churches across the globe have deployed technology in some specific areas like communication, record keeping and information sharing. Ultimately, the three issues mentioned above seem very important to techno-optimists in the Church. However, the youth desire an environment that is vibrant and interactive, a fact that has led to mixed reactions from major religious players. The spectrum of argument on the subject matter would be classified into three perspectives: good, neutral and bad, depending on various factors. Based on this, the first factor that informs the aspect of mixed reaction is the question, “What is the effect of technology on the morality of the congregant? The second factor is the question, “What is the purpose of technology to be adopted? Is it for entertainment, for spiritual or physical growth of the church? The third factor is the question, “What is the overall goal to be achieved?” amongst others (Kallenberg, 2011).

Youth ministry in mainstream churches has not been so effective due to traditional methods of conducting activities. Most of the leadership of mainstream churches has suppressed the youth to the clock of the past, which the latter describe as “outdated and boring.” Part of the problem in mainstream churches has been the aspect of rigidity of the elderly members and the leadership’s failure to listen to their demands and respond to their desires. The connection between the youth and the elderly seems to be fading much faster. In response to this, all avenues that could re-establish the connection should be explored to ensure the stability of the Church. Given the interaction between youth and technology, they desire that it be incorporated into most church activities (Kahenya, 2010).

Magezi (2015) established that most African pastors in new evangelical churches have employed technology more than those in mainstream churches. He opines that most Churches being established today have an entrepreneurial mindset, a fact that leads them to do anything to attract more people. Furthermore, he opines that mainstream Churches that have embraced technology have, to a great extent, experienced positive outcomes in youth ministry. He further asserts that youth ministry is not yet satisfied with the level of technology used. Existing evidence on the use of technology in Vihiga County suggests that various sectors have set an example for other counties in the adoption and utilization of technology. In particular, operations in aspects like governance, agriculture, healthcare and education have been boosted by technology to a greater extent. The adoption of technology in these areas has enhanced service delivery, citizen engagement and transparency within operations. Overall, the county government of Vihiga has led by example in this area, earning it praises in equal measure. The praise has served as a catalyst for other institutions to emulate it (Lusigi, 2018; Opolu & Muchai, 2021). However, it is worth noting that the uptake of technology by churches in Vihiga County has not been explored by researchers.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

A study by Kahenya (2010) found that mainstream churches are losing youth to Pentecostal charismatic churches because their environments are not youth-friendly. Therefore, this puts youth ministry in limbo and poses a great threat to its diminishing. The question is whether youth ministry in mainstream churches will continue to exist, since the transition is in jeopardy. There should be reasons why youth ministry is under threat of diminishing in mainstream churches, as evidenced by the tension between scientific advancements and religion. Currently, most youth are studying in an environment where scientific innovation is thriving. This may cause a change in their conception, perception and interpretation of issues. As a result of technological advancements, the traditional way of doing things in mainstream churches seems to be failing to meet the needs of youth. Benefiting from this are the Pentecostal charismatic churches, which have created a technologically rich environment that gives youth a reason to belong. Differences in ideologies, orthodoxy and beliefs have caused tension between the traditionalists and the youth, a fact that calls for mediation. This study, therefore, aims to examine the impact of social media on youth ministry in selected mainstream Churches in Vihiga County, Kenya. The resulting question from a neutral point, therefore, is, “If fully adopted, what would be the influence of technology on youth ministry in mainstream churches?”

1.2 Research Objective

Examine the impact of social media on youth ministry in selected mainstream churches in Vihiga County.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Secularization Theory

The study was guided by secularization theory by social scientists Karl Marx (1818–1883), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Max Weber (1864–1920), and Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), who argued that the modernization of society would include a decline in levels of religiosity. As a theory, secularization holds that society retreats from religious traditions and practices as it becomes increasingly modern. Through developments that are scientific and intellectually oriented, the ideological background of spiritual, supernatural, paranormal, and superstitious beliefs that religion heavily leans on is legitimately undermined. Increased human knowledge leads to the invention of different things that transform human life into a shell of new thought and drag them away from religious tenets.

Amongst key aspects of change are scientific innovations, particularly technological advancements. Pro-secularization theory scholars argue that secularization is real in the current society since there is a decline in involvement in institutionalized religion, prestigious religious institutions and symbols are fading away, sacred ideas are being lost daily and most people are more concerned with worldly things than spiritual ones. These scholars attribute it to technological advancements that have fostered changes affecting religion (Momen, 1999). This theory is relevant to this study in that it touches on modernization driven by technological advancements, which is part of the church. However, the church is divided on how to go about the aspect of technology just for its benefit and it disapproves of secularization as a concept that technology seems to be advocating for to some extent. Therefore, the theory helps to understand the influence of social media, multimedia gadgets and religious-based applications as the variables informing the second objective.

2.2 Empirical Review

Social media is a tool that can impact the growth of youth ministry and change its face and complexity totally (Ononogbu & Chiroma, 2018). Content that can be shared through social media cannot be ignored and churches that are looking forward to a healthy and wealthy ministry ought to embrace the positive attitude of social media despite the fact that it has negative aspects. Most studies in the area of social media and youth tend to highlight the power of social

media on youth and its effects on both spiritual and physical aspects of life. However, they also warn about the diverse effects of the same if used uncontrollably (Piteo & Ward, 2020).

Bwalya (2021) study established that social media was actively consumed by respondents mostly for communication with close allies. Among the most commonly used social media platforms identified by the respondents were WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. Furthermore, findings indicate that the platforms were used for evangelization purposes among the peers, as they could share texts, scriptures and images that resonate with youth activities. Duthel (2023) conducted a study on “Evangelization of Young People in the Age of Social Media.” The study established that social media has grown to every border of the world, connecting the four corners of the globe. At the core of its use are the youth, who deploy social media for various purposes, which imply both opportunities and challenges. The study established that social media has proven beyond a reasonable doubt that it is an ideal tool for evangelism as it can penetrate any environment. The study further argues that only proper strategies lack from the side of the church to propel social media towards reaching every individual, as it has been used politically. Therefore, the study concludes that the church should be encouraged to use social media to reach the youth, who are the majority consumers, and that leaders are tasked with ensuring this is realized.

An article posted by AgFinancial (2020) on social media and the church suggested that social media has been at the forefront of informing the youth about the church's event calendar. However, it further argues that achieving the desired forms of communication is only possible if church leaders are technologically informed and literate. Additionally, the article indicates that the youth feel they are in a better place when they interact with their ministers online and mostly through social media. Ononogbu and Chiroma (2018) argue that social media platforms were on the rise and consumption was aligned with the younger generation rather than the elderly. The study established that social media is a tool that carries both the potential to impact youth ministry and harmfully impact it. Furthermore, the findings indicate that Nigerian churches have not devised effective strategies to harness the unlimited potential of social media for youth ministry purposes. Kelly et al. (2020) argue that social media, to some extent, has been deemed to have psychological effects on users, especially those in the youthful stage. Orben (2020) carried out a study on teenagers, screens and social media: a narrative review and key studies. The study found that youth social media use has, to some extent, affected their psychological well-being. A study almost similar to this was conducted by Keles et al. (2020), focusing on the influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents. Piteo and Ward (2020) discussed the effects of social networking sites on adolescents' psychological issues.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a descriptive survey design, a scientific method that involves observing and describing the behaviour of a subject without influencing it in any way. This research design suits the kind of study in context because it is interpretive, since it is concerned with interpreting the social world, where Christianity falls, is understood, and experienced.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Vihiga County in the Western Region of Kenya. Vihiga County is among the four Counties within the Western region of Kenya and has four sub-counties: Hamisi, Emuhaya, Vihiga, Luanda and Sabatia sub-counties. Vihiga County is known for its unique blend of churches, as it is the headquarters of various African-initiated churches. However, the area is also dominated by Pentecostal charismatic churches and Mainstream churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, Friends Church, and Anglican Church, which the current study focused on.

3.3 Target Population

The study targeted youth, ordinary elderly members, clergy, and Departmental leaders from selected mainstream churches in Vihiga County, totaling about 4,503 congregants. The study targeted youth, as they are the primary consumers and custodians of technological innovations for personal and youth ministry purposes, compared with other congregant groups, while clergy, departmental leaders, and elderly members were targeted because they are the decision makers on various issues in selected churches.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

The study sample comprised 404 respondents, broken down as indicated in Table 1 below

Table 1
Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

Respondents	Target	Sample	Sampling Technique
Youths	2008	140	Random
Elderly Members	1307	130	Random
Clergy	309	24	Purposive
Departmental Leaders	906	90	Purposive
Total	4503	404	

3.5 Data Collection Tools and Procedure

Semi-structured questionnaires were used to collect data from the clergy and the youth. Interviews were used to collect data from ordinary elderly members, as most of them could not interact well with the questionnaires due to literacy level, challenges with reading, and understanding of the contextual issues. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were deployed to collect data from departmental leaders. Finally, the researcher used an observation checklist to collect data pertaining to the availability of various technologies and the way youths participated in church activities and their own activities. The researcher made prior visits to selected churches to familiarize and seek permission for data collection after the university and other relevant institutions had given authorization letters.

3.6 Data analysis and Presentation

The researcher employed a descriptive data analysis technique. Qualitative data captured from the review of literature from secondary sources, interview schedules, and FDGs were analyzed thematically, whereby common themes were used in sorting them out, interpreting, and then documenting in the report. Qualitative data was collected by use of questionnaires, which involved both closed-ended and Likert scale questions. The data from questionnaires was then cross-checked for missing items, which led to making corrections. The analyzed data was presented in the form of tables, charts and graphs for the purposes of interpretation and report writing.

3.7 Ethical Consideration

In conducting this research, several ethical issues were taken into consideration: the respondents were assured beyond doubt that the data that would be collected would be confidential and the identity of the respondents would be concealed. The researcher also sought permission from the relevant authorities (MMUST, NACOSTI, and the church leadership before engaging the respondents in this research. Respondents were requested not to put any identifier on the questionnaires and interview schedules. Questionnaires were filled out individually. The findings of the study were derived only from the data collected. Respondents were allowed freedom of expression, which enabled them to participate in the study voluntarily.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Understanding Youth Ministry

Youth ministry is a collection of activities in a church that involve persons between the ages of 15 and 35. The genesis of youth ministry is anchored in biblical history. Throughout the Bible, we see the youth being ordained by God to do different ministry work. At the end of their ministries, they are seen to accomplish a lot of tasks that were mandated to them. The best example is that of Prophet Jeremiah, whom God called at a young age (Jeremiah 1). On trying to give excuses, God indicated why he called him and assured him that his ministry would be guided by none other than Himself. It is worth noting that all the biblical characters who entered ministry while they were still youths were successful because they were mentored by faithful men or God Himself.

Another example is the case of Apostle Paul, who, in his years of ministry, is seen mentoring the youth to take over the mantle of leadership and serving God. In his teachings to Timothy, Paul is seen instructing him on how to become an effective spiritual leader who is seasoned and at a point that he also instructs him to rightly divide the word of truth (1st Timothy 1). This is an implication that the ministry during the apostolic era was anchored on training the youth in the truth of the word of God, the real theology (Griffiths, 2013). Biblical times, however, differ from modern times; therefore, the perspective of youth on issues related to Christianity has shifted toward materialistic things like technological gadgets. This, therefore, informs the need to study the link between the history of former and latter youth, hence the current study (Damang, 2022).

According to Dave Wright (2012), by the early 1970s, churches in Europe began to realize the need for specialized ministries for teenagers and began hiring youth pastors. Some of these were former staff members from Young Life (YL) and Youth for Christ (YFC). For growth and expansion, youth ministries adopted a strategy similar to that of non-church youth movements to reach more youth and preach to them. During the 1970s, youth pastors seeking to reach large numbers of youth for the gospel began to employ a more attractive model. Gatherings with food and live

music could draw enormous crowds. Churches found that large, vibrant youth groups drew more families to the church, and, therefore, encouraged more attraction-oriented programs.

By the 1980s, the emergence of MTV and a media-driven generation meant that youth ministry became more entertainment-driven than ever. Youth pastors felt the need to feature live bands, video production, and elaborate sound and lighting to reach the audience. No longer could a pile of burgers or pizzas draw a crowd. By the end of the decade, the youth group meeting was being creatively inspired by MTV and Nickelodeon game shows. The message had been simplified and shortened to fit the entertainment-saturated youth culture. By the start of the 21st century, it was discovered that many youths were no longer interested in the shows put on or in the oversimplified messages. Christianity was no different from the world around them. Some youth ministries intensified their effort by combining massive hype with strong messages that inspired youth but did not translate to everyday life (Senter, 2010).

4.2 The Impact of Social Media on Youth Ministry

4.2.1 Social Media Usability Experience by Youth in Selected Mainstream Churches in Vihiga County

The current study sought to find out the youth's experience with the use of social media. The youth gave varied responses. For instance, 34% (48) of the youth expressed enthusiasm for using social media, especially newcomers to these platforms. They expressed how social media platforms are good for interacting with people and making new friends. Most of those in this cadre were school-going youth who had little time on either computers or phones. According to them, social media is one of the means that helps them relax their minds after having faced the tough academic period at school. They further credited Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube as their favorite social media platforms that enable them to share and interact with people and content within their caliber. Speaking about the experience of Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, one of the youths shared his experience with social media, saying:

“My experience with social media is quite amazing. In the first place, I have learned that the world is so small and that I can get to know anything I want at any time, given that Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube are at the forefront in promoting content. However, I am certain that I will be getting to beef up my experience as I continue to interact with the platforms, especially when I am out of school and have control of time and personal resources.” (Youth 14, Personal Communication, August 4, 2021).

The experience of the above youth implies that technology is ever-evolving. Therefore, social media users continue experiencing new ventures that require them to update themselves on various aspects. As days go by, innovations are happening within the social media space, which advance user experiences and enhance interactivity within the social niche. Another group among the respondents included individuals who have interacted with social media platforms and find them versatile in equipping them as they learn and share their experiences in different areas of life. This category had the majority of the respondents, 52% (73), who indicated that social media is their lifestyle. This category contained independent respondents who owned their own gadgets like smartphones, tablets, laptops and other electronic devices that make it possible to interact through social media platforms. Furthermore, 15% (21) of the youth in this category indicated that they run their own YouTube channels to promote their content; most of them fall into the music and arts category. Just like those in the first category, the respondents in this second category pointed towards Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube as the main platforms that are easy to use and most popular among the youth. Speaking about the same, one of the youths from one of the Catholic Churches said;

“As a thespian, I have a different experience, just beyond the consumption of content on social media platforms. In my case, after discovering that I can have my own channel on YouTube and create a Facebook page for my work, I have not only promoted my content but also gotten paid through the content I post. I first shared my dream of doing the same with my priest, and he assured me that as a catholic priest, he would like to see the youth grow into a global brand, which I have achieved.” (Youth 102, Personal Communication, August 24, 2021).

According to the above observation, social media gives an opportunity to the youth to further their careers outside the classroom walls, especially their talents. As reported by the respondent in the narration, the clergy have a major role in motivating the youth to beef up their social media experience for the better, given that it is on the rise. However, there was a unique category that expressed their views differently concerning their experience with social media platforms. A small number, 14% (20) of the total respondents within the youth category, expressed their dissatisfaction with social media platforms, pointing towards their negativities more than their positives. Some of the respondents pointed out that they had inactive Facebook accounts, which they seldom visited, while some indicated that they were not interested in having an account. Some of them pointed out that the lack of control over the content shared on the platform is a menace to the users. They further pointed towards the friends' requests and invites on WhatsApp as a bother in a manner that people keep adding others to groups without their permission. For instance, one of the respondents said:

“I rarely do my stuff on social media, a fact that renders my experience below par. In the year 2016, I was added to a WhatsApp group that shared obscene content. One day, my girlfriend bumped into funny clips and this ended up costing our relationship. By then, we were looking forward to getting married in the year

that followed. This, with additional cases of what I have encountered on social media, makes me freeze totally from using the platforms. Though the take is personal, I have no problem with those using social media platforms for various purposes, whether physical, psychological and spiritual growth.” (Youth 25, Personal Communication, August 17, 2021).

A different perspective is given by the respondent in context, according to the experience. The respondent can, therefore, be termed a conservative individual who does not like to compromise his or her own integrity. However, user experience on social media is a matter of one’s choice, knowing what to go for and what to avoid. Such cases of sharing content that is not good for consumption are a common issue on social media, with some content shared intentionally and some shared accidentally.

4.3 Frequency of Social Media Usage in Selected Mainstream Churches in Vihiga County

The youth were asked to rate the frequency of usage of some commonly used social media platforms for youth ministry activities on a five-point Likert scale where 1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3=Occasionally, 4=Often and 5=Always (N = 140). Inquisition on this aspect was important as it formed the basis for the study to bring up an understanding of the frequency of usage of social media by the youth before delving into its applicability to youth ministry. Table 2 below presents the findings on the said question.

Table 2

Frequency of Usage of Some Commonly Used Social Media Platforms

Platform	1	2	3	4	5
Facebook	15 (10.6%)	25 (18%)	35 (25%)	50 (35.8%)	15(10.6%)
WhatsApp	15 (10.6%)	20 (14.2%)	42 (29.8%)	20 (14.2%)	43 (30.5%)
Instagram	117 (83%)	3 (2.1%)	2 (1.4%)	10 (7.1%)	8 (5.9%)
Flickr	139 (99%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
YouTube	0 (0%)	14 (10%)	10 (7%)	46 (33%)	70 (50%)
Snapchat	140 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Tik Tok	133 (95%)	5 (3.6%)	1 (0.7%)	1 (0.7%)	0 (0%)
Twitter	114 (81%)	3 (2.1%)	3 (2.1%)	16 (12 %)	4 (3.8%)

Results from Table 2 above indicate that most youth are well-familiarized with the use of Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube social media platforms. Topping the list is the use of YouTube, where at least everyone among the respondents indicated that they have used it, though to a varying degree. Data from Table 2 indicate that 12(10%) rarely, 10 (7%) occasionally, 46(33%) often and 70 (50%) always used YouTube. This may be attributed to the fact that YouTube posts a lot of varied content in video format, which leaves the youth with the opportunity to be entertained and learn. Given the fact that YouTube can help people replace in-person activities with videos, its popularity has risen with time. Statistics show that YouTube has thrived over time and it has not only attracted the youth but also the adults and the elderly. According to Stahl and Literat (2023), YouTube has over 2 billion active accounts logged in every month, but most interesting is that most YouTube content consumers consume the content without necessarily having an account, a fact that makes YouTube have billions of users. An interesting fact from the statistics from the study is that, on average, viewers who are 18 years and above spend about 41.9 minutes watching YouTube content daily, with 40% happening on mobile phones and 60% on other electronic devices. YouTube would, therefore, make it easy for youth to access Christian-related videos and hymns at any time, thereby enhancing their spirituality.

Facebook is another social media platform that has a massive following. Unlike YouTube, it can connect people who can share and interact. Data from Table 2 indicate that 15 (10.6%) never, 25(18%) rarely, 35 (25%) occasionally, 50(35.8%) often and 15 (1.6%) always used Facebook. Similarly, the statistics on WhatsApp are almost similar to those of Facebook, where 15 (10.6%) never, 20(14.2%) rarely, 42 (29.8%) occasionally, 20(14.2%) often and 43 (30.5%). However, the findings of the study indicated that other social media platforms like TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram had little to do with the youth, with less than 10% (14) of the youth on average using them. These findings are directly opposite to the case in countries like the U.S.A., where YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram are leading social media platforms for the youth (Stahl & Literat, 2023).

4.4 Areas of Social Media Application by Youth

The study also sought to understand how the youth applied social media platforms. Responding to this 65% (91) of the youth indicated that they use social media platforms for entertainment, learning, content promotion and connecting with their friends. Given that the youth had indicated in the previous question on the frequency of usage of YouTube, WhatsApp and Facebook, most of the comments on the applicability were in line with the three platforms. In the case of YouTube, 76% (106) of the respondents indicated that they use it for entertainment and passing time, while 17% (23) indicated that their primary use of YouTube is for learning purposes. Furthermore, 15% (21) of the respondents indicated

that apart from using social media platforms for entertainment and learning purposes, they use YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp for content promotion, especially for those doing arts and those in business. Only 10% (14) of the youth indicated that they use social media platforms for religious-based purposes, specifically listening to Christian music, preaching, sermon preparation and inspirational snippets sharing.

The clerics were asked to rate the frequency of usage of some commonly used social media platforms for youth ministry activities on a five-point Likert Scale, where 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Often, and 5 = Always. Understanding the clergy's frequency of usage formed a basis for developing a comprehensive ground to relate to findings later in the subsections that follow within the context. Table 3 below presents the findings on the said question.

Table 3

The Frequency of Usage of Some Commonly Used Social Media Platforms by the Clergy

Platform	1	2	3	4	5	N
Facebook	7	3	4	3	7	24
WhatsApp	3	3	3	8	7	24
Instagram	24	0	0	0	0	24
Flickr	24	0	0	0	0	24
YouTube	3	4	3	8	6	24
Snapchat	24	0	0	0	0	24
Tik Tok	24	0	0	0	0	24
Twitter	18	4	1	1	0	24

The results in the table 3 above portray the interaction of the clergy with various social media platforms. The findings indicate that the clergy interacted with Facebook, WhatsApp and Youtube more than the other platforms. For instance, findings show that 7 (29%) never, 3(13%) rarely, 4(17%) occasionally, 3(13%) often and 7(29%) always use Facebook. Cumulatively, it is evident that 17(71%) of the clergy interact with Facebook. In the same line, findings show that 3 (13%) never, 3(13%) rarely, 3(13%) occasionally, 8(33%) often and 7(29%) always use WhatsApp, leading to a cumulative sum of 21 (88%) WhatsApp interaction. Additionally, findings show that 3 (13%) never, 4(17%) rarely, 3(13%) occasionally, 8(33%) often and 6(25%) always use YouTube, leading to a cumulative sum of 21 (88%) YouTube interaction. However, the data from Table 3 show that Instagram and Flickr are not used by the clergy as 24(100%) of the respondents indicated so. This distribution of usage imply that the clergy does not interact with social media platforms so much as the youth do, justifying why there is conflict on the application for youth ministry. This finding therefore aligns to Kahenya's (2010) study, which argued that the exodus of youth from mainstream churches may be pegged on the role played by the clergy's reluctance on the use of technology, as they are not the major consumers.

4.5 Social Media Applicability in Youth Ministry in Selected Mainstream Churches in Vihiga County

Findings show that 40% (56) of the youth indicated that YouTube offers a platform that helps them interact with content that is posted by fellow youth of the same faith across the globe. In this regard, they opined that such content helps them to learn from each other on various aspects of youth ministry, including music, evangelism and other related activities. Furthermore, 60% (84) of the youth indicated that they find YouTube the best place to post recorded sermons, recorded worship sessions and discussion forums that are aligned with youth ministry. In addition, 95% (133) of the respondents indicated that YouTube is ideal for the youth ministry to learn, interact and grow in music ministry because various choirs and artists upload musical content there.

A study conducted by Onogbu and Chiroma (2018) established that YouTube serves as a vigorous catalyst for bolstering youth ministry within churches, as it is a capacious platform for innovative outreach. They argue that in this digital era, YouTube has risen to offer a plethora of engaging content tailor-made specifically for the youth. Mbithi *et al.* (2023) support this position, adding that sermons, worship sessions, and discussions that resonate with the interests and challenges faced by young individuals are found on such platforms as YouTube. Such content serves not only spiritual-oriented purposes but also as a means of cultural expression, intertwining faith with modern issues affecting society. Moreover, Campbell (2023) opines that the interactive features of YouTube enable real-time engagement, fostering a sense of community among the youth and encouraging dialogue on matters crucial to their faith endeavours. The fact that platforms like YouTube transcend physical boundaries implies that youth ministries can be independent yet dependent on each other across the nation and globe in extension.

One popular social media platform is Facebook, which has emerged as a potent tool for sharing information in various formats. Responding to this, 75% (105) of the youth indicated that through dedicated church pages and groups, Facebook creates a rich environment with an array of content that resonates deeply with most of the interests of the youth. They cited features like live-streaming of services and events. In addition, 63% (88) of the respondents indicated that Facebook bridges the physical boundary or gap through virtual sanctuary features where the youth can actively

participate in religious activities, seek guidance, and engage in meaningful conversations. Speaking about Facebook, one of the youths opined:

“The power of groups on social media is a very vital and critical issue that has fostered prayer life. I am a member of three Facebook prayer groups. Amongst the three groups, one shares prayer points daily and another schedules two days of fasting and prayers every month. I, however, have a group that holds prayer sessions every day, and individuals send their prayer requests daily. We meet in the evening online from 9:30 to 10 pm, where one individual summarizes the prayer items.”

(Youth 132, Personal Communication, August 26, 2021).

WhatsApp was deemed to be the most used social media platform in matters concerning youth ministry. Findings from the study showed that 90% (126) of the respondents indicated that they had WhatsApp installed on their phones and used it for various purposes, including church activities. For instance, 65% (91) of the respondents indicated they had WhatsApp specifically for youth ministry, where communication involved sharing various content related to youth ministry activities. Furthermore, 61% (86) of the respondents lauded the platform’s ability to enable the sharing of multimedia files, such as short video clips, audio, and photos, that convey information related to youth ministry.

A study by Kuhlin (2022) reveals that WhatsApp has proved to be an ideal tool in churches, especially among the generation that understands digital matters well. The study posits that, with the ability to create groups, WhatsApp has enabled real-time sharing of information, with the youth appreciating it for its ability to integrate various file formats and cost-saving communication. Masoga (2020) notes that during the COVID-19 period, WhatsApp gained prominence as churches were forced to turn to the platform for various activities, including the sharing of information. In yet another study, Ndereba (2022) titled “A Holistic Approach to Youth Ministry Models in Africa: A Practical Theology for Faith Formation” stresses the importance of social media, specifically WhatsApp. She notes that even mainstream churches have turned to WhatsApp and Facebook, especially the youth ministers, to teach and exhort the body of Christ on various topical issues of faith.

With its innovative and engaging format, TikTok has become a powerful tool for amplifying youth ministry within mainstream churches in Kenya. Churches use TikTok's short-form videos to deliver impactful messages, share uplifting stories, and present biblical teachings in a format that resonates with youth. Through catchy challenges, relatable skits, and thought-provoking content, churches capture the attention of a younger audience, making faith more accessible and relevant to their daily lives. TikTok's algorithm-driven discovery feed also enables churches to reach a broader population, allowing their content to be seen by users beyond their immediate followers. By leveraging the platform's trends and user-friendly interface, mainstream churches in Kenya effectively bridge the gap between traditional teachings and contemporary culture, fostering a vibrant online community centred on faith and shared values.

4.6 Perception of the Clergy and Departmental Leaders on the Use of Social Media for Youth Ministry in Selected Mainstream Churches in Vihiga County

The study set forth to examine the perception of the leaders concerning the demands of the youth in relation to using social media in the church for the purposes of the growth of youth ministry. The position of the clerics was sought in that they were asked to express their opinion on the use of social media. Responding to the question, 64% (19) of the respondents expressed their satisfaction that the youth would actually benefit greatly from the use of social media platforms, but the problem lay with the youth themselves. The first issue that was mentioned by 25% (8) of the respondents was the fact that youth are in an explorative stage where they use every opportunity they have to learn and discover new ventures about themselves, a fact that drives them in a more negative direction.

Therefore, with social media at their disposal, most of the youth would prefer to go for the content that excites them. Furthermore, 38% (11) of the clergy indicated that since some of the youths are school-going, they take a long time without interacting with their peers and friends; allowing them to be on social media, thus encouraging them to deviate more to the side of their friends than what the church would encourage. For instance, one of the pastors from the Quaker approached the researcher and shared this:

“I cannot allow the youth, especially those who are still going to school, to be on social media. I may seem unrealistic with this decision, but believe me or not, it works for good. In the wake of COVID-19, the students were released from school to come back home. My daughter, a form three student, I never knew what she does behind the scenes, used to take her mother’s phone and spend a good time with it, saying that she was using it for studying purposes. This was one of the motivating factors, given that the atmosphere was generally anti-academic. Surprisingly, I happened to look at what she used to do with the phone and realized that she used to traverse various social media platforms searching for friends and sharing unworthy content. She took advantage of the fact that her mother would not understand some of the things she used to share, given that her mother was not very familiar with her phone. What surprised me was that she was chatting with fellow girls and exchanging love messages and content; that is when I discovered that she had been introduced to lesbianism. I, therefore, concluded that our children need protection by denying them access to phones and other electronic devices.”

(Cleric 21, Personal Communication, July 22, 2021).

Parents who double as leaders in various religious positions have the challenge of ensuring that the morality of their children is not compromised, but rather comes out as an example to the rest of the children. It, therefore, calls for such a person, a leader of the church and a parent, to make a sound resolution. Such a case represents several unshared incidents that parents, guardians, and clerics have gone through to have a mindset that social media platforms may wreak havoc on the youth. Therefore, such a contrary opinion concerning social media shuts out the positive side that may catalyze the growth of youth ministry. This is a direct reflection of Kallenberg's (2011) findings that presents the concept of "God and Gadgets" and a justification for technological adoption rigidity and fears of modernization by Marx, Weber and Durkheim.

Furthermore, 35% (11) of the clerics opined that social media is an ideal tool for the purposes of interacting and promoting the growth of youth ministry. Although they acknowledged that social media has many negative effects on the younger generation, their opinion was that one way to divert youth from misusing social media is to show them that it can be used for other purposes that benefit them.

4.7 Social Media and Youth Ministry in Selected Mainstream Churches in Vihiga County

The researcher aimed to find out how the youth want social media platforms to be used for the purposes of promoting the growth of youth ministry. In this context, the youth expressed various suggestions on the way they felt the church should use the various social media platforms for enhancing youth ministry, as explained below;

4.7.1 Social Media and Evangelism

One of the greatest milestones that religion would have achieved in the technological-driven era is the expansion of the tools used in evangelism. Social media and evangelism have gained prominence in contemporary Christianity. This is the use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and other popular platforms that are aligned with social media to spread the gospel. The main aim in this context is to create content that hits the three pillars of evangelism: reaching people, connecting with the people, and engaging with the people for the purpose of winning souls. These findings align with Duthel's (2023) findings, which established that social media is a vital tool for evangelism, as it transcends physical boundaries.

4.7.2 Social Media and Prayer Ministry

Prayer is vital in daily life, as it serves as a channel for communication between humankind and God. Though it is not easy to pray through social media, studies have proved that small prayer groups have been successful in facilitating interaction opportunities as the prayers go on. The study sought to establish social media integration to help the youth grow their prayer life as an element of youth ministry. With specific reference to the youth, various responses were given. For instance, one said

"The power of groups on social media is a very vital and critical issue that has fostered prayer life. I am a member of three Facebook prayer groups. Amongst the three groups, one shares prayer points daily and another schedules two days of fasting and prayers every month. I, however, have a group that holds prayer sessions every day, and individuals send their prayer requests daily. We meet in the evening online from 9:30 to 10 pm, where one individual summarizes the prayer items." (Youth 132, Personal Communication, August 26, 2021).

Another respondent said:

"At a point in life, I was so tired of the state of a prayer-free life. One day, after a sermon on prayer, our priest encouraged us to find prayer partners either at home, church or even online. After this, I formed a WhatsApp group for purposes of prayer, which has 23 members now. All these are youth from our church and the experience has been awesome as we pray every day regardless of our geographic locations, as we share the experiences of prayers and various personal requests there. Since the group began, we have held 8 sessions of fasting, something that was hard as we had no time to do this in the church." (Youth 88, Personal Communication, August 21, 2021).

Additionally, another one opined:

"As a Catholic faithful, I joined a prayer group on Facebook that posts prayers that help me in confession, adoration, supplication, thanksgiving and intercession every time. Today, I am better positioned even in praying rosaries and different chaplets. I always ensure that I visit the page three times a day in the morning, afternoon and at night before I sleep so as to pray alongside others through the postings." (Youth 12, Personal Communication, August 5, 2021).

From the above responses, it is clear that Facebook and WhatsApp are the two leading social media platforms that promote prayer, as various groups can be formed or joined for purposes of prayer. In summary, from the responses from youth on their experiences, it is evident that social media promotes prayer as an element of youth ministry in two ways. The first way is the joint prayer efforts, where every individual participates in the praying process, as is the case

with the first two respondents. The second instance is demonstrated within the third response, in which an individual recites the prayers that are posted by others. Therefore, such groups can be termed as great contributors to youth ministry, as it is recognized. However, it is worth noting that not every youth would find such platforms very important, as indicated by 20% (28) of the respondents within the youth category.

Furthermore, the departmental leaders were asked to express their views on whether social media was ideal for promoting youth ministry through prayers. They, however, had varied views, with 40% (56) saying “No,” 34% (47) saying they did not know, and 26% (37) accepting the fact that social media had an impact on the growth of youth ministry in the church, as demonstrated in the figure below.

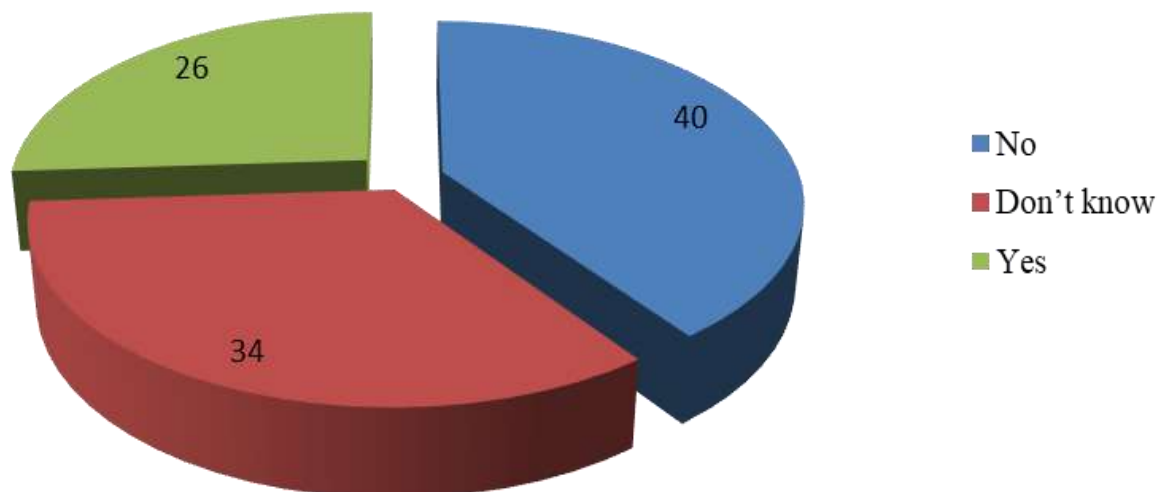


Figure 1
Social Media and Prayer Life of Youth

The respondents were asked to give reasons as to why social media promoted prayer life. The first category, which indicated yes, gave two reasons why they thought social media could impact the growth of prayer as an element of youth ministry. First, they opined that most people today are organized into groups that promote various agendas through online platforms. Citing prayers as one of the reasons for the formation of groups, they argued that lack of time to meet physically for prayers could be solved by forming social media groups, which two of the respondents proved that it worked since they were part of such.

Secondly, they opined that various guidelines posted on social media on various prayer items and encouragement on prayers could act as a motivation for the youth to engage in prayer life, even at an individual level, devoid of guidance from the church. The researcher further asked the respondents whether they had made this a possibility in their church. Only two youth leaders from two different churches indicated that they had rolled out this plan and had prayer groups running through social media. Others stated various reasons as to why this had not been possible, including difficulty in organizing the youth, as well as lack of focus from most of the youth.

The second category comprised those who did not know. The reason given by those who did not know the subject in context was the fact that they were not so much into social media and therefore, they were unaware of whether that was a possibility. From the researcher's observation of the researcher, most of these respondents were advanced in age and were out of the category of technology-bound individuals. In the real sense, they only understood their phones to be tools of communication, as one of them indicated:

“At my age (61 years old), I may not have a lot of social media knowledge, as I only use my phone on most occasions for calls and M-Pesa transactions. Anything beyond that is none of my business. Since my children have their own phones, I do not know how they use them, whether for prayers or not. I have seen that my children spend most of their time on phones” (Elderly Member 91, Personal Communication, June 14, 2021).

As the respondent above posits, there is a divide in the knowledge and application of social media, which is justifiable, as the age difference gives varied technological experience. Therefore, it is imperative to point out that social media is better suited for young people. Even though some elderly people registered an active presence on social media, most of their pages were handled by people with more versatile technological experience.

Those who declined that social media could not have an impact on the prayer life of youth pointed towards three main issues: First, they opined that most of the youth forfeit prayers even when in physical meetings, so it would be difficult for them to pray in organized groups far from each other and a prayer leader. Secondly, they addressed the issue of having youth experience using social media for other purposes, like entertainment, which supersedes their interest in

spiritually-related issues like prayer. Furthermore, they stated that social media is a more interruptive tool that cannot be used in aspects that need concentration, such as prayer. For instance, one respondent questioned the possibility of following up on prayers when one is online, and his or her boyfriend or girlfriend is texting?” Additionally, the respondents opined that prayers should be made privately, not publicly, as the bible is against such prayers. Some respondents felt that praying on social media is making everything public. Finally, one of the respondents gave a response that the researcher felt was important to share:

“Various denominations have various doctrines and prayer methods. In my personal opinion, exposing the youth to social media-mediated prayers is not the right way to keep them growing, given that most of the members from the groups formed will be from various denominations. In such a case, it is easy for youth to lose their religious identity and hence become faith wanderers. Such interactions with youth from various churches are what have made us, the mainstream churches, lose youth to the “modern” churches that have no specific faith-bearing identity. If we have to win the war on the youth, we must be very careful about the kind of interaction we encourage them to engage in. Interestingly, as the Catholic Church, we are losing ground on controlling the youth, as they feel that we do not pray as youth do in other modern churches.” (Elderly Member 106, Personal Communication, June 25, 2021).

Concerns of the above respondent shed more light on why encouraging youth to join prayer groups irrespective of the denominational affiliation of members is a danger and threat to the continuity of youth ministry, as opposed to the bigger picture of the growth of youth ministry. The respondent is inclined towards the collapse of youth ministry rather than strengthening it through prayer on social media, as “modern” churches are removing the youth from mainstream churches. In this case, therefore, a conflict of control arises, and controlling it has proved difficult as no one can dictate to the youth in mainstream churches how to use their social media platforms, especially in monitoring which prayer groups they join. This finding takes the direction of Masoga’s (2020) arguments that the awesome experience of the youth, relating to social media, is the leader’s fear of losing denominational traditions, hence, the reluctance in adoption.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Conclusion

Social media has the potential of enhancing youth ministry in matters of worship, evangelism, prayer, studying the word, communication and community service. In the case of mainstream churches, the use of social media in youth-based activities has worked to some extent but remains a challenge. As a result, there are cases of youth exodus to evangelical charismatic churches that meet their technological needs. The onset of COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for technological reformations to a certain extent, justifying the need for adoption. However, this study established that there is technological adoption rigidity among the elderly members and the leadership towards technology, fearing the erosion of religious norms and traditions. As a result, there is a conflict between the elderly and the youth, as the elderly and the leadership are the custodians of decisions that affect the youth, including decisions to allow and procure the necessary technologies that can satisfy the needs of the youth, without tampering with religious cores.

5.2 Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, this study recommends that church leaders should change their perception and stop perceiving the negative side of technology on the youth and focus on its positive side as well, in order to help the youth ministry build on its strengths and grow the youth ministry. In addition, the church should develop a policy document that gives guidelines and a framework on how, where, who, and when social media and other technologies can be used for youth ministry.

Declaration of Interest

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