HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

A historical survey of the African Neo-Pentecostals' response to digital transformation

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Research Project Registration:
Project Leader: Jerry Pillay
Project Number: 04653484

Description:
This research is part of the project, 'African Christianity and Development', directed by Prof. Jerry Pillay, Department of Historical and Systematic Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

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Dates:
Received: 23 Aug. 2022
Accepted: 02 Oct. 2022
Published: 17 Feb. 2023

How to cite this article:
Orogun, D.O. & Pillay, J., 2023, 'A historical survey of the African Neo-Pentecostals' response to digital transformation', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(1), a8040. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8040

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The ongoing digital transformation (DT) in our world has not only brought change to secular systems but also to how things are done in the mission and ministry of the Christian faith. Although before the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, some churches were interacting with DT, the post COVID-19 experience has shown that many more Christian organisations, especially, the African Neo-Pentecostal Churches (ANPC), have carved their niche in the digital space. With South Africa and Nigeria in view, this article investigated how the ANPC interacts with DT to improve missional work and the possible implications of doing so in the last 15 years. In the process, three strategies were applied. Firstly, a literature review and some online investigations were undertaken to articulate how the ANPC have engaged with DT in the past. Secondly, as a primary source, a quantitative empirical survey was conducted through data collection from 109 Neo-Pentecostal leaders to assess the current development in the use of digital technology (DTECH) by the ANPC. Thirdly, the article applied Albert Humphrey's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) framework to analyse the implications of the interaction. The outcome showed that the strengths and opportunities of digital interaction such as the wider and easier reach of audience, online training, online giving, improved sound and light technology and advertisements among others are helpful in missional assignments. Nevertheless, some observed Weaknesses and Threats need attention. Most importantly, the lesson from the findings is that 'techno church' practices come with gains; however, interaction with DT is not sufficient for missional services.

Contribution: Aligning with *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies's* focus and scope, this article contributed to an interdisciplinary religious aspect of research as it brought forward the interactions of African Pentecostalism, Historical Theology and Information Technology.

Keywords: African Neo-Pentecostal Churches; digital transformation; digital technology; new media; SWOT analysis.

Introduction

The history of technology from the second industrial revolution shows that techno-scientists have continuously attempted to make both life and work easier for humankind. For example, newer cars are continuously designed with digital technology (DTECH) to allow multitasking like driving and attending to emergency calls (Haddington & Rauniomaa 2011; Police1 2010). Also, the cost of logistics for physical attendance of schools, exams, graduation ceremonies, hosting company meetings, etc. has been drastically reduced (Skills Academy n.d.; Mukhtar et al. 2020). Likewise, the workspace has enjoyed easier methods of operation including on boarding, negotiation, board meetings, et cetera. (Bryan & Jones n.d.; Natesan & Du Plessis 2021). Similarly, social media (new media) platforms have continued to improve marketing and wider reach of clients, associates, friends and family. Interestingly, the digital economy[1] is now the norm. However, given the long-standing tradition of physical interaction, a custom encouraged in scriptures,[2] the church has enjoyed uninterrupted physical gatherings (PGs) until the emergence of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Although some African Neo-Pentecostal Churches (ANPC) have been familiar with Digital Sound, Lights and Media, the focus on digital transformation (DT)[3] especially the new media was not

1.'"Digital economy" is "that part of economic output derived solely from digital technologies with a business model based on digital goods or services" – consists of the digital sector plus emerging digital and platform services' (Bukht & Heeks 2017).

2.See Psalm 50:5, Act 2:42, Matthew 18:20 and Hebrews 10:25.

3.Digital transformation is the integration of digital technology into all areas of a business resulting in fundamental changes to how businesses operate and how they deliver value to customers. Beyond that, it is a cultural change that requires organisations to continually challenge the status quo, experiment often and get comfortable with failure. This sometimes means walking away from long-standing business processes that companies were built upon in favour of relatively new practices that are still being defined (Ferro 2022). The idea is to use technology not just to replicate an existing service in a digital form but to use technology to transform that service into something significantly better (Samuels 2021).

primary until recent years. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent public health safety protocols that include shutting down PGs, DT automatically became a reliable alternative. The ANPC are now part of the foremost subscribers to DT. Surprisingly, despite the rise of techno-savvy churches, there are no precise academic investigations undertaken on the interaction of ANPC with DT. Filling this gap is the task of this article as it surveys their historical activities alongside literature findings and provides a primary source using quantitative research data obtained from 109 Neo-Pentecostal leaders mostly in South Africa and Nigeria. Subsequently, the article does a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis[4] to reveal the implications of the interaction and provides the lessons thereof. The article will now proceed with a brief literature review below.

Brief literature survey

Literature findings suggest that not so much academic research has been undertaken on the DT of the ANPC. Consequently, ANPC and DT interaction lack robust academic literature. For example, Sircar and Rowley (2016:1–6) explore 'Social Media and Mega Churches'. They cover only the Hillsong church in Europe. Moreso, there was no empirical survey on Hillsong's interaction with the new media. Likewise, Kgatle (2018:1–6) looks at religion and social media in South Africa where he critiques Facebook's moral and social influence. Though Kgatle discusses some weaknesses, he did not cover the entire social media platforms nor address religion and DT as a portfolio *vis-à-vis* SWOT analysis. Additionally, Kgatle did not discuss any empirical evidence to validate his postulations. Also, Frahm-Arp (2015:115–141) presents South African Pentecostal Churches' interaction with politics using social media. The article presents historical background on how three Pentecostal Charismatic Evangelicals (PCE) in Gauteng used media platforms to spread their doctrines on Christians' role in politics. The author selects and analyses their online messages and concludes that the use of DT influenced members' participation in the 2014 election. While the article speaks about ANPC, it highlights only the political opportunity of ANPC in DT. Furthermore, Khanyile (2016:1–135), from a sociological perspective, places a searchlight on the End Time Disciples Ministries in South Africa led by Prophet Penuel. He extracts information from the Facebook page of the ministry and subsequently raises an alarm that over 11 000 followers are impacted negatively by Prophet Penuel's projects of violence, power, exploitation, manipulation, hegemony and patriarchy. Though Khanyile's socio-moral critique is appreciated, his sociological view does not represent the theological analysis of the ANPC interaction with DT. Additionally, Darko-Adjei, Animante and Akussah (2021:1–32) investigate the use of social media by ANPC in Ghana during COVID-19. The study arrives at a positive perception of the adopted social media platforms and recommends more engagements with DT. Although their study points to the ANPC, it is limited to Ghana and written purely from an Information Technology perspective.

So far, the literature review above shows that there is an academic research gap to be filled on the ANPC interaction with DT, especially from historical and theological perspectives. Moreso, the choice of the ANPC in this article is not only about filling an academic gap, but it is also predicated on their interaction with DT before COVID-19 challenges and the important lessons to be learnt from their interaction. Consequently, this article raises some research questions. Firstly, when did the ANPC begin interaction with DTECH? Secondly, when did the ANPC move into the new media space? Thirdly, what are the progressive history and current development of such interaction? Fourthly, what are the possible SWOT and the lessons thereof? This article will attempt to answer these questions in the following sections. In the meantime, the next subsection will describe how the ANPC have interacted with DT in the past.

How African Neo-Pentecostal Churches interact with digital technology in the past

There are no specific dates mentioned in academic records that suggest when the ANPC began interaction with DTECH. However, the authors of this article investigate the online activities of some ANPC based on their years of interaction with DTECH. While exhausting the list of churches may be beyond the scope of this article, a few have been selected. This does not represent any more importance than other ANPC.

Pastor Chris Oyakhilome and the Christ Embassy Church

Online investigation shows that the earliest period of ANPC activities in Digital Media is 14 years ago. Christ Embassy led by Chris Oyakhilome with headquarters in Nigeria and a huge establishment in South Africa has the earliest YouTube record as of 2008.[5] Before 2008, Oyakhilome was interacting with his followers via hard-copy books, DVDs CDs, etc. Also, for over 15 years, the church has been familiar with Digital Lights, Still and Motion Cameras, Screens and Digital Sound Systems. Progressively, the church moved into the new media space 14 years ago. A 2013 report has it that Oyakhilome has the highest number of Twitter followers in Nigeria. In the report of Daroz in Osewa (2022), Oyakhilome joined Twitter in 2010 and entered the Twitter hall of fame with 2.2 million followers in 2022. The report shows that he is the 50th most followed Twitter user. These DTECH credentials influenced how Christ Embassy propagates the gospel around the world. As the earliest user of new media, Christ Embassy leads the ANPC interaction with DTECH. Thus, the church may not be so much impacted during the COVID-19 lockdown because the members already acclimatised to online church over the years.

4.The Birla Institute of Technology and Science (2022) notes that SWOT analysis originated from Albert S. Humphrey in the 1960s, SWOT analysis is a basic, straightforward model that assesses what an organisation can and cannot do as well as its potential opportunities and threats. Likewise, the British Library (2022) explained that SWOT framework is credit to Albert Humphrey, who developed the approach at the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) back in the 1960s and early 1970s. Ultimately, the goal SWOT analysis is to reinforce business strategy by assessing all of such business's strengths and weaknesses, potential opportunities and pitfalls within the workplace. Furthermore, S is (Strengths) while W is (Weaknesses). O means (Opportunities) and T (Threats). The overall understanding of these four key areas puts an organisation in a significantly better position to take positive action.

5.Earliest sermons sighted online was in 2008 (themimshachma 2008).

Prophet Uebert Angel and the Spirit Embassy Goodnews Church

Online findings show that Uebert has his earliest interaction with DTECH in 2011[6] (11 years ago). Uebert has expanded the church across Southern Africa, Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States.[7] He joined Twitter in 2011 (Angel n.d.). Nehanda (2018) reports that Uebert has in total of 1 078 000 followers on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and remains the only Zimbabwean to cross the 1 million total followers on social media. As one of the earliest users of DTECH in Southern Africa, he continues to sustain his interaction with DTECH. Thus, it is unlikely that the Spirit Embassy church suffered much negative impact during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the ministry's adaptation to DT over the years.

Pastor Paul Adefarasin and House on the Rock

Although Adefarasin has over 20 years of ministry experience, his earliest messages were sighted on YouTube in 2014 (Best of the gospel generals 2014; My Faith Tv Network 2014). Subsequently, House on the Rock (HOTR) branches across the globe have gradually moved into the digital space. Also, the world's largest annual Christian Concert (The Experience), hosted by HOTR, is accompanied by DTECH, especially in the area of sound and light, which the church has been familiar with for over 15 years. In 2011 (11 years ago), Adefarasin joined social media and currently has over 1 million Twitter followers (Adefarasin n.d.). So far, HOTR appears to be one of the earliest ANPC to move into the digital space. Oyero (2020) reports that the 2020 edition of the Experience Concert went fully virtual for the first time because of COVID-19 with millions of attendees across the globe. This was easily achieved because Adefarasin and the HOTR have been engaging with DTECH for over a decade. Thus, it can be inferred that the church's adaptation to DT may have reduced a high negative impact when churches disengaged from physical gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pastor Enoch Adeboye and the Redeemed Christian Church of God

As a doctor of mathematics and a preacher, it is not surprising that Adeboye interacts easily with DT, especially the new media. He joined Twitter in 2011 and currently has over 2m followers (Adeboye n.d.a). He also has over 1.5m Instagram followers (Adeboye n.d.b). Although as a global church, Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) has a lot of mushroom parishes that could experience challenges in their interaction with DT, the general overseer may have continued to influence RCCG churches' response to DT in the last 11 years.

Prophet Bushiri and the Enlightened Christian Gathering

Bushiri's earliest messages were sighted on YouTube in 2013, and he has continuously adapted to the new media, especially during his crisis with the South African authority. Currently, his YouTube TV has over 52m viewers (Bushiri 2013). More interestingly, he reaches over 7.7 million viewers on TikTok (Bushiri n.d.a). Presently, in the Southern African region, he leads Facebook interaction with over 4.3m followers (Bushiri n.d.b) and 1.3m followers on Instagram (Bushiri n.d.c). He recently launched a new mobile app called 'Major 1Connect' to increase his interaction with followers (Meyer 2020). So far, Bushiri and the Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG) church have a history of about 9 years in the digital space.

Pastor At Boshoff and the Christian Revival Church

This is one of the fastest-growing churches in South Africa led by Boshoff. While the church is very familiar with some DTECH like sound and light, its earliest interaction with new media like YouTube was in 2013 with 51 000 subscribers. Currently, Christian Revival Church (CRC) has over 5m YouTube channel viewers (CRC Church n.d.a) and 111 000 Facebook followers (CRC Church n.d.b). Overall, CRC has interacted with DTECH for over 9 years.

Pentecostal Charismatic Evangelicals in South Africa

Frahm-Arp (2015:11–141) indicates that three PCE churches have been interacting with social media since 2014. They are His People, Grace Bible Church and Acts of Faith Harvesters. Though there is no specific date in writing or online, Maria gives an idea that as of 2014 (8 years ago) ANPC in Gauteng were in the new media. They share their convictions of Christian involvement in politics on social media platforms and consequently influenced members' electoral participation. By inference, as of 8 years ago, interacting with DT is already a familiar activity among ANPC in Gauteng, South Africa.

More recent ministers and ministries

Recently, ANPC witnessed the rise of newer ministries interacting with DT, especially the new media. For example, Apostle Joshua Selman in Nigeria through his ministry called Koinonia only joined YouTube in 2019 (Koinonia Global n.d.) So far, the ministry has attracted over 20 million YouTube viewers in just 3 years. Also, Apostle Aroma of the Remnant Christian Network joined YouTube in 2013; however, his popularity scaled up in the last few years with over 12 million YouTube viewers (Osayi n.d.a) and 200 000 Facebook followers (Osayi n.d.b). Moreover, many more pastors and ANPC are transforming their missional work and worship experience through DTECH.

So far, this section has established that ANPC have been familiar with DTECH for over 15 years in Digital Sound, Light, Screens, Still and Motion Graphics technology. Likewise in the last 14 years, they have progressively carved a niche in the new media. The next section will present the empirical research outcome to assess the current development in ANPC interaction with DT.

6.Earliest sighted message on YouTube was in 2011 (Angel 2011a, 2011b and 2011c).

7.See details of the Spirit Embassy Church at the official website: https://www.spiritembassy.org/

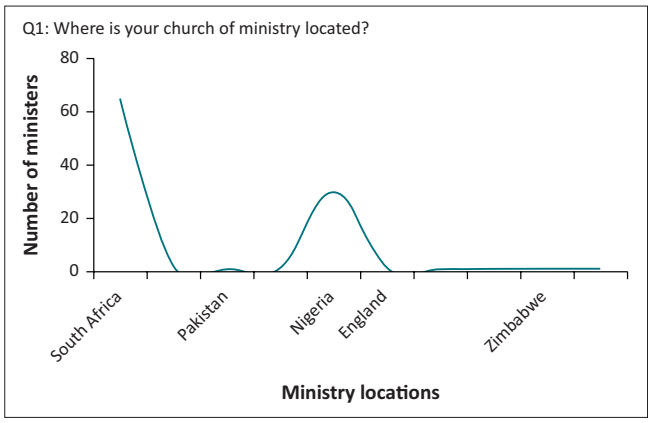

FIGURE 1: Respondents' Ministry Locations.

Empirical survey outcome

To assess the current development in the use of DTECH by some ANPC, a quantitative empirical survey was conducted. The idea is to see how pastors currently use DTECH, how members respond and how DT has impacted their missional services. The survey provides 10 questions[8] bordering on the ministry location of respondents (ML), their years of interaction with DT (YIDT), familiar equipment in technology (FET), opportunities of DT interaction (ODTI), the response of members and followers to DT (RMF), the impact of DT during COVID-19 (IDTC), respondents' future preference of interaction (FPI), threats of interaction (TOI) and distraction via interaction (DOI). Figure 1 above shows that 109 ministers mostly from South Africa and Nigeria responded to the questions, while Table 1 summarises the outcome of the research exercise.

In Table 1 below item 1 shows that 47.7% of ANPC only started responding to DT between 2020 and 2022. By implication, the COVID-19 pandemic was instrumental to many ANPC responses to DT. Additionally, 43% have been familiar with DT between 5 and 10 years, while 9.3% have been in the digital space for over 10 years. These confirm the earlier historical narratives in the previous section where selected early subscribers were said to have interacted with DT between 8 and 14 years and more recent subscribers plugged in between 2 and 7 years ago. This is also validated by the empirical evidence in Figure 2 below. Although for over 15 years, 72.1% of the ANPC interact with DTECH in Sound, Light, Screens, Still and Motion Graphics technology as evidenced in Table 1, item 2, the more recent years of interactions are with the new media. Also, in Table 1, items 3, 4, 8 and 9 show that opportunities for interaction (70.7%), followers' response (70% better), feedback (69% better) and counselling (37% better) are proof of the positive impact of the interaction. Thus, the impact of YIDT, FET, ODTI, RMF, IDTC4 and IDTC5 in Table 1, items 1–4 and 8–9 represent motivators of continuous response to DT by the ANPC.[9]

Contrarily, in Table 1, items 5–7 and 11–13 reveal that missional work is negatively impacted. Members' financial commitment dropped by 94%[10]; opportunities for healing and deliverance sessions that may require physical interaction dropped by 87%. While the financial challenge can affect the missional operations, the necessity of healing and deliverance raises the question of whether the response of ANPC to DT raises or reduces the bar of spiritual intervention in missional work. Adherents are not in church just for the fun of it, they need spiritual support. Where adequate spiritual support is insufficient, the spiritual essence of DT may be questioned. As a remedy, in Table 1, item 10, 89.4% of the respondents prefer the substitution of PG or virtual gathering (VG) only with virtual and physical gathering (VPG) combined. This notion is evident in the analysis in Figure 6 below.

Finally, Table 1, items 11 and 12 show TOI and DOI. Item 12 reveals that over 82.1% of the ministers who participated in the survey are distracted because of frequent interaction with DT. This confirms the respondents' statistics in Figure 8 below. These impacts threaten the balance of ministry and commitment to family, personal development and personal business, among others.

So far, this section corroborates the earlier historical narratives under our 'Brief literature survey' and reveals the current development in the ANPC interaction with DT. Most importantly, given the report in Table 1, items 1, 5–7 and 11–13, this section avails some key lessons: (1) challenges like COVID-19 can be instrumental to innovation and engagements with DTECH in missional expressions (cf. Pillay 2020:266–275); (2) the fact that financial commitment dropped in some cases suggests a gap. Thus, interaction with DT may not be the singular sufficient model for fundraising and financial growth in some ANPC; (3) the physical interaction space needed for spiritual intervention like healing and deliverance is not provided for in the ANPC interaction with DT. Thus, it can be inferred that the interaction with DT is not sufficient to provide spiritual support for adherents; (4) the threat of interaction, especially 'distraction' as evident in Table 1, item 12 and Figure 8 shows that ANPC interaction with DT does not represent a single perfect model for comprehensive missional services; and (5) in Table 1, the overall ratio of positive versus negative impacts is about 60:40. Interpretively, the negative is too significant to be overlooked. Thus, DT alone is not sufficient for missional services. The next section will now undertake a SWOT analysis to show the implications of ANPC interaction with DT.

8.Complete Survey Questions and outcome/responses are available at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/15LrzjfhLxZfO4gvt1IeZK0oNzrgOGDCzJEjezaUzyZ8/edit#responses

9.Percentages: low (L% – ±25), medium (M% – ±50) and high (H% – ±75). Also, the data are summarised in percentages. For example, the overall respondents in YIDT are 107. To obtain an exact number of specific groups, like those who have interacted with DT in the last 10 years. The formula below is applicable. Specific Number = Specific % × Total Nos. = 9.3/100 × 107 = Approximately 10. Therefore, it means 10 respondents only have interacted with DT for the past 10 years. Moreso, some of the numbers will give us approximate results given the diverse dimension of the questions.

10.The Ratio of Better to Worse is 80:55 = 1:0.7. This culminates into 70%:30%. IDTC Finance = Ave. of Ministry Financial Growth and Online Followers Commitment = 7.8 + 5.4/2 = 6% Approximately.

TABLE 1: Empirical research summary.

Item	Question focus	Acronyms	Response	Low (%)	Medium (%)	High (%)	Total	Impact
1	Years of interaction	YIDT	107	9.3 (10 ±)	43 (5 ±)	47.7 (2 ±)	100	Positive
2	Familiar technology	FET	104	27.9	72.1	Non	100	Positive
3	Interaction opportunity	ODTI	106	25.9	Non	70.8	97.7	Positive
4	Followers response	RMF	106	30 Worse	Non	70 Better	100	Positive
5	COVID impact-finance	IDTC	102	6 Better	Non	94 Worse	100	Negative
6	IDTC (attendance)	IDTC2	102	Non	34 Better	Non	100	Negative
7	IDTC – miracles and healing	IDTC3	102	13 Better	Non	87 Worse	100	Negative
8	IDTC – feedback	IDTC4	102	Non	Non	69 Better	100	Positive
9	IDTC – counselling	IDTC5	102	Non	37 Better	Non	100	Positive
10	Future preference	FPI	104	2.7 VG	7.7 PG	89.4 VPG	100	Positive
11	Threats of interaction	TOI	105	Non	20 C&H	Non	100	LowNeg
12	Interaction distraction	DOI	106	27.4	49	5.7	100	Negative
13	Location: South Africa	ML1	71	Non	Non	68.3	68.3	Positive
14	Location: Nigeria	ML2	32	Non	Non	30.8	30.8	Positive
15	Location: Others	ML3	10	Non	Non	8.8	8.8	Negative

VG, Virtual gathering; PG, Physical gathering; VPG, Virtual and physical gathering; C&H, Ministry account cloning and hacking ; ML, ministry location of respondents; YIDT, years of interaction with DT; FET, familiar equipment in technology; ODTI, opportunities of DT interaction; RMF, response of members and followers; IDTC, impact of DT during COVID-19; FPI, future preference of interaction; TOI, threats of interaction; DOI, distraction via interaction.

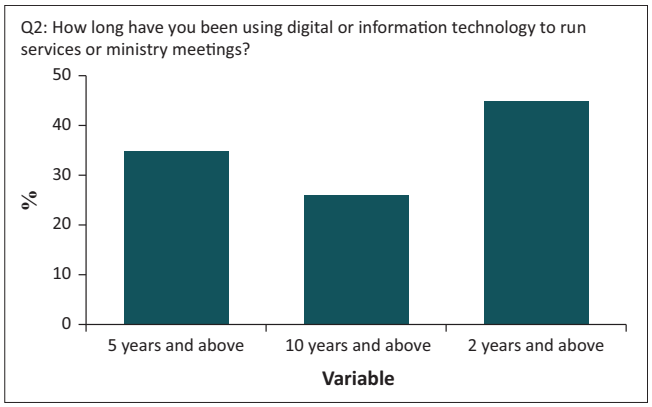

FIGURE 2: Time frame.

SWOT analysis of African Neo-Pentecostal Churches with digital transformation

In the context of this research, the algorithm of SWOT analysis enables the examination and elaboration of the SWOT of the ANPC interaction with DT. The analysis will be based on the survey respondents' reports juxtaposed with some literature findings. Meanwhile, earlier in the 'Introduction' section of this article, SWOT analysis has been delineated with detailed footnotes. The analysis will now begin with 'Strengths' below.

Strengths

Strengths represent the benefits of DT to the ANPC. Eight points will be discussed.

Financial digital platforms create giving opportunities in the church

From the survey responses, Figure 3 below shows that over 30% of the ANPC encourage members to give online. Some display their bank account details during virtual meetings while others use Point of Sale (POS) machines in physical gatherings (PGs). In both instances, DTECH provides the advantage of digital platforms for offerings and related fundraising projects.

Financial digital platforms can reduce the impact of theft on the church premises

In the section 'Empirical survey outcome', Table 1, item 2, reveals that 72.1% of the respondents are very familiar with DTECH. Figure 3 shows that 30.4%[11] of respondents use Point of Sale (POS) machines and online cash transfers. Notably, several churches have been robbed during and after services.[12] Fortunately, because of the ANPC's interaction with DTECH, cashless transactions can reduce the impact of such sad events.

Digital platforms create improved advertisements

The earlier historical presentation under 'Brief literature survey' unveils the high-level subscription of the ANPC to social media. With millions of followers on different platforms, advertisement has only gotten better with cheaper advert funding, wider reach and constant advert privilege. This is validated by Table 1 item 3 where 97.3% of the respondents claim that DT gives the ANPC 97.7% interaction opportunities. This is indeed a benefit.

Digital platforms aid online church and related meetings

In Figure 4 below 35.4% of the respondents enjoy 75% – 100% wider reach and popularity. Also, 17.5% now have more training platforms for church leaders and workers. Consequently, through live streaming, more meetings like concerts, prayers and Bible classes have become better in the ANPC.

Digital platforms aid liturgical experience and ambiance

Using the LED Media Screen and 'Easy Worship' software, among others, the ANPC now enjoy some innovative liturgical experience. Bible reading, message contents with imagery, praise and worship lyrics have become better and

11.Online cash transfer is 20.9% while collection of offerings with POS machine, also known as Automated Teller Machine (ATM), is about 9.5% that makes the digital online transaction 30.4% among the Neo-Pentecostal respondents.

12.South African and Nigerian Churches robbed during and after services PM News (2020); Vanguard (2017); Dietrich (2022) and The Witness (2009).

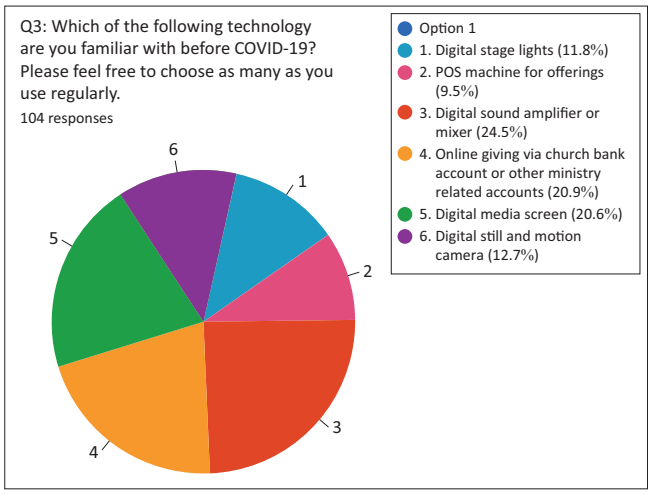

FIGURE 3: Technology familiarity.

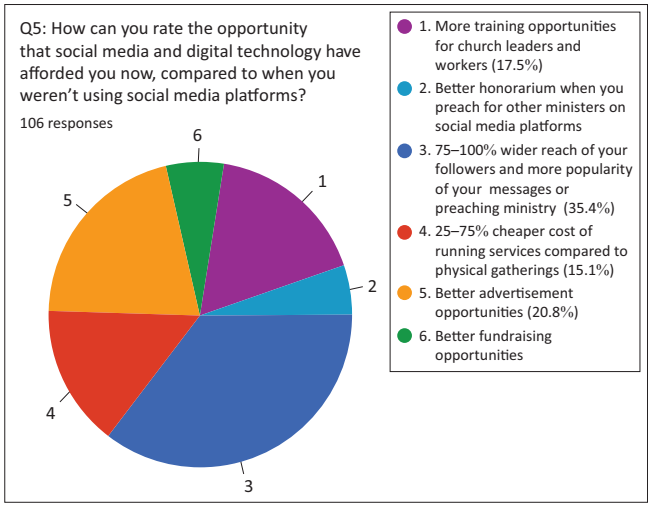

FIGURE 4: Opportunity ratings of using social media platforms, or not using.

more attractive. Additionally, the ambience created by digital lights and sound easily boosts the worship experience of adherents. This liturgical transformation has aided the interest and participation of more youths. In some cases, such transformation leads to church growth.

Digital platforms provide avenues for economic gains

Churches and leaders with huge followers on social media are content creators. Social media companies engage their platforms' in advertisement services with accompanying financial rewards.

Digital platforms aid public criticism among the African Neo-Pentecostal Churches

In Figure 7 below 18.3% of the respondents noted the criticism of their messages and actions online. Open criticism has become popular with the new media interaction. Aggrieved members, colleagues and ministry associates among others take advantage of the new media's free speech window. Doctrine-related controversies like tithing,[13] scandals on corruption (Orogun & Pillay 2021) and ill-treatment of members and staff are often brought online. Sadly, this

13.See example, Sahara Reporters (2017).

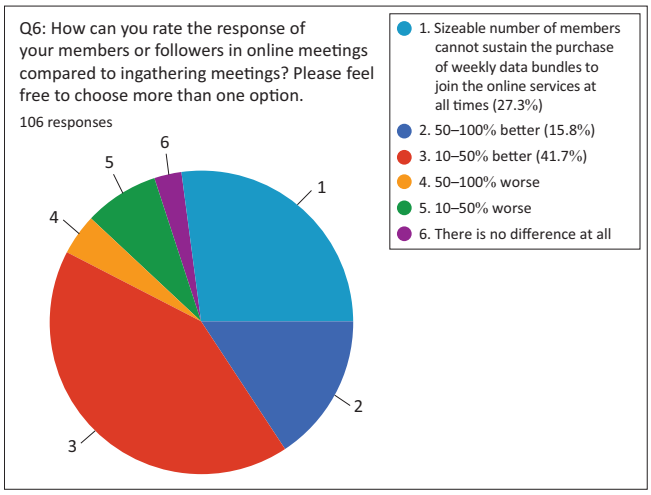

FIGURE 5: Response rate of members or followers in online meetings compared to ingathering meetings.

medium of expression can create negative publicity for the church. Notwithstanding, criticism in some cases allows the possibility of 'check and balance' in the church.

Digital platforms aid sustainability in crisis, transition and relocation

Location is never a barrier to missional work if an internet network is available. Some ANPC have taken advantage of this privilege. For example, after Prophet Bushiri's exit from South Africa, the sustainability of the church would have been difficult given the crisis that engulfed the church. However, with DT, Bushiri maintained the church in transition. Likewise, against the claims of the South African law enforcement agencies, Bushiri used social media platforms as a counter instrument to tell his side of the story and thereafter convinced his followers (SABC News 2018). So, DT allows Neo-Pentecostal leaders to sustain connections with followers irrespective of challenges connected to crises, transition or relocation.

Weaknesses

Using the survey report and literature findings, seven points are discussed below.

Digital platforms promote the abuse of prosperity gospel via financial scams

Although not in all cases, Neo-Pentecostalism is generally affiliated with the prosperity gospel. While some leaders genuinely preach prosperity within a biblically permitted context, others use DTECH as a platform to abuse the prosperity gospel. For example, in different church services, Johnson Suleman claimed to have called angels to do online money transfers to the accounts of his listeners (Suleman n.d. and Celebration TV 2020). He later claims that some people already receive transfer alerts on their phones. Suleman may have made some internet banking transaction arrangements behind the scenes to stage-manage financial miracles. Access to digital financial platforms allows a supposed angelic transaction.

This miracle money caricature weakens the testimony and the impact of the gospel in the ANPC. Subsequently, it permits adherents' manipulation and exploitation. In another scenario, Meyer (2020) reports that Prophet Bushiri recently launched a new digital online application where virtual worshippers subscribe with R80 to join the online church. The software application titled 'Major 1 connect' already has 7000 subscribers for the first time it was used. In other words, Bushiri already made a profit of R560 000 with the application. Meyer (2020) further relates that over 6m people viewed the broadcast, and more than 25 000 subscribers are expected to join. By implication, DT can be a platform to commercialise the gospel among the ANPC.

Digital platforms allow the caricature of prophetic miracles

Digital platforms create miracles caricature space for some ANPC. For example, Prophet Bushiri 'walked on air' on social media as proof of miraculous power displayed to attract miracle seekers (News24 2022). However, nobody knows what happened behind the scenes. In another online video, Bushiri used an iPad to capture the picture of an unknown miracle subscriber's child in the realm of the spirit (Fayehun 2018). By implication, technology has become a spiritual vehicle to download miracles. Likewise, Pastor Paul Sanyangore made a phone call to God on a smartphone during an online service on behalf of a miracle seeker (Fayehun 2017). Although these prophets have been criticised by several Christian leaders and organisations, the narratives reveal the gap created through digital interaction (see Charlton 2019; Nwachukwu 2017).

Digital platforms sometimes fuel intra-religious crises

Digital technology may not necessarily be the cause of the crises, but it certainly aggravates the issues. This is aided by the freedom of expression in the digital space as it freely allows banter among religious leaders. For example, the banter between Adeboye and TB Joshua (Ezza Ezekuna Tv 2021) Mboro and Bushiri (eNCA 2020) and other banters of doctrinal disagreements (TVC 2019).

Weakness of non-inclusion

Inclusion here is limited to diversity in economic power.

With the rise of hybrid worship in a post COVID-19 era, nosediving market economy, inflation and poor buying power, access to gadgets like quality smart phones, computers and sustainable financial investment in data bundles may be difficult for adherents at the bottom of the economic ladder (see Pillay 2020:266). Consequently, low-income earners in the ANPC may be excluded from virtual participation. This is evident in Figure 5 above where 27.3% of respondents testified that a sizeable number of church members cannot sustain the purchase of weekly data bundles to join online meetings. Thus, the less privileged may be excluded from spiritual support and other related benefits.

Censoring messages

Sometimes pastors may desire to preach their convictions, which may not be politically correct or seat well with some vested interests online. Such messages may stand the risk of social media censorship.

Low financial commitment

As discussed earlier in the 'Empirical survey outcome' section and evident in Table 1, item 5, some respondents agree that members' financial commitment dropped by 94% because of nonphysical interaction. However, a few churches have experienced the opposite. This is evident in Figure 4, where 15.1% of respondents opine that DT helped them to save cost of operations. Also, 5.6% of respondents claim they have raised more money and increased their financial flow through DT. Another 5.6% agree they have received a better honorarium after online preaching engagement. While it is not in all cases, the online church can cause low financial commitment of adherents.

Digital interaction inhibits ministry expression, adequate spiritual support and services

Many ANPC believe in healing and deliverance, and some clergies find ministry expression through the gift of healing, miracle and deliverance. The virtual space transition has reduced the physical interaction where expression of healing and deliverance support gets easier. As evident in Table 1, item 7, such support has reduced by 87% with the advent of the virtual church.

Opportunities

These can be extracted from the 'strengths' analysis made earlier in this section. Overall, they are summed up in two points. The first is 'Economic opportunities' through easier logistics, cheaper costs of running missional work, lesser financial theft, advert payment by social media companies, better fundraising platforms and savings opportunities. The second is the 'Expansion of missional workspace and improved missional Services'. For example, improved counselling by 37% in Table 1, item 9 because of interaction with DT creates a better opportunity.

Threats

Using the survey reports and literature findings, two points are discussed below.

Cyber economic threats

In Figure 7 below 26.7% of respondents testified to the imposters' fraud access through account cloning and hacking. Although 33.6% have not experienced any fraud; however, 13% claim they have heard of such sad incidences from fellow ministers. Such cyber fraud may culminate in an economic threat to adherents. On this account, some leaders have made disclaimers to sensitise their followers. For example, Joshua Selman made a disclaimer on the fraudulent interference of hackers (Koinonia Global 2020).

Cyber health threats, addiction and distraction

Kissell (2022) notes that mental health issues, vision damage, compromised immunity, chronic headache, obesity and addiction-aided distractions are parts of cyber hazards. In Table 1, item 12, 82.1% of the survey respondents agreed that they are distracted by their interaction with DTECH and 54.7% rated their distraction level between 50% – 74% and 75% – 100%. This can lead to cyber addiction, and it is a threat to the balanced life of some ANPC leaders. The article will now discuss derived lessons from ANPC interaction with DT.

Lessons learnt from African Neo-Pentecostal churches' interaction with digital transformation

Lesson 1: Challenges can be instrumental to innovation, and new engagements with digital technology

In the summary of 'Empirical survey outcome', the basic lesson is that some challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic are change agents. Thus, ANPC must be flexible to accommodate change when necessary. Maintaining the traditional way as the only means of missional expression can limit the ANPC missional services in tough times. Thus, continuous engagement with DT as the need arises is imperative.

Lesson 2: Congregants' response to online giving differs

The evidence of low financial commitment discussed earlier under the subsection of *weaknesses* shows that digital giving platforms are better for some and worse for others. Thus, using digital platforms as the only medium of fundraising may suggest that DTECH is not enough for financial stability. Thus, ANPC need to be flexible to embrace alternative fundraising methods.

Lesson 3: Interaction with digital transformation is not sufficient for spiritual services

As evident in the 'Empirical survey outcome' section, the physical interaction space needed for spiritual intervention in missional services like healing and deliverance is not provided for in the ANPC interaction with DT. Thus, it can be inferred that such interaction is not sufficient to meet the spiritual needs of adherents. The humble submission of this article is that human physical interaction cannot be short-changed with alternative virtual innovations. Some schools of thought may argue that physical interaction is not necessary as Jesus's physical presence was not needed to perform healing and miracle as in the case of the centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5–13. But in verse 7, Jesus intended to have physical contact with the sick servant. However, the centurion's faith caused a shift in Jesus's model of spiritual service. Consequently, Jesus's missional expression in healing, miracles and deliverance can be achieved either by non-presence (virtual) or physical presence models. In other words, both mediums are important

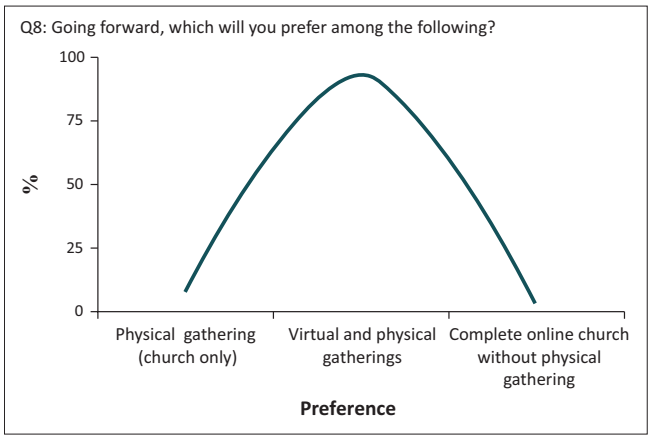

FIGURE 6: Preference of gatherings.

depending on the situation. Full transition into the digital space is insufficient for all circumstances, there is a need to combine virtual and physical interaction. Moreover, the majority of the survey respondents in Figure 6 agree with this idea. The lesson here is that spiritual service must not be reduced to the digital space alone. Where one-on-one counselling, healing and deliverance are needed, such arrangements can be accommodated.

Lesson 4: Interaction with digital transformation requires self-discipline, time management and cyber security education to reduce cyber threats

As evident in Table 1, item 12 and Figure 8, interaction with DT does not represent a perfect model for comprehensive missional service**.** Undoubtedly, the strengths and opportunities discussed in the SWOT analysis, show that progressive DT is imperative. However, there is a need to consciously reduce the accompanying cyber distractions and related health hazards discussed in the weaknesses of DT. More precisely, mobile phones and related DTECH gadgets emit non-ionising electromagnetic radiation, which can be absorbed by human tissues close to the gadgets (see Naeem 2014:5–6). Consequently, the amount of radiation absorbed may depend on frequent use. The findings of Frei et al. (2011) reveal that such exposure to radiation affects brain glucose metabolism and can cause brain tumours. Thus, engagements with DTECH require self-discipline and a time-management culture. This will lead to using the least time to achieve as much as possible and eventually spending lesser time in the digital space. Health consciousness is key, and the missional labour is not more important than the health of the labourers. Finally, the Threats discussed under SWOT analysis show the existence of a cyber economic threat. The findings of Opinov8 Technology Services (2018) assert that 80% of financial crime comes from cyber-attack**.** The lesson here is that ANPC and related subscribers to DTECH need to invest in continuous cyber security education or employ the services of cyber security experts. They also need to abreast themselves with technology laws to combat fraudsters when the need arises.[14]

14.See further advice by Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (n.d.) at: advice at https://www.cisa.gov/4-things-you-can-do-keep-yourselfcyber-safe

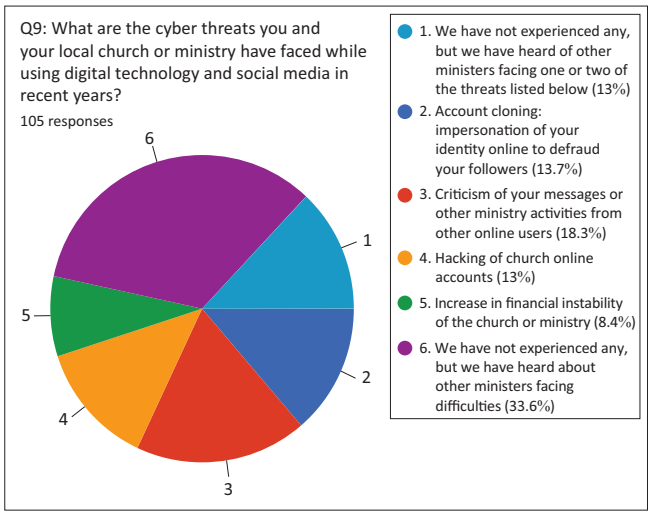

FIGURE 7: Cyber threats.

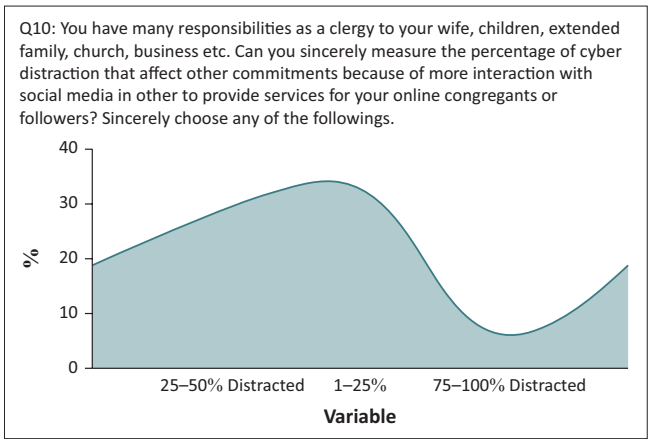

FIGURE 8: Percentage of cyber distraction that affect other commitments.

Lesson 5: Over-emphasising digital transformation may engender exclusion of rural beneficiaries of spiritual support

Possible exclusion of the rural beneficiaries is a weakness evident under the SWOT analysis section in this article. Besides clamour for fame, economic gains and competition among others, the drive for DT needs to be missional to accommodate the inclusion of adherents in rural settings. The ANPC need to ask and answer the fundamental question of purpose in this regard. Otherwise, abuse and negligence of priority both in urban and rural ministries are inevitable. The ANPC and related subscribers should not be over-occupied or over-emphasise urban techno-savvy activities while neglecting the rural mission fields.

Lesson 6: Digital transformation creates a gap for abuse to thrive through prophetic caricature and commercialisation of the gospel

There may be no laws hindering fundraising styles or online miracle displays; however, the literature evidence backed by the SWOT analysis (weaknesses) shows that access to digital platforms engenders prophetic caricature and commercialisation of the gospel. Thus, the ANPC and related users have a responsibility to raise the critical question of purpose. They must ask whether fake cyber miracles and prophetic caricatures are morally sound and honourable to the glory of God. The lesson here remains that if the purpose of interacting with DTECH is not to honour God and serve the adherents, abuse is inevitable.

Lesson 7: Developing alternative sources of income is imperative

The lower financial commitment of adherents in some ANPC because of DT as indicated earlier in the SWOT analysis section should not be taken lightly. The days of depending on 'Tithe and Offerings' only to finance missional services are over. Alternative sources must be in view. Developing multiple streams of income may bail the church out considerably.

Lesson 8: Digital transformation creates a gap for intra-religious crises to thrive

The evidence of intra-religious crisis within the SWOT analysis is not surprising because as humans, offences will always come. However, reaction to offences determines the solution. The lesson here is that using the free speech space of DT to make open confrontations and counter-reaction to offensive statements, doctrines and actions is detrimental to the unity of the church. Thus, for the sake of Christian unity, not all interactions are necessary for the digital space. This requires a high level of forbearance. Cyber reactions easily promote online crises and disunity, but private online dialogue can resolve issues and preserve the unity of the church.

Conclusion

This article surveyed the ANPC interaction with DT as it provided a historical narrative to describe the past and generated empirical evidence as a primary source to discuss the current development of such interaction. The article gathered that some ANPC have been interacting with DT for over 15 years with the use of Digital Sound, Light, Still and Motion Graphics (cameras), among others. Progressively, the ANPC sustained the interaction by moving into the new media space in the last 14 years and currently stands as part of the leading subscribers to DTECH. Furthermore, using SWOT analysis, the article highlighted and elaborated on the implications of the interaction and finally brought out some lessons to enable better use of DT in growing churches and related missional services. Overall, the article sustained that notwithstanding the positive implications, DT is not sufficient for comprehensive missional services and thus, the need for more flexibility (cf. Pillay 2020), especially the combination of the traditional physical and virtual interaction to reduce the weaknesses and threats of ANPC interaction with DT.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Both authors contributed equally to this article. It is a work between a Postdoc Fellow and the Promoter on 'The Economics of Religion and Socio-economic Development in Africa'.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data were collected from about 109 participants mostly in South Africa and Nigeria using the Google Survey Questionnaire. Details of the available database are available at: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/15LrzjfhLxZfO4gvt1IeZK0oNzrgOGDCzJEjezaUzyZ8/edit.

Disclaimer

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