

The Bullish Script: Social Media and the Theatrics of Omenala Church Ihuoma Okorie.

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Abstract

Social media has become a powerful tool for religious organizations to propagate their doctrines and connect with followers. This paper examines the use of social media by the Omenala Church, a traditional religious group in Nigeria, and its implications for religious coexistence. The study focuses on the church's Facebook page, "Gospel of Truth: Omenala bu Uzo Ndu na Eziokwu," which has gained significant visibility through its dramatic and often confrontational posts. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study reveals how the church's "bullish" scripts, characterized by derogatory language and inflammatory rhetoric, have escalated tensions between adherents of Omenala and Christianity. The findings highlight the potential of social media to both unite and divide, emphasizing the need for religious organizations to promote respectful dialogue and peaceful coexistence. The paper concludes with recommendations for fostering tolerance and mutual understanding in online religious discourse.

Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of daily life, serving as a primary platform for disseminating information and facilitating interaction among individuals and communities. This widespread adoption underscores society's growing awareness of the potential benefits of social media. In contemporary digital times, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and domestic ones such as TikTok, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu have connected billions of users worldwide, making them indispensable tools for communication and interaction (Wang, 2024, p. 153). Through these platforms, individuals share their lives, perspectives, and ideas on both personal and social issues, sparking widespread engagement and discussion. Social media has transcended its role as a mere technological tool to become a powerful medium for promoting and propagating ideas, skills, and values. However, alongside its positive contributions, it has also been misused by some to propagate violence and spread harmful rhetoric. Malicious comments, insults, and toxic content have unfortunately become commonplace, posing significant challenges for users and undermining social harmony, particularly in terms of religious coexistence. This study critically examines the social media practices of the Omenala Church, located in Eastern Nigeria, with a specific focus on their use of Facebook. It analyzes the content they produce to promote their religious tenets and gain visibility, highlighting the "bullish scripts" employed in their messaging.

Additionally, this study explores the implications of such content for religious coexistence and social harmony, shedding light on the broader challenges posed by the misuse of social media in religious discourse.

Social Media and Religious Coexistence

The media is widely recognized as a powerful tool for information dissemination, entertainment, and education. With advancements in technology, conventional media—once the primary platform for sharing vital information—has been overtaken by what is now referred to as new media. Mendoza (2024) aptly describes traditional media as encompassing "the press, television, radio, cinema, and telephone." However, the evolution of communication technologies has introduced newer forms of media that have gained widespread popularity, collectively referred to as new media. New media refers to digital content created and distributed by anyone with internet access, characterized by its interactive and participatory nature. The New Media Institute defines new media as "a catchall term used to define all that is related to the internet and the interplay between technology, images, and sound." Examples include blogs, email, music and television streaming services, as well as social media networks. Unlike traditional media, new media facilitates two-way communication, fostering engagement and collaboration among users.

Social media has emerged as a transformative phenomenon, significantly influencing all spheres of life. Its advent and rapid growth have been driven by the innate human desire to connect and communicate, coupled with advancements in digital technology. One notable merit of social media is its ability to facilitate faster and more convenient information sharing. As Afolaranmi (2023, p. 14) notes, "Its growth has been powered by the human desire to communicate with one another and advance digital technologies." This highlights the crucial role social media plays in contemporary society. Furthermore, Olasinde (2014, p. 56) asserts that the widespread acceptance of social media has enabled the current generation to easily access any information they seek through the internet, particularly on social platforms. This underscores the profound transformation in global communication brought about by the advent of social media, fundamentally reshaping how people interact and share information worldwide.

Considering its widespread use, Ogunsola and Raji (2019, p. 1) observe that "religious organisations have started to incorporate the use of social media into their activities." In Nigeria, religion is predominantly expressed through three main forms: Christianity, Islam, and Traditional Religion. All three—particularly Christianity and Islam—have increasingly embraced social media in recent years, as noted by Nwankwo (2017, p. 17). Online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are now extensively used by religious bodies and institutions to connect with their congregations and reach a broader community. Social media usage spans across major

world religions, from Catholics to Buddhists, and is particularly prominent among evangelical churches, which often lead in adopting and leveraging digital technologies. These platforms are employed in innovative ways to build communities and extend influence. Cheong (2013) highlights this by stating, “A lot of religions are quite savvy. They use social media to brand their own organizations.”

One of the key advantages of social media for religious organizations is its ability to reach a larger audience. It facilitates communication with existing members while also attracting new followers, effectively supporting the mission of evangelization. Through these platforms, religious institutions share uplifting messages, provide timely updates about events, and foster instantaneous engagement with their followers. This approach aims to create a sense of togetherness and inclusion, strengthening community bonds. A study conducted by Afolaranmi (2022), titled “Peaceful Coexistence, Social Media, and the Nigerian Baptist Pastors: Challenges and Possible Ways Out,” highlights the significant impact of social media on the operations of faith-based organizations worldwide. The study particularly focused on stakeholders, such as church pastors in the Nigerian Baptist Convention, who have been leveraging social media in their ministries to promote peaceful coexistence among church members. Despite its role as a unifying tool, the study revealed that pastors face numerous challenges when using social media in their ministries and other aspects of their lives, especially in fostering peaceful coexistence within their communities.

Using semi-structured interviews, the study identified several obstacles to achieving peaceful coexistence through social media. One major issue is internet addiction, which interferes with individuals’ daily lives and limits their ability to engage thoughtfully with online content. According to the study, excessive internet usage often results in superficial interactions, reducing the effectiveness of social media as a tool for meaningful dialogue. Another significant challenge lies in information mismanagement, where the improper handling of online content exacerbates misunderstandings and conflicts. To address these challenges, the study recommended that pastors adopt a proactive approach to social media usage. This involves utilizing online platforms not only to promote religious coexistence but also to encourage peaceful coexistence in the broader society. Notably, the findings underscored that internet addiction contributes significantly to religious intolerance. The excessive time many individuals spend on social media—scrolling aimlessly through posts—diminishes their capacity for critical and respectful engagement with diverse perspectives.

It is important to note that internet addiction, which psychologically affects users, often subtly hinders their ability to engage thoughtfully with online content. When they do engage, it is

frequently through insults or the use of vulgar language in comment sections, escalating tensions and leading to cyber conflicts. Such behavior often results in verbal bullying and other negative interactions for those involved. If left unchecked, this can spiral into religious chaos, as has been observed in other parts of the world. Compounding the issue is the proliferation of fake and unverified posts and comments, which further inflame tensions and fuel conflicts.

Additionally, Dauda's (2023) study, "Social Media for Islamic Da'wah and Peaceful Coexistence in Yorubaland, Nigeria," examined the misuse of social media for Islamic Da'wah and its impact on peaceful coexistence in Yorubaland. Using a descriptive survey research design and observational methods, the study found that social media has significantly transformed the global patterns of Islamic Da'wah. However, its use by some Yoruba Muslim preachers (Du'at) has generated conflicting reactions. The study revealed that certain Du'at have utilized social media platforms to disseminate misinformation, hate speech, personal attacks, condemnation of fellow Muslims, and character defamation. These actions have led to persistent hostility, confrontations, and disunity among religious sects, fostering mistrust within the Muslim ummah and heightening tensions. This misuse of social media has also contributed to an increasing wave of Islamophobia, with non-Muslims questioning the nature of Da'wah propagation, the credibility of its messages, and the level of tolerance in Islam. The study concluded that contemporary Yoruba Du'at should leverage the positive potential of social media to promote peaceful coexistence. It emphasized that religious conflict remains the greatest threat to harmonious living, making it imperative for religious leaders to adopt a more constructive and unifying approach in their online engagements.

From both studies, it is evident that religious bodies and institutions have increasingly adopted social media as a tool to propagate their faith. This demonstrates that these organizations recognize social media as a powerful medium for conveying messages of faith to both adherents and non-adherents. Both studies also highlight that social media can either promote religious tolerance or foster intolerance, depending on how it is utilized and engaged with by followers and the broader public. While it serves as a vehicle for spreading messages of faith, it can also become a platform for intolerance and division. Although the studies focus on social media usage within Christian and Muslim contexts, this research explores its application within African Traditional Religion, with particular attention to the Omenala Church's social media platform, titled "Gospel of Truth: Omenala bu Uzo Ndu na Eziokwu." In line with the growing relevance of social media, African traditional worshippers have also leveraged this tool to spread their gospel and foster a sense of community.

However, concerns have arisen regarding cyberbullying and online abuse associated with some interactions on these platforms. Such negative behaviors significantly erode interpersonal

relationships and threaten religious coexistence. Alarming, instead of using social media creatively to draw people toward African Traditional Religion, some have opted for clandestine approaches that mock Christianity through provocative and confrontational content. These "bullish scripts" not only undermine the intended purpose of fostering unity but also escalate tensions, posing a serious threat to religious and peaceful coexistence.

Summarily, there have been many ways of communication in Africa that contributed positively to the peaceful coexistence of people before the arrival of the internet and social media as new means of communication. However, the fact that social media has taken over is worth studying. Despite its positive and negative impacts on peaceful co-existence, this study delves into its use by African Traditional Religion adherents. It is within the context of the destructive use of religion around the world, and in Nigeria particularly, that this study has decided to document its effect on social media.

Theoretical Framework

Social Media Engagement Theory explores the concept of how individuals interact with content on social media platforms through active participation and engagement. This includes actions such as likes, comments, shares, and other interactive behaviors that allow users to express their reactions and opinions about the content they encounter. A fundamental aspect of this theory is the notion of social presence or "connectedness" to both the content and other users on the platform. This connectedness can foster a sense of community and belonging, as well as establish trust and credibility in the information being shared. Another critical element of Social Media Engagement Theory is the role of social influence. Research indicates that individuals are more likely to engage with content that is popular or shared by trusted sources. This phenomenon facilitates the dissemination of information and ideas across networks of interconnected users. However, it can also lead to the creation of "echo chambers," where users are primarily exposed to information that aligns with and reinforces their existing beliefs and perspectives.

Several factors influence an individual's level of engagement on social media. These include: Platform Differences: The design and functionality of platforms (e.g., Facebook vs. Twitter) shape how users interact with content. Content Type: The format of content (text, images, or video) can significantly affect its appeal and engagement levels. User Characteristics and Motivations: Factors such as age, gender, interests, and personal motivations play a critical role in determining how and why individuals engage with social media content. (<https://open.ncl.ac.uk/academictheories/10/social-media-engagement-theory/>)

By understanding these dynamics, researchers and practitioners can better assess the impact of social media on user behavior and the broader digital ecosystem. One of the most popular strategies for fostering engagement on social media platforms is through the use of “gamification.” This approach incorporates game-like elements, such as points, badges, and leaderboards, to motivate users to interact with content and take specific actions, such as sharing or commenting on posts. Gamification can be an effective tool for boosting engagement and influencing user behavior, and it is frequently employed by brands and businesses to promote products and services. Social Media Engagement Theory is a dynamic and evolving field, reflecting the continuous changes in social media platforms and their usage. While studies have highlighted both the positive and negative aspects of social media engagement, understanding how engagement works is crucial for optimizing the use of these platforms. By leveraging the positive aspects of engagement and minimizing the negative ones, social media platforms can be used more effectively to enhance user experience and interactions. (<https://open.ncl.ac.uk/academictheories/10/social-media-engagement-theory/>)

In this study, Social Media Engagement Theory will be employed to explore the use of social media platforms, specifically Facebook, by individuals, with a focus on the posts and interactions conducted by a traditional religious body known as the Omenala Church. The study will examine the engagement by users, as well as the reactions and opinions generated from the content they encounter on the platform. Also, the content shared by the Omenala Church, including texts and other posts, will be analyzed to assess its implications on both the users and the wider society. This analysis will also provide a framework for understanding the motivations and behaviors of those who post content, as well as those who engage with it. Given that the study centers on Facebook, the findings will be specific to this platform and may not be applicable to others.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method, specifically an internet-based survey, which qualifies as Social Media Research. Social media data, which includes information collected from social media networks, illustrates how users share, view, or engage with content. The research was conducted using Facebook, a prominent social media platform. The advantages of collecting data via social media are significant, as it helps to limit bias, supports open sampling, and enables both tracking and directing of sampling efforts (Mirabeu, Mignerat & Grange, 2013). Additionally, social media platforms provide easy access to large volumes of raw data. Fricker (2008) suggests that internet-based surveys can utilize both probability and nonprobability sampling methods. This study adopts the probability sampling method, which allows the researcher to establish criteria for selecting the social media platform used. The Gospel of Truth, Omenala bu Uzo Ndu na Eziokwu a platform dedicated to the promotion of Igbo African Traditional Religion (Omenala

and Odinala), was selected for its visibility and active presence in the digital space. The criteria for choosing this platform are as follows:

1. The platform has a Facebook account.
2. The page is updated regularly (on a daily or weekly basis).
3. The researcher liked the Facebook page and subsequently followed it.

To collect data, the researcher monitored posts on the platform over a three-year period, from December 2, 2022, to January 15, 2025. Given the frequent posting of contents, which this study refers to 'scripts' on the platform, the study randomly selected posts based on their relevance and timeliness in relation to the research objectives. In addition, the comments made under each post were collected for analysis. The engagement with posts, including comments made by followers, was analyzed to identify patterns of interaction and to relate them to the study's objectives. Both primary and secondary sources were utilized in this research. Instances of derogatory comments and the subsequent banter were analyzed, with a focus on how these interactions align with the themes of the study. Primary data was gathered from the Facebook platform, while secondary data was sourced from books, academic journals, and other reputable online sources.

The Bullish Script: Social Media and the Theatrics of Omenala Church

In the contemporary world, many people identify themselves as adherents of particular religions. Over the past 100-150 years, records indicate that the majority of traditional worshippers in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria were encouraged to abandon their indigenous belief systems in favor of Christianity, brought by European missionaries. Christianity, particularly the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist denominations, faced significant challenges in penetrating many Igbo communities. These Christian denominations, with their doctrines centered on the worship of one God and Savior, criticized traditional worshippers, claiming that they had been deceived into abandoning their traditional practices (Omenala) in favor of what they termed "repentance."

However, in recent times, a shift is occurring in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria, as many Christians are now returning to their roots, repenting and turning back to Omenala. The Omenala Church, which holds weekly gatherings every Sunday at their worship center along the OnitshaNkpor-Enugu Highway, follows the ancient practices of their ancestors in worshiping Chukwu Okike Abiama (God Almighty), without any European influence. To further propagate their religion, a Facebook page titled Omenala bu Uzo Eziokwu na Ndu was created, which has gained 73,000 followers. The main goal of the platform is to preserve and propagate Igbo culture while remaining loyal to their ancestors.

However, rather than peacefully promoting their faith through posts and comments, the platform has chosen to attack Christianity using derogatory language, disregarding the diverse religious backgrounds of their followers. Their success in gaining followers is largely attributed to the emotionally charged and dramatic scripts they produce daily and weekly. These posts often blame Christianity for the decline of Igbo cultural practices. This inflammatory rhetoric has led to frequent misunderstandings, quarrels, and exchanges of harsh words between adherents of Omenala and Christians. The aggressive nature of this propagation has escalated tensions, resulting in conflicts and crises of significant proportions. Thus, the creation and use of social media for religious propagation have fundamentally transformed the way religions spread their messages. The case of the Omenala Church highlights how social media, while a tool for spreading religious messages, can also become a platform for religious confrontation and division.

On October 13, 2024, a post containing an inflammatory message was made, reading as follows: "Reality has hit Onyeze Jesus, and his power is nowhere to be found. Everyone has fallen to human beings, contributing money for his freedom—no angel or spirit is around to perform miracles. I still wonder why our people hate someone who loves them and has decided to tell them the truth of life, instead of continuing in deception. The day reality hits you, you will understand how useless that Jesus and your Bible God really are. Keep following your slave Jesus and his gang in Nigeria. When reality hits you, then you will realize the importance of man and humanity. I wish you a quick release—aka na asa uchu (quick release)."

The post generated significant engagement, accumulating 1,300 comments and 133 shares. In the message, the poster mocked the kidnapping of a religious leader, drawing a comparison to the thief on the left side of the cross who mocked Jesus for his inability to save himself. The comments that followed came from both Christians and adherents of the African Traditional Religion (ATR), specifically Omenala. Some Christian users responded with statements such as "Jesus still remains Alpha and Omega," which angered some Omenala adherents. In retaliation, these adherents insulted the Christian commenters, calling them "efulefu" (fool). Other Omenala followers contended that when reality strikes, Christians often forget God. More insults followed, with some users calling the Christian commenters "Ewu" (goat), while others claimed that the poster (whom they considered a mentor in Omenala) is knowledgeable and vast, hence, cannot be telling a lie. The situation escalated to the point where the poster was urged to stop being a "nuisance" online.

Again, in a TikTok video posted on August 21, 2023, a provocative script was shared that read: "I told you that in no distant time Christianity will be a joke in our land." This carefully crafted message generated substantial engagement, with 2,000 comments, 782 shares, and 70,000 views. The comments that followed were filled with insults and negative remarks, resulting in a

heated exchange between Christian adherents and followers of traditional religion. While Christians responded with moderate comments like “Jesus reigns and lives forever” and “Jesus will continue to be Lord over all,” the adherents of African Traditional Religion retaliated with derogatory remarks. These interactions quickly escalated into a verbal battle, with insults flying from both sides. Some of the followers of traditional religion intentionally sought to degrade Christians emotionally and mentally, simply because of their religious affiliation. This scenario reflects the reality that while digital technology has created new avenues for interaction, it has also led to the emergence of new forms of online harassment (Rhea & Ahuja, 2020).

On January 10, 2025, another post appeared on the Facebook page, reading: “Thank you so much, beloved brother, for rejecting European slavery to accept our ancestors’ way of life, which means freedom.” In this post, the author praised an Anambra Catholic priest who had resigned from his position to embrace African Traditional Religion. The followers of Omenala hailed the priest as “The number one hero of the year,” celebrating his decision to join their faith. However, many Christian adherents expressed disappointment and sadness over the priest’s defection. In response, they were verbally harassed by the followers of African Traditional Religion, who repeatedly referred to Christianity as “a religion of mental slavery.

Even more, on January 11, 2025, a post shared on the Omenala Church's social media platform read: “No pastor believes in the Bible, and they know that Jesus is powerless, which is why they move around with armed guards and seek private doctors. Yet, you continue to believe them. No wonder you are called sheep (Aturu).” This provocative message sparked laughter and a flurry of shares among adherents who were enthusiastic about the post. Among the comments, one adherent referred to pastors as “scammers” and “yahoo yahoo,” calling them “pulpit bandits,” while a Christian commenter responded, stating, “Jesus is my power.” This comment, however, provoked a wave of insults from adherents of the African Traditional Religion (Omenala), who called the Christian commenter “efulefu” (fool) and other derogatory names. This kind of online behavior reflects a deep lack of religious respect by the Omenala church and has become a significant obstacle to the peaceful coexistence of religious groups on social media.

The constant banter and insults following each post contribute to the ongoing cycle of online conflicts. Despite the potential for social media to foster positive engagement and dialogue, the Omenala church has opted to use Facebook as a platform for spreading hate speech against Christianity. This has led to a series of quarrels and verbal altercations between adherents of different faiths. Instead of using social media to promote understanding and peaceful coexistence, it has become a tool for stirring religious tensions. As noted by Paul (2019), “Religious conflicts have far-reaching implications for peace, national security, and development in any society” (p.

53). Thus, the divisive use of social media by the Omenala Church only contributes to the broader challenges of religious intolerance and social fragmentation.

From the above, it is clear that an online or virtual religious conflict exists, primarily stemming from disagreements between adherents of Christianity and the African Traditional Religion (Omenala). Findings from this research reveal that religion continues to play a significant role in the lives of Nigerians, with many individuals choosing to identify strongly with their religious beliefs. It also shows that religion interacts with the broader society in which it functions. However, the tolerance level among adherents of the Igbo traditional religion appears to be minimal. This aligns with Paul (2019, p. 62), who argues that “religious intolerance, fundamentalism, and extremism are co-pilots of the vehicle of religious violence.” This is evident in the way adherents of Omenala assert their religious superiority, using this as justification for their frequent attacks on the Christian faith through the Omenala Facebook page.

The use of social media by the Omenala Church to advance its gospel has been marred by conflicts between Christians and adherents of African Traditional Religion. This tension is largely due to the lack of decorum in the discourse on the platform. The absence of a minimum standard of respectful engagement has only deepened divisions, leading to growing distrust and suspicion between religious groups. The comment section on the Omenala Church’s page is often filled with records of occasional conflicts, with some posts resulting in heated exchanges. Furthermore, the misuse of religion in this context has had serious consequences, leading to the destruction of lives, as many individuals have been maimed and wounded as a result of the religious tensions exacerbated by these online interactions.

Considering that this study uses social media as a tool for examining religious discourse, it is essential to note the significant effects of the verbal harassment carried out by the Omenala Church. Such harassment deeply affects those who, uncomfortable with the insults, decide to defend their religion. It becomes evident that when core values, norms, beliefs, and ideologies are tampered with, conflicts inevitably arise. Religion, in this context, has become a potent weapon for division. The consequences of this online tension are particularly felt in the cultural landscape, where adherents of a specific religion dominate, cultivating suspicion and animosity. Given the vital role religion plays in shaping society, Paul (2019, p. 56) asserts that religion and society are deeply interconnected, influencing each other in profound ways. It is therefore crucial that adherents of both Omenala and Christianity take conscious steps to build bridges of religious understanding and mutual respect.

This study recommends that a targeted Behavior Change Communication (BCC) strategy be developed for social media users to discourage such online theatrics and verbal conflicts. Tolerance must also be promoted, as it is an essential virtue in conflict management. Additionally, dialogue should be employed as an effective means of resolving these conflicts, fostering a more respectful and peaceful online and offline religious discourse.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that the adoption of social media has significantly transformed and layered Nigerian society. While it has provided abundant opportunities for individuals, businesses, and organizations to thrive, it has also created a space where the vulnerable, especially within religious communities, can be bullied by anyone comfortably seated in the safety of their home. The ramifications of such online harassment are often devastating and long-lasting. This underscores the urgent need to build bridges of religious understanding and mutual respect.

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