

Social Media, Spiral of Silence and Audience Reaction to Religious Media Contents: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This research paper examines the impact of social media on public engagement with religious media content, the Spiral of Silence theory, and audience reactions to such content. Social media has transformed the way religious content is created, distributed, and consumed. However, the Spiral of Silence phenomenon holds that individuals are less likely to express views or opinions that they believe others will disagree with. The study explores how social media is affecting the willingness of individuals to discuss and engage with religious media contents and how individuals react to these contents. The paper highlights real-life examples of controversies in Nigerian religious social media and analyzes the potential risks and rewards of religious media content dissemination on social media. The study concludes that social media platforms have become key players in the dissemination of religious media contents and have created unique challenges and opportunities for religious communication. The Spiral of Silence theory is still applicable in the context of discussions about religious media contents on social media, and it has the potential to silence minority opinions and magnify the impact of dominant ones. Additionally, audiences' reactions to religious media contents on social media are diverse and complex, driven by a range of factors such as religious affiliation, personal beliefs, and broader societal trends. However, it is important to be mindful of the potential ethical and theological challenges that arise from producing and sharing religious media content on social media. Audiences' reactions to religious media contents are complex and can vary widely depending on several factors, including religious

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affiliation and societal trends. Finally, the study recommends ways to improve the dissemination of religious media content, increase user privacy and make algorithms more transparent, and prevent the spread of misinformation and hate speech. Future research should focus on further examining the impact of social media on the distribution and reception of religious media contents.

Keywords: Social media, spiral of silence, audience reaction, religious media contents

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an integral part of modern life, permeating virtually every social facet of human activity. It has become the channel through which people communicate, share information and interact online. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have become primary sources of information, entertainment, communication, and even political discourse. The impact of social media on society is undeniable, from shaping economic trends to influencing political outcomes. One of the significant effects of social media on society is that it has drastically changed the way people communicate. Social media platforms provide a wide range of tools and features that enable people to connect and interact with one another in various ways (Kim, 2020). For instance, the use of emojis, stickers, and gifs has transformed how people express emotions and convey information. In addition, social media platforms now offer messaging features that allow users to share content in real-time, reinforcing the impression of being with other people.

Another impact of social media on society is that it has democratized access to information. Social media platforms empower users to source and share information, leading to the emergence of citizen journalism. As a result, traditional media outlets no longer have a monopoly on the distribution of information, and users can now access news and information from a wide range of sources. However, social media has its downsides. One of the major concerns is that social media use can lead to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health-related issues. This is partly due to the unrealistic expectations and constant need for validation that social media can engender. Additionally, social media platforms can be used to spread fake news, hate speech, and propaganda, which can lead to social unrest, political polarization, and even violence.

In the 21st century, however, social media has become a ubiquitous and indispensable aspect of modern life. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have become primary sources of information, entertainment, and communication for billions of



people all over the world. According to a report by the Pew Research Center (2019), about 69% of American adults use social media platforms, and among them, Facebook is the most popular platform. However, social media is not just a platform for sharing information and connecting with friends. It is also a platform where users can express their opinions and beliefs. This leads to a unique phenomenon known as the "Spiral of Silence," which posits that individuals will often conceal their opinions to avoid isolation or retribution (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) cited in Hjarvard (2018). In the context of social media, people might conceal their opinions online if they feel that their views are unpopular or that they might face backlash from the virtual community.

Meanwhile, religious media contents are a crucial aspect of the information disseminated on social media. Rahman, Uddin & Haider (2020, p. 275) support that "religious media content plays a significant role in shaping the attitudes, beliefs, and values of individuals, especially within religious communities". The portrayal of religious messages and themes shapes the opinions and beliefs of many individuals, especially within religious communities. Religious media contents might include texts, visuals, or audio files that reflect the tenets, beliefs, and doctrines of a particular religion. Supporting this claim, Hoover (2017, p. 57) observed that:

In a world where social media platforms are becoming increasingly popular, religious leaders and organizations are leveraging social media to disseminate their messages and reach wider audiences. Religious media content can take different forms, including written, video, and audio formats. These contents are used by religious leaders and organizations to convey religious teachings, inspire, and motivate their followers. For instance, religious media contents may contain themes such as forgiveness, love, compassion, and charity, which are fundamental and central to many religious traditions.

Social media platforms provide religious communities with an avenue to share and connect with others who share their beliefs and values. The use of social media by religious communities is particularly prevalent among younger people, who are more likely to rely on social media for news and information. Religious media content on social media can help foster a sense of community among believers, offer spiritual guidance, and provide a platform for discussion and debate. Religious media content on social media can also function to educate and engage non-believers. Individuals who are curious about a particular religion can use social media to seek out information and engage with believers (Leurs, Ponzanesi & Accornero-Guy, 2018). Additionally, religious media content can promote interfaith dialogue and understanding, which can help to reduce religious tensions and promote greater respect and tolerance among different religious



communities. However, Adegoke & Phiri (2018, p. 254) note that “the dissemination of religious media content on social media is not without its challenges. The unregulated nature of social media platforms means that there is a risk of religious groups spreading extremist views, hate speech, and misinformation”. This is particularly true in times of political or social upheaval, where religious leaders and followers may use social media to spread intolerant or divisive messages.

Albeit, the impact that religious media contents have on audiences has not been extensively studied, and it is unclear how social media platforms contribute to this impact. Therefore, this paper aims to scrutinize how social media affects the spiral of silence theory and the audience's reaction to religious media contents. Specifically, it will explore how social media platforms affect the behavior and opinions of religious media consumers.

Statement of the Problem

It is evident that social media has become a vital tool for religious organizations to disseminate and engage audiences with their religious media contents. It has become an increasingly important channel for the dissemination of religious media contents. However, the effects of social media on individuals' willingness to engage in discussions about religious media contents, and how they react to these contents, remain under-researched. The Spiral of Silence theory suggests that individuals may be hesitant to express unpopular opinions for fear of social isolation, leading to a 'spiral of silence.' It is essential to explore whether this theory holds in the realm of discussions about religious media contents on social media. This has given rise to the question of whether social media is affecting the willingness of individuals to partake in discussions about religious media contents, as well as how individuals react to these contents.

Religious media contents, which are often associated with strong beliefs and values, may be particularly susceptible to the Spiral of Silence phenomenon. How then does social media affect the willingness of individuals to discuss or engage with religious media contents, and how do people react to these contents? Does the Spiral of Silence theory hold true when it comes to discussions of religious beliefs and practices on social media? What factors influence the willingness of individuals to engage with religious media content on social media, and how do these factors differ across different religious traditions, age groups, and social media platforms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media and its impact on communication: A Discourse

Social media has revolutionized the way people communicate and interact with each



other. In the modern digital age, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have become integral tools for personal communication, business marketing, political activism, and much more. These platforms have become ubiquitous in modern society, with billions of users worldwide (Iwuchukwu, 2019). Social media has changed the nature of communication in several ways. First, it has facilitated a more democratized form of communication, allowing individuals to express their opinions and ideas more freely without the need for intermediaries. This has led to increased diversity and inclusiveness in communication, allowing marginalized groups to have their voices heard. Additionally, social media platforms have enabled people to connect across geographical, cultural, and social boundaries, allowing them to form virtual communities around shared interests and causes (Osinubi, 2017).

However, social media has also had negative impacts on communication. The anonymity and lack of face-to-face contact on social media have led to increased incivility, harassment, and cyberbullying. Additionally, the use of social media algorithms to personalize content may lead to the creation of echo chambers, where people only interact with others who share similar views, leading to the reinforcement of biases and polarization. The impact of social media on communication has been especially significant in the domain of religious communication. Religious organizations have increasingly utilized social media to reach out to their members and to engage with the wider public. Social media platforms have facilitated the broadcasting of religious messages, the formation of virtual religious communities, and the dissemination of religious content (Ezeanya, 2018).

Interestingly, social media has also presented several challenges for religious communication. For instance, the anonymity of social media may encourage individuals to misrepresent their religious affiliations or beliefs, leading to confusion and disputes. Additionally, the use of social media by non-religious groups to disseminate negative or offensive content about specific religions or religious groups may exacerbate tensions and undermine religious communication efforts. Social media platforms have also presented several opportunities for religious communication (Anifowose, 2018). For instance, social media platforms have enabled religious organizations to expand their reach beyond their traditional geographical boundaries. Religious practitioners can now connect and interact with individuals from different parts of the world, expanding their understanding of diverse religious traditions and practices.

Also, social media platforms have facilitated the formation of networks and alliances among different religious groups, enabling joint efforts towards common goals such as interfaith cooperation, peacebuilding, and social justice. Social media platforms have also enabled religious



organizations to quickly respond to crises or disasters, and to mobilize resources and support for those in need (Adeyemi & Eletta, 2017). However, religious communication via social media also poses certain ethical and theological challenges. For instance, the use of social media in religious communication raises questions around the authenticity and authority of religious messages and the problem of selective quoting. Additionally, social media platforms may not be consistent with the principles of certain religious traditions regarding modesty, privacy, and the proper use of communication technologies, raising concerns around ethical and moral implications (Okeke-Uzodike, 2018).

Spiral of Silence Theory and its Application in Social Media

The Spiral of Silence theory, developed by German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, explains how individuals try to gauge the dominant public opinion and modify their own views accordingly to avoid social isolation. According to the theory, individuals who perceive themselves to hold a minority opinion tend to remain silent, while those who believe they hold a majority opinion tend to be more vocal. Over time, the dominant opinion becomes more entrenched (Bakir & McStay, 2018). The theory posits that this dynamic creates a spiral, with the minority opinion becoming increasingly marginalized and the majority opinion reinforced.

In the era of social media, the Spiral of Silence theory has been applied to understand online communication dynamics. Social media platforms have created a space for individuals to express their opinions publicly, leading some to argue that the theory is less relevant in a world where everyone has a voice (Faris & Roberts, 2018). However, studies have shown that individuals are still susceptible to the dynamics of the spiral of silence on social media. One reason for this is that online social networks are not completely inclusive, and individuals are still likely to be exposed to opinions that reflect their existing biases. Algorithms designed to personalize users' newsfeeds can also reinforce existing beliefs and provide a simplistic view of complex issues. This can create a feedback loop where individuals are not exposed to dissenting opinions, further entrenching the dominant view and shrinking the space for minority opinions. Another factor is that social media platforms provide an explicit metric of popularity in the form of likes, shares, and retweets. Users are incentivized to conform to the dominant opinion to gain social currency, leading to self-censorship and the amplification of the dominant opinion, which can discourage the expression of minority views.

Since the social media has become an essential part of our daily lives, providing a platform for individuals to express their opinions and engage with others, social media platforms such as



Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram provide a space for all users to share their ideas. The Spiral of Silence theory suggests that there is still a dominant public opinion that can silence minority voices, regardless. One example of the application of the Spiral of Silence theory in social media is seen in the 2016 United States Presidential Election. After Donald Trump won, many liberals were surprised by the result, as they believed that Hillary Clinton was more popular. However, research has shown that many individuals who supported Trump did not publicly express their support on social media due to the fear of backlash and social isolation from their peers. In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, it was found that 59% of Trump supporters believed that social media platforms censored conservative voices. As a result, even though Trump's supporters were in the majority, they remained relatively silent on social media, while Clinton's supporters, who believed they held the minority opinion, were more vocal. This ultimately led to an undercounting of Trump supporters on social media, creating an impression that Clinton had a greater chance of winning (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Another example is seen in the response to climate change on social media platforms. While there is a scientific consensus that climate change is occurring, there is a vocal minority that denies it. These individuals use social media to amplify their views and resist efforts to tackle climate change. This creates a perception that climate change is a controversial issue, discouraging individuals who support action on climate change from expressing their opinions. Research has found that social media algorithms can reinforce the Spiral of Silence by promoting posts and content that already align with users' existing views (McLeod & Becker, 2009; Scheufele, 2013). For example, an individual who follows pages and personalities espousing conservative views will receive more content that aligns with those views, and this can lead to the individual being less likely to express controversial opinions that do not align with their social media feeds. This dynamic can create an echo chamber of opinions, further marginalizing minority voices.

Also, the application of the Spiral of Silence theory is not limited to political issues but also extends to religious issues. social media has become an integral part of religious discourse in recent times. It provides a platform for individuals to connect with others who share similar beliefs and values (Moy & Gastil, 2006). However, just like with political issues, the Spiral of Silence theory is still applicable when it comes to religious issues and social media. For example, in a research study conducted by a religious organization, it was discovered that many members who held non-traditional views on certain religious doctrines did not express their opinions on social media due to the fear of backlash and social isolation from their peers. The study found that 70% of the members surveyed felt that their views were not represented in their religious community, and



this led to their silence on social media (Shepard, 2017). Similarly, in the online discussion of religious issues, there is a vocal minority who are opposed to certain practices, while the majority of members support them. These individuals use social media to amplify their views and resist efforts to be more inclusive (Olukotun, 2017). Consequently, this creates a perception that religious practices are divisive and controversial, discouraging individuals who support inclusivity from expressing their opinions openly.

Religious Media Contents and their Dissemination on Social Media

Religion has always been an important aspect of human life, and the evolution of media has played a crucial role in shaping its impact on society. The use of traditional media such as books, newspapers, and television for religious content dissemination has long been the norm. However, in recent years social media has emerged as a new avenue for religious content creators to spread their messages to a wider audience. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become hotspots for religious content dissemination, with millions of users engaging with religious content every day. Religious leaders, organizations, and individuals are using these platforms to promote their messages, share inspirational stories, and provide personal reflections on their religious beliefs (van Dijk, 2012).

The use of social media for religious content dissemination has several benefits. Firstly, it provides an opportunity for religious content creators to engage with a global audience and disseminate their messages beyond their immediate physical community. Secondly, social media allows for quick and easy sharing of content, making it easier to spread religious messages to a wider audience. Thirdly, social media platforms have features such as live streaming, which allows for real-time interactions between content creators and their audiences, creating a sense of community among followers (Naaman, Becker & Gravano, 2011). However, the dissemination of religious media contents on social media is not without its challenges. One major challenge is the issue of authenticity. There is a growing concern that social media platforms are becoming a breeding ground for misinformation, and this has also led to the spread of false or misleading religious content. This can have serious consequences, especially in the case of religiously motivated violence, where social media platforms can be used to disseminate extremist views and ideologies (Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl & Pingree, 2015).

Another challenge is the vulnerability of users to religious propaganda. Social media algorithms often track users' interests and activities to provide personalized content recommendations (Brough, 2017). This feature makes social media users susceptible to being fed



religious contents that confirm their existing beliefs, thereby deepening existing divides and encouraging polarization. Moreover, the tension between religious freedom and hate speech on social media is becoming a major concern. While social media platforms allow for the expression of diverse religious views, hate speech and offensive content that attacks particular religious or ethnic groups can lead to tension and conflict in society (Cheong & Ismail, 2018). Therefore, social media companies must create and enforce policies to regulate the dissemination of religious media contents on their platforms.

Audiences' Reactions to Religious Media Contents

Audiences' reactions to religious media content can vary widely depending on a range of factors, including the content itself, the intended audience, and the context in which it's presented. For some audiences, viewing religious media content can be a deeply meaningful and personal experience, providing inspiration, comfort, and a sense of community. In some cases, religious media content can also help individuals to strengthen their faith, find answers to challenging questions, and deepen their understanding of religious teachings and practices. However, other audiences may have a more critical or skeptical view of religious media content. In some cases, this may stem from differences in belief or religious affiliation, while in other cases, it may reflect broader societal attitudes toward religion and religious institutions. Some people may also be put off by religious media content that is seen as overly preachy or dogmatic, or that fails to recognize the complex realities of contemporary life (Zimmerman, 2020).

Another potential factor that can influence audience reactions to religious media content is the way in which it is presented or marketed. For example, viewers may be more receptive to religious media content if it is framed in a way that resonates with their personal experience or presents a fresh perspective on a familiar topic. Conversely, if religious media content is presented in a way that comes across as preachy or judgmental, viewers may be turned off or feel that the content is irrelevant to their lives. It's worth noting that reactions to religious media content can also be highly influenced by broader cultural and social trends. For example, in some parts of the world, there may be greater tolerance for religious diversity and a more receptive attitude toward religious media content, while in other areas, there may be more skepticism or outright hostility toward religion. Meanwhile, the ways in which audiences react to religious media content are complex and multifaceted, reflecting a wide range of individual and contextual factors. As such, it's important for religious media creators to be aware of and sensitive to the diversity of perspectives and experiences that audiences bring to their work, in order to create content that



resonates with viewers in meaningful and impactful ways (Waldron & Waldron, 2019).

Audiences' reactions to religious media contents vary depending on factors such as their religious affiliation, perspectives, and attitudes toward religion. For example, in some cases, viewers may be open to religious media content that aligns with their beliefs and values, while in other cases, they may be skeptical or resistant to it. In the United States, for example, some conservative evangelical Christian communities have responded positively to religious media content that reinforces their worldview and promotes traditional family values (Poole & Richardson, 2020). Conversely, more liberal audiences may be more receptive to religious content that emphasizes social justice and progressive causes. In addition, some viewers may be drawn to religious content that speaks to their personal experiences and provides a source of comfort and inspiration. One example of religious media content that has sparked strong reactions from audiences is the TV show "The Handmaid's Tale." Based on a dystopian novel by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, the show depicts a future in which an authoritarian regime has taken control of the United States and imposed a theocratic system that brutally subjugates women. The show has been praised for its powerful critiques of fundamentalism and religious extremism, and has been criticized by some religious critics who argue that it misrepresents Christianity and promotes an anti-religious agenda (Chang & Henry, 2019).

Another example is the popular podcast "Serial," which explores the case of Adnan Syed, a Muslim man who was convicted of murdering his ex-girlfriend. The podcast has been praised for its detailed investigation and nuanced storytelling, but has also been criticized by some for perpetuating negative stereotypes of Muslim men and failing to adequately consider the role of racial and religious bias in Syed's conviction. In the world of social media, religious media content can also spark strong reactions and debates among audiences. For example, the video-sharing platform YouTube is home to a wide range of religious content, including sermons, spiritual teachings, and religious debates. While some viewers may find these videos to be helpful and informative, others may view them as promoting extreme or intolerant views, or as spreading misinformation or propaganda (Khan, 2016). However, audiences' reactions to religious media contents are complex and shaped by a wide range of personal, cultural, and social factors. Understanding these dynamics is critical for religious media creators and producers, who must navigate diverse audiences and perspectives in order to create content that is meaningful, impactful, and respectful of religious diversity and beliefs.



Social Media, Spiral of Silence and Religious Contents: The Case Dr. Abel Damina and Nigerian Religious Social Media Users

Social media has drastically changed the way religious content is created, distributed, and consumed. With the rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, religious leaders and organizations have been able to connect with audiences in new and innovative ways, using these platforms to share sermons, religious teachings, and inspirational messages. However, the dynamics of social media can also create challenges for religious content creators and consumers. For example, the "spiral of silence" phenomenon, which suggests that people are less likely to express views or opinions that they believe others will disagree with, can impact the visibility and impact of religious content on social media. This can be particularly challenging for minority religious groups or individuals who feel that their views are not represented or are actively marginalized on social media. One example of this dynamic can be seen in the case of Nigerian religious leader Dr. Abel Damina and his followers. Damina is a prominent Christian pastor and leader of the Power City International Church in Uyo, Nigeria. He has a large following on social media, where he regularly shares religious teachings and commentary on current events.

Earlier in 2024, Dr. Abel Damina became embroiled in a controversy with Pastor E.A Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church over Adeboye's claim that he had "tea with God." In a video shared on social media, Adeboye made the claim that he had a personal relationship with God and had a cup of tea with him. Damina publicly criticized Adeboye's claim, arguing that it was not biblical and could lead to confusion and deception among believers. This argument sparked a heated debate on social media, with both supporters and critics of Damina and Adeboye sharing their views and opinions. However, some observers noted that many Nigerian social media users may have been hesitant to express their opinions on the controversy due to the "spiral of silence" dynamics at play. This may have been particularly true for followers of Adeboye or other major religious figures who may have felt discouraged from engaging in the debate.

Similarly, in another controversial issue, Damina also debunked the idea of giving 10% of one's income as a tithe to the church, a practice widely followed by many Christians around the world. Damina argued that there was no biblical basis for the concept of tithing, and that it was a misinterpretation of scripture that had been perpetuated by some religious leaders and organizations. Once again, this argument sparked a heated debate on social media, with supporters and critics of Damina sharing their views and opinions. However, the "spiral of silence" phenomenon may have impacted the visibility and impact of these opinions, particularly for individuals who felt that their views were not represented in the debate.



CONCLUSION

Social media has transformed the way people interact, communicate, and consume information, including religious media content. The Spiral of Silence theory, which posits that individuals may be hesitant to express unpopular opinions for fear of social isolation, remains applicable to social media. The theory holds that individuals may conceal their opinions online if they feel that their views are unpopular or that they might face backlash from the virtual community. This is particularly applicable in discussions about political and religious issues on social media. Religious media contents have become widespread on social media platforms, and they significantly influence the attitudes and beliefs of individuals, especially within religious communities.

This study has explored the impact of social media, the spiral of silence theory, and audience reactions on religious media contents. The study established that social media platforms have become key players in the dissemination of religious media contents and have created unique challenges and opportunities for religious communication. The Spiral of Silence theory is still applicable in the context of discussions about religious media contents on social media, and it has the potential to silence minority opinions and magnify the impact of dominant ones. Additionally, audiences' reactions to religious media contents on social media are diverse and complex, driven by a range of factors such as religious affiliation, personal beliefs, and broader societal trends. However, it is important to be mindful of the potential ethical and theological challenges that arise from producing and sharing religious media content on social media. Audiences' reactions to religious media contents are complex and can vary widely depending on several factors, including religious affiliation and societal trends. This paper highlights the dynamic interactions between social media, the Spiral of Silence theory, and religious contents.

Recommendations

- i. Religious leaders and organizations should take into consideration the potential biases and limitations of social media algorithms when disseminating religious media contents. They should seek to diversify their message dissemination channels to reach a wider audience.
- ii. Social media platforms should conduct more intensive moderation and engage in the prevention of the spread of misinformation and hate speech to reduce the risk of social unrest, political polarization and religious tensions.
- iii. Religious practitioners should be mindful of the potential ethical and theological challenges that arise from producing and sharing religious media content on social media.



Religious media content should avoid being preachy or judgmental and should recognize the complex realities of contemporary life.

- iv. Religious communities should invest in creating and maintaining open and inclusive communication channels that allow individuals to express their opinions without fear of social isolation or condemnation.
- v. Social media providers should implement measures to increase user privacy and make the algorithms more transparent. This transparency will allow users to understand why they receive certain religious media contents and allow for a better understanding of users' preferences.
- vi. Future research should focus on further examining the impact of social media on the distribution and reception of religious media contents, paying close attention to the role played by factors such as age, gender, religious affiliation, and cultural background. This will help to create a more nuanced and detailed understanding of social media's impact on religious communication and provide more targeted recommendations for future religious communication.

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