Cyberspace as a New Area of Mission for Seventh Day Adventist Church, Kisii Central - Nyanchwa Station, South Kenya Conference.

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the cyberspace as a new area of mission for Seventh Day Adventist church, Kisii central - Nyanchwa station, South Kenya conference. The study employed the Uses and Gratification theory of assessment to understand the involvement of the SDA church in cyberspace as a new area of mission in a manner that enlarges its evangelical horizons. Personal interviews were conducted with pastors, ICTs technocrats, youth, church clerks and church members to establish the place of technology in the mission of Kisii Central SDA church that makes technology an important area of mission in terms of use and church mission itself. The implied clusters gave data of both users and implementers of technology to benefit the church community. Analyses and data presentation used frequency tables and percentages. Therefore, it would be erroneous to think that technology is absolutely good. The study has demonstrated that cyberspace is a new mission area instrumentally and subject to evangelical church missions. Cyberspace technologies are becoming increasingly instrumental in the Kisii Central SDA church mission that gives her relevance in the technological society. In addition, cyberspace technologies are used in worship, prayer, the transmission of sermons and preaching of the gospel, motivational text messages, formation of online church groups, religious instructions. The study recommended that the church commit herself fully to finding viable ways to evangelize cyberspace as the new area of mission.

Key Terms: Technology, cyberspace, church, mission, evangelism, cyber groups.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The advancements in cyberspace technologies, particularly information and communications technologies (ICTs) enable people to go beyond the boundaries of space and time. Today, it is unusual to find people not using internet-related technologies like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, collection of blogs, texting, live streaming media, etc. The Church cannot fold its arms and watch other institutions use these technologies to their advantage only since they can play a central role in the spread of Christianity; various technologies offer an incredible opportunity to the Church to reach out to members all over the world. Tan (2009) argued that social networking had become part of the church's pastoral ministry. If the church does not embrace cyberspace technologies for her membership networking and mission, then she is bound to be left behind.. Despite being technology users and in need of a Christian message, her members will not receive the Christian message. Seventh - day Adventist (SDA) churches, in their attempts to fulfil the missionary mandate of Christ to go out to all nations to preach the Good News, are challenged to reach out to such unchartered cyberspace territories to share the message of Christ. Cyberspace technologies enable the church to enhance and promote traditional church ministries and do missions in the technological society worship, fellowship, pastoral care, education, mission, community outreach, evangelism and communications. It should be gracefully understood that cyberspace is unavoidably a new area of mission where the church encounters several new members, especially the young generation. This claim necessitates investigating the involvement of Kisii Central SDA church in cyberspace as her new area of mission.

In today's technological society, the reality of the Church in relation to cyberspace has greatly changed, particularly the concept of mission and evangelism. Many people, particularly the youth, are found in cyberspace using cyber technologies for various purposes - relationships, trade, social groups, education, etc. Many activities that call for the church's presence to religious significance go through cyberspace. Furthermore, there are aspects of the believing community that need the enhancement of technology - the aged, sick, people with physical disabilities, distance due to poor road infrastructure; all these realities make some section of the Christian community not fully participate in the reality of the church thereby calling for the need to implement technology to enable them to participate in the church. Technology has overtaken various aspects of the traditional church model rooted in physical and spatial engagements. It is equally vital to argue that the technologies used in cyberspace, despite being good, also embed negative aspects that need to be evangelized. Therefore, it would be erroneous to think that technology is absolutely good.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The great mission of the Church is to preach the Good News to the ends of the earth following the command of her master Jesus Christ: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; teach them to observe all that I commanded you; and I am with you to the ends of time" (Matthew 28: 19 - 20). This is realized through various available means. Dawson (2005) and Pautler

(2010) contend that cyberspace technologies play a central role in spreading the Christian message and religious activities and experience. Today, technology takes over the instrumental part and functions to meet the goals of religion for its relevance; it does this by giving spiritual guidance and moral orientation, participating in virtual religious rituals, services, meditation sessions, worship, confessional exchanges, religious instructions (teachings), discussions, testimony services, and intercessory prayer groups (Cloete, 2015).

Under instrumental role, Vergel (2010) affirms that cyberspace technologies used by the Church provide optimum functions to the church. Such instrumental parts are realized through various internet-related technologies like Websites, Facebook, Twitter, Webinar and Zoom for live streaming activities, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc. Grinter et al. (2011) argue that evangelism is one of the major reasons why churches have to adopt cyberspace technologies. Church communities situated in remote, secluded, and sparse locations can connect with other members through online services. Furthermore, online services allow Christian believers and those who are curious about the Christian Church and message to have the joy to have a personal experience of the aspects of church from the comfort of their own home.

However, the gap in the mentioned literature is that it does not consider those platforms as a new area of mission not just in terms of using them but more fundamentally in terms of area as the goal of church mission itself where followers are found and reached. These technologies tremendously open new areas of mission and ways of doing the assignment. Partridge (2005) asserts that cyberspace and its related technologies create a Church sphere not limited by time or location, a sphere of church mission for the interaction of different religious ideas and concerns worldwide. Feijter (2006) explains that to make better use of cyberspace as a new and enlarged area of mission, the Church needs to be up to date with new modern technologies to enable her properly carry her task of winning people to Christ in today's technological society, saturated by electronic media. It will be hard to significantly influence 21st-century societies for the church if its members are not knowledgeable enough about modern technological tools. Ossai-Ugbah (2011) reiterates that any attempt to go back to the traditional church model where human physical activities are the measure of the church operations will be like rendering the church irrelevant in terms of space and means in the modern technological society. While Olanrewaju and Adebola (2019) warn that the aptitude of the above devices reconstitutes in a manner of manipulating real religious and spiritual experience, making them mere excitements or vice versa. In a profound sense, this assertion by Olanrewaju and Adebola require that cyberspace be considered the new area of a church mission to inject into its religious values.

Methodology
The study looked at cyberspace as a new mission area for Kisii Central SDA church in South Kenya Conference - Nyanchwa Station. Specifically, it examined the participants' perspectives on various church cyberspace missionary activities and the mission itself. The study was done with different clusters of respondents, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Target Population, Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

Target group	Target Population	Percentage	Sampling Technique	Sample size	Percentage
Pastors	2	0.6%	Censors	2	2%
Church Clerks	2	0.6%	Censors	2	2%
ICTs Technocrats	20	6%	Purposive	10	8%
Youth	100	31%	Purposive	50	40%
Church Members	200	62%	Simple Random	60	48%
Total	**324**	**100%**		**124**	**100%**

Source: Researcher (2022)

Table 1 illustrates different categories of the Kisii Central SDA church use of technology. The figures demonstrated cyberspace as a viable alternative area of mission to physical church arrangements. Personal interviews were conducted with pastors, ICTs technocrats, youth, church clerks and church members to establish the place of technology in the mission of Kisii Central SDA church that makes technology an important area of mission in terms of use and church mission itself. The implied clusters gave data of both users and implementers of technology to benefit the church community. Analyses and data presentation used frequency tables and percentages.

3.0 RESULTS

Discussions and presentations of results were centred on cyberspace technologies and church missionary evangelical activities, prioritizing cyberspace as an important area of church mission that brings about a new understanding of mission different from traditional knowledge that limited mission to physical display. The discussions considered technology as not just a neutral means for evangelism but also embeds other aspects that do not constitute the values of the Christian faith. The two-sided regard to cyberspace technologies makes technology a new area of mission where the church is called to give witness to Christ.

Cyberspace Technologies used by Kisii Central SDA church

The purpose of the study was to articulate cyberspace as a new area of Kisii Central, SDA church evangelical mission in SKC, Nyanchwa Station. But first, the study sought to establish cyberspace technologies used by the church and church members. The results were as illustrated in table 1.2 below.

Table 2: Cyberspace Technologies used by the Church

Type	Frequency	Percentage
Live Streaming (Zoom, Webinar, Television, Radio, etc.)	124	100%
Church Website	80	65%
Facebook	110	89%
WhatsApp	120	97%
Twitter	115	93%
YouTube	120	97%
Radio	112	90%

Source: Researcher's Construct, 2022

In table 2, the study established that Kisii Central church and church membership employ various technologies to enhance their evangelical activities. The figures demonstrated that the use of cyberspace technologies by Kisii Central SDA church widens her evangelical activities and the manner of realizing them. The reason for widely using various technologies was that they connect with a broader membership, particularly the young Christians who frequent users. The services realized through these technologies form the basis for which Kisii Central church should seriously consider the importance of technology in her mission to reach out to all the faithful in various conditions or state of affairs in the church. The findings were in tandem with Bekkerin (2011), who argued that the use of different cyberspace technologies forms the basis of the church's online ministries that offer new and exciting prospects and challenges. Also, the study by Jones and Ough (2010) noted that in Zimbabwe, pastors and members in Pentecostal churches are aware of technology, and they use it in the propagation of the Christian message.

Among the technologies employed by the church, live streaming was found to be the most preferred, with all 124 (100%) of the respondents endorsing its usage by the church, while the church website even though its usage is good, only 80 (65%) of the respondents use it. The informants noted that the church website enables the faithful to access all the necessary information they need, including church announcements, records, programs, Scripture texts, devotional messages, and prayer wishes. A key informant informed:

> With the church website, and specific software and database to process and store membership records, today it is easy to access all the activities of the church as compared to those old days when we used physical records, which used to get lost and damaged; it is also easy to keep track of the church development and entire reality. Storing membership data in an electronic and organized manner is the greatest development we have ever had.

Another key respondent informed:

> As church members, we can tweet our pastor on any issue of faith and the church. The pastor, on his part, is enabled to respond immediately. Facebook and Twitter have fastened our communications in the church and facilitated many things for us.

These findings were consistent with Kamp (2016), who emphasized that because of their instant nature, cyberspace technologies enable congregants to connect, bond and form communities and associations all over the world beyond the horizons of physical space. And also, Bolu (2012) and Grinter et al. (2011) asserted that Information Communications Technologies (ICTs) have today become a standard base for many church activities, including worship services, which once relied primarily on physical engagements now rely on ICTs to create a multimedia experience. Religious websites offer a wealthy depository of spiritual interests.

Cyberspace Evangelical Activities by Kisii Central SDA church
After establishing the feelings of the respondent's views on the technologies used by the church, the study sought to discuss some of the evangelical missionary activities realized by the Kisii Central SDA church. The study established that worship and prayer, formation of online church communities, preaching and religious instructions were the main online activities. As illustrated in the table, the results have assessed the strategies put by table 3 below.

Table 3: Cyberspace Evangelical Missionary Activities

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Worship and Prayer	124	100%
Formation of Online Church Communities	60	48%
Preaching/Direct Evangelism	120	97%
Religious Instructions and Education	115	93%
Communication	124	100%

Source: Researcher's Construct, 2022

In table 3, the study found that technology is notably used to meet various evangelical activities of Kisii Central SDA church. *On worship and prayer,* the study established that 124 (100%) of the respondents unanimously agreed that cyberspace technologies allow church members to worship in that prayers, songs properly, sermons are live-streamed. Even other technologies like Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube facilitate daily devotionals, prayer and prayer, Bible texts, etc. Some listen to the radio to receive the same services in the comfort of their homes. The study noted that in Kisii Central SDA, church cyberspace worship is taking a prominent position in all related programs of church services. However, the study also noted that worship and prayer services are only restricted to live streaming within members of the local church, devoid of outreach to members outside of the locality of Kisii. Nevertheless, the study also noted that this problem is cured through the local radio where worship and prayer services are aired. The content and the office of the formal structure of worship and prayer

meetings are transferred from face-to-face services into the virtual space, which allows for more candid exchanges between participants and enlarges the worship and prayer space since it enables access from all over the world that is not available in conventional services. The findings were in agreement with Gaiya (2002), and Osaghae and Suberu (2005), referring to Pentecostal churches (PCs), argued that members of the PCs define and distinguish themselves through their creativity, particularly in the use of ICTs to propagate the gospel message, enhance their act of worship and other religious activities.

On the formation of online SDA church groups, 60 (48%) of the respondents indicated the presence of online church group arrangements, majorly among the young people. The respondents acknowledged that they have WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter group associates who engage themselves with others on matters of faith. They recruit and reach out to many members who are put off by traditional church model systems, exchange motivational texts, encourage each other, exchange church communication. The respondents noted that the online church group arrangements are of great help to them in sharing the Christian faith. One key informant noted:

> I have received great support from my online church group. Once I was in dire need, and when I opened up to members of my group, I received enormous help; I felt the nearness of Christ at that time of need through my friends in the group. The church group members are members accessible to each other at any time of day, allowing them to share any information or issue that affects the individual. It is serving as psychotherapy to those in need.

The finding is supported by Bailey (2007), who affirmed that online groups promote solidarity around illness, sharing experiences about relationships as forms of incarnated ways of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Another critical informant observed:

> Through interaction with others in the online church group, individual church members internalize church teachings and values and integrate them into their self-identity as members of the SDA church.

The study found religious groups are meant to crystallize in both bonding and bridging socio-religious capital in terms of interdependence of members as a form of witnessing their master Jesus Christ. The finding is congruent to the study by Slevin (2000), which asserted that cyber technologies make it accomplishable to construct human relations from a diversity of cultural and social settings, thereby making the Church more inclusive and universal. And also, the study by Barken (2005) affirmed that online group members enjoy the benefits of electronic discussions, which enable them to communicate with those who are familiar with the beliefs and practices of the movement and who have shared, and perhaps still share, the same ideals, hopes, values, and fears that they hold. This enables to deepen the religious convictions and faith of the congregants. In addition, participants make online discussions on specific issues relevant to their religious faith.

Preaching/Direct Evangelism
The study to find out the use of cyberspace in relation to preaching or direct proclamation of the Gospel message. As illustrated in table 3 above, 120 (97%) of the respondents indicated that cyberspace technologies provide opportunities for pastors to reach out to many followers. The church's pastors use cyberspace platforms to preach to those who may not be able to attend physical church services for particular reasons. When asked why many prefer cyberspace platforms for preaching the Word of God, they indicated that it opens up avenues to offer the Christian message to the aged, the sick, those physically challenged, etc. In addition, church members and others that do not have the possibility of attending face-to-face worship service can partake in the service through radio and live streaming services in their area of comfort. On this, a key informant in the interview echoed:

> In the older days, there was more time for the preaching while singing and worshipping is in the second stage, but at the moment, the time allocated for sharing the Word of God is available as one wishes; prayer resources are readily available online than offline.

The findings agreed with Shoba (2020), who reaffirmed that the use of digital platforms provides congregations with spiritual nourishment through programs like daily devotionals, prayers, and sermons. In addition, Bolu (2012) explained that internet-related media platforms are widely used to reach out to congregations in various places for the church's good. The church website connects congregants to all the needed information related to their church and faith.
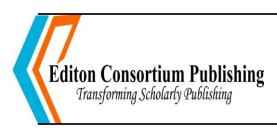
Religious Instructions
The study established that 115 (93%) of the respondents are beneficiaries of cyberspace technologies in various aspects of their education in religion. They get Scripture texts, instructional and other religious worship materials on their smartphones or tablet devices posted to them by religious instructors or other faithful interested in educating church members on religious matters. Instructional content is projected on the screen during seminars and even posted to them through emails and WhatsApp platforms. Those conversant with the church websites use them to research and prepare lessons that will be taught on their stipulated days of church services or other instructional meetings. Some indicated that they watch the church educational proceedings in their homes through streaming video on the television, zoom, or YouTube.

> One key respondent noted:
> The SDA church cannot choose to ignore cyberspace and its related technologies if it is relevant to today's sophisticated technological reality. Likewise, religious instruction cannot be done outside of technology; through it, the faithful in all life conditions can receive information relevant to their faith.

The findings are consistent with Helland (2007), who explained that ICTs provide faith support educational programmes that are difficult or impossible to practise in the person's current physical setting (sickness, age, pandemics, and so on). Various technologies are a valuable tool for church congregations to enlarge their abilities to do more with fewer resources. Cyber technologies used by the Church essentially duplicate the

functions bringing religious services to wider audiences and contexts. A church congregation that does not strategically employ these technologies is likely to be perceived as out of sync with the contemporary world (Højsgaard, 2005).

However, the study also noted that pastors and other church groups, despite their willingness to embrace technology in the church, fully do not have ICT skills and theological training that could build them in the use of cyberspace platform for missionary and evangelical activities of the church. The use of cyberspace technologies in the church is localized in a local and freelance structure. Not many church members are informed of the structured church platforms like the website and its role. This could contribute to fewer people 80 (65%) using it in church, as shown in Table 2 above. This is in line with the study by Mary Hess (2005), which recommended that theological institutions recognize that today's audiences differ from the ones in which the educators may have been raised. As the SDA church looks forward to being relevant to the evolving technological society, the technological revitalization of its mission is indispensable. Both the spiritual leadership and the congregants must equally be energized; this is basically because the digital evangelism model presents the church an opportunity to get involved in sharing her faith in new and innovative ways on digital platforms.

Cyberspace as a Subject of the Church's Evangelical Mission
Despite the instrumental value of cyberspace technologies, the study endeavoured to find out how cyberspace itself is a subject of the church's evangelical mission. This was done with some specific cyberspace technologies used by the congregants in Kisii Central SDA church. The findings were as illustrated in table 4 below.

Table 4: Cyberspace a Subject of Evangelical Mission

Type	Frequency	Percentage
Church Website	70	56%
Facebook	118	96%
WhatsApp	120	97%
Twitter	116	94%
YouTube	100	81%

Source: Researcher's Construct, 2022

Results in table 4 demonstrated a varied opinion of the respondents on the negative aspects or bad use of cyberspace technologies that make cyberspace a subject of a church mission in need of evangelism, with the exception of church websites with 70 (56%) respondents indicating negative aspects on the lower level. In contrast, all others showed higher levels of misuse. For example, WhatsApp was 120 (97%), Facebook had 118 (96%), Twitter had 116 (94%), and YouTube had 100 (81%) of the respondents. The respondents indicated that despite being used for religious purposes, these cyberspace technologies also transmit harmful content devoted to defaming and attacking religious groups, particularly the SDA church. A key informant noted:

There is a lot of pornography and violence on social media platforms. There are too many hate sites, and content consumed even by the SDA youth who frequently use those platforms. All these realities reflect the reality of sin and the need of the church to be present to sanitize such platforms.

Another respondent informed:

> Even among church members, especially the youth, it is customary to exchange twits. However, these messages do not reflect Christian content due to large scale distribution and transfer of personal data on the network, which had led to hacking and disclosure of personal information to the public, thereby violating the privacy of individuals or a group.

These findings are supported by Himma (2007b), who explained that the activity of computer hacking is unethical and, therefore, unacceptable. Furthermore, cyberspace's secular nature and content and its technologies tend to obscure those using them to fully understand religious, moral values as they are constantly challenged through these technologies. Today, it is becoming impossible to distinguish freaky doctrinal interpretations, personal devotional practices, and ideological advocacy carrying a church label from the authentic positions of the church. This is why church-related groups and individual members should engage themselves to counteract and evangelize cyberspace content and operations.

Christians should commit themselves, spending a significant portion of their time positively to guarantee their presence in cyberspace to give witness to the Christian message. The withdrawal of church presence implies endorsing unreligious content in cyberspace. The SDA church membership individually and collectively should be creatively present in cyberspace to witness the Gospel message. The church, which traditionally exercised its moral power, should continue to do it even in cyberspace technologies. Magnani (2007) claimed that technological knowledge that enables us to reason morally had become our moral duty in our technologically determined world.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study demonstrated that cyberspace is a new mission area instrumentally and also a subject of evangelical church missions. Cyberspace technologies are becoming increasingly instrumental in the Kisii Central SDA church mission that gives her relevance in the technological society. Also, cyberspace technologies are used in worship, prayer, the transmission of sermons and preaching of the gospel, motivational text messages, formation of online church groups, religious instructions. The church within her abilities has appropriated cyberspace technologies to her advantage. However, the study showed that despite the instrumental function of cyberspace, it is also the very subject of the SDA church's evangelical mission. People are found in cyberspace, and the content transmitted in cyberspace has more secular values warranting the church's involvement with it as a way of witnessing the message of Christ.

Recommendations: The study recommended that Kisii Central SDA church engage itself with other technologies since it operates on the basic level of technological use. The church should widen its technical scope to include other platforms. Members to be helped to make better use of technology since it is now a reality that cannot be ignored for the relevance of the church. Further, the study recommended that the church commit herself fully to finding viable ways to evangelize cyberspace as the new area of mission. This task cannot be left to technocrats and other secular institutions that over-flood it with secular values devoid of religious undertones.

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