"When Are You Going to Change Those Stones to Phones?" Social Media Appropriation by Pentecostal Churches in Cape Town

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Abstract

On May 15th 2016, the Southern Africa Zone 5 Pastor of Christ Embassy (CE), Pastor Rita, appeared on a live stream service that was broadcast to all the churches in the region to talk about the visit to the Holy Land in Jerusalem by Pastor Chris and his delegation. She later announced that the entire visit can be viewed on Love WorldSat Super User and King's Chat and encouraged the use of the app to encourage viewership. Following the concept of mediatisation and looking at Pastor Rita's communiques, this paper explores the appropriation of Social Media (SM) by Pentecostal churches (PCs) in Cape Town, South Africa. It seeks to understand how and to what extent innovation and competition propels PCs' appropriation of SM to disseminate information, position themselves to attract the desired audience and maintain relevance in the face of mounting competition. Acknowledging the premise that the church is fast eroding and peoples' lives are increasingly on the move, PC understand that the success of church depends on how they stay connected with Christians and evolve with the times. SM thus becomes the tool on-the-get-go, a way for accessing the church, and for PCs to stay connected with Christians, given their accessibility on mobile phones.

KEY WORDS: Social Media, Appropriation, Mediatisation, Pentecostal Churches, Platforms/Apps

Introduction

This paper is part of a larger study that explores religious competition and innovation within Pentecostal churches (PCs). The main objective of this project was to map out religious competition and innovative trends among PCs in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The study explores the creative appropriation of Social Media (SM, henceforth) in comparison with face to face modes of communication and interaction in PCs. Of interest is the extent to which SM appropriation by PCs influence how it is represented as well as how the church and followers interact with one another. The paper discusses the extent to which SM represent the authority of religious institutions, and offer

Christians a degree of self-selection and self-determination. While the focus here is contemporary media as SM, henceforth, it is important to acknowledge that religious competition is not new, and started as far back as the fifteenth century when Gutenberg invented the printing press (Morgan, 2011; Einstein, 2008), which gave a different perspective to religion –namely, introduction of marketing following the printing of pamphlets/tracts and subsequently the proliferation of tracts to counter the profane literature that was circulated at the time (Morgan, 2011). Competition was further heightened after the First Amendment right to freedom of religion in America, which meant that religions had to compete for parishioners, oftentimes using marketing techniques, from simple print advertising to door-to-door salesmen (Einstein, 2008: 4). However, these simple forms of competition have evolved with the advent of new communication technologies to reach out to Christians. What is more, SM has taken this competition further by targeting Christians on-the-move, no longer limited to televisual outreach (Pradip and Lee, 2012). These advances, Einstein intimates, 'have meant not necessarily more competition, but bigger competition and not only bigger competition, but competition with considerable marketing expertise in multiple media outlets' (2008: 8). That various platforms have been created to speak to different consumers' taste illustrates what Cheryl Russell refers to as 'customized products for individualistic consumers' (Russell, 1993: 56). This drive for customised taste is what propels the competitive environment, engendering religious firms such as CE and mega Pentecostal churches to 'flourish owing to the provision of products at least as attractive as its competitors' (Finke and Iannaccone, 1993; Hamberg and Pettersson, 1994).

Through the communiqués of Pastor Rita[1] of CE, I examine how PCs appropriate SM in the context of evolving internet-mediated technologies to appeal to Christians. The first communiqué comes in the aftermath of a visit to Jerusalem by Pastor Chris, some Pastors and selected members of the church in April 2016:

> I am sure that you have seen it on King's chat, Love WorldSat, Super user and Yookos, and even on Christ Embassy Southern Africa and Zone 1. Have you been following on all those platforms? Praise God! Make sure that you follow! How many of you are following on Love WorldSat Super User? How many of you? Can I see your hand? This is very serious! Ok why are you not following Love WorldSat super user? You don't know how to follow? It is very easy.... Only these ones are following and we've been talking about it! So everybody sitting down is not following! Can you go there now if you have your phone with you ... Are you connected? Or there is no data? ... Do it all over the region! You have to follow, this is one app you must follow. Praise God! I can see that some of you have just started following it, because I can see the number of people who are following rising.… Tell somebody you must follow Love WorldSat super users. If this is the only reason that you need to get a phone, instead of a stone[2] it is worth the investment! Alleluia![3]

After this exercise, Pastor Rita cautions against unfollowing and told the church that as Christians following these apps was expected. 'How can Christians win souls when they do not have apps installed on their phones, what then will they use to win souls'? she interjected. Seen from the pastor's remarks above, some Christians downloaded the app

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[1] All names used are pseudonyms.
[2] Referring to a phone as a stone insinuates that it is not sophisticated enough.
[3] Live stream communiqué of Pastor Rita of Christ Embassy Southern Africa Zone 4, Cape Town: 15/05/2016.

and were advised not to delete for want of memory space. Rather, other unimportant apps should be deleted to make space for church apps. And for those without smartphones, they were asked to 'change their stones to phones'. While not all members have downloaded the various apps, from my observations, it would appear most Christians have the Bible app on their phones and navigate the different versions of the Bible on Sunday service.

The call by Pastor Rita was reiterated at the cell group prayer meeting by a junior pastor. On May 29th 2016, through a similar live stream broadcast, Pastor Rita made a follow-up to find out how many Christians of CE have downloaded all the other apps of the church. Those who downloaded the apps in church were given a gift voucher of Pastor Chris' digital library and were asked to download a sermon or motivational talk for free. Conversely, those who do not yet have an Android phone were asked to; 'save your money for food this week and buy a phone; stop using a stone'![4]

By contrast, Ark of the Glory of the Lord (AGLC), limits its followers' appropriation to the existing apps (WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube), and to what is convenient to them. Sunday services are still held following the mainline tradition of face-to-face encounters.

Against this backdrop, this paper uses the communiqués of Pastor Rita to explore the appropriation of SM by Pentecostal churches (PCs) – Christ Embassy (CE) and Ark of the Glory of the Lord (AGLC), in Cape Town, South Africa. It examines and compares the uses of SM by both Pentecostal churches, and how each of them understands the power of social media and its role in proselytization in an increasingly competitive and fast-moving world. While the role and appropriation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) within PCs has been well articulated (Hackett and Soares, 2015; Campbell, 2013, 2010; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007), the appropriation of SM however, is yet to be fully captured in all its multiplicities and complexities and its fluid and dynamic nature (Villi and Matikainen, 2016). This paper fills that gap. It argues that as a way of staying relevant and connected with Christians on-the-go and appeal to would-be Christians, especially youth, mega-PCs have inculcated SM into forms of worship while rising PCs have adopted a minimalist approach towards appropriation and maintained the traditional forms of face-to-face worship by increasing the number of Christian activities in church.

Firstly, it is helpful to get some perspective on social media. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 60), 'Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content' (UGC). This layer of platforms form a new online layer through which people organise their lives, and which increasingly influences human interaction on an individual and community level, as well as on a larger societal level, while the worlds of online and off line are increasingly interpenetrating (Van Dijck, 2013: 4). Acknowledging a proliferation of SM platforms, this study will be limited to two social media platforms – social network sites (SNSs) and user-generated content (UGC). The former are applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010: 63; Van Dijck, 2013). UGC involves explicit and implicit participation. Explicit participation involves

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[4] Live stream communiqué of Pastor Rita of Christ Embassy Southern Africa Zone 4, Cape Town: 29/05/2016.

'producing media texts and artefacts. It also encompasses co-creation – when consumers are no longer satisfied with their traditional end-user roles and get involved in creating and developing digital products and services' (Villi and Matikainen, 2016: 110; see also Ramaswamy and Gouillart, 2010: 3-6). Implicit participation involves users sustaining connections and togetherness rather than producing content; it serves to maintain communality and community (Villi and Matikainen, 2016: 110). Although studies have shown how PCs are more successful with appropriations of the mass media with regard to SNSs and UGC than their historic mainline churches (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007: 235). It is also worth noting that while mega churches are at the forefront of appropriation, some PCs (Ark of the Glory of the Lord church, AGLC) are content with basic forms of SM – WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook. What does such appropriation entail and how does it fit patterns of media ownership and control? Following the deregulation of the media in the aftermath of neoliberalism, media ownership ceases to be a prerogative of nation-states and corporates. It opened up the airwaves for PCs to purchase their own airwaves and determine the content to be broadcast. The new form of ownership and control practiced by PCs, while appearing to have moved away from that practiced by corporates, still operates on the same principle – it 'controls every means by which the population learns of its society' (Bagdikian, 2014: 4; Pradip & Nain, 2004) Wanting to be the first in technology development of different SM platforms engenders significant controls, allowing churches to defend their interests and disseminate content that maintains the statuesque and their privileged role within the church (Pradip and Nain, 2004: 3). For instance, Pastor Rita may not own somebody's smartphone yet she exerts control over the contents by asking that certain apps be downloaded and others deleted to make space for these apps. In this respect, the pastors are not different from the state/corporates that seek to control content and determine desire.

This paper will focus on the question of how and to what extent Pentecostal churches have appropriated social media to disseminate information, maintain relevance and position themselves in the face of mounting competition to attract the desired audience? What drives the need for Pentecostal churches to appropriate social media? How have new players in the arena successfully gained or worked towards achieving visibility in the face of such stiff competition?

Following Stig Hjarvard's concept of mediatisation (2011, 2016), the paper uses the communiqués of Pastor Rita and empirical findings from this study to discuss religious mediatisation and the appropriation of SM to take spirituality closer to the Christians, with relation to innovation and competition. Such innovative and competitive traits hinge on the supply-side concept of religion that states that religious change usually occurs in response to the shifting desires and needs of religious consumers (Finke and Iannaccone, 1993). At its base, one religion is not very different from another. The differences, intimates Einstein, (2008: 20), 'lie in the packaging – the music, the type of texts used, and what additional services are available beyond the prayer services – *such as internet-mediated services*' (my addition, in italics for emphasis).

Given that people's lives are increasingly on the move, the coming of SM thus becomes the tool on-the-get-go and a way for PCs to stay connected with Christians following its accessibility on mobile phones. Hence appropriating and embedding SM into the workings of the church keeps the church connected with the Christians.

I will begin by exploring earlier studies on SM and Pentecostalism that speak to the theoretical underpinnings of mediatisation and the extent to which churches are reliant on

SM. Next, I will give a methodological overview of the study. This will be followed by looking at the power of having a smartphone, and how it can help the church achieve its objectives of spreading the word and winning souls. The last sections explore comparisons of CE and AGLC with regard to SM appropriation – creation of software and apps – listing the different apps in use and the functions. The paper concludes that while megachurches are on a global mission to attract followers and reach out to the would-be 'born-again' through the massive creation and deployment of social media, rising Pentecostal churches adapt to the social media platforms that are feasible to their Christians to enhance evangelism – domesticating the new and the old.

Pentecostalism, Social Media and Mediatisation

This study follows in the path of earlier studies (Hackett and Soares, 2015; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007, 2005; Hackett, 2006, 1998) that shed light on the social uses and appropriation of information and communication technologies (ICTs). While TV was the major medium used in reaching a wider audience in the past, increasingly people's lives are on the move and thus churches require other strategies to reach these populations. SM, given its accessibility on mobile phones, has thus become the tool on-the-get-go. PCs see the heuristic benefits of transforming communication, and minimising the threat of competition from the secular world and profane literature. The need to add SM to its previously appropriated internet-mediated communication technologies is to connect and reach out to as many members as possible or risk losing members and would-be converts (De Witte, 2003: 185; see also Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007: 228).

Appropriation of SM therefore invokes the way Pentecostal churches (PCs) are recalibrating the appropriation of ICTs in general and SM in particular. Out of this technique has emerged a mediatisation theory that shows how societies are intertwined and influence each other in various institutions including religion, stressing the interaction and transaction between actors and structures (Hjarvard, 2011: 120-21; Hjarvard, 2016). SM goes beyond the 'virtual/visual arena of spiritual warfare' (TV) to a virtual space for competing for mass recruitment of new members, interaction and disseminating Christian messages. The use of SM becomes an extension of print media and physical church and creates the desired impact of 'moving with the ministry in their pockets' - similar to the idea of 'having your life in your pocket' as the late Steve Jobs noted with the creation of the iPhone (Campbell, 2007). In other words, the media has become integrated into the social fabric/workings of society and its institutions. While SM offers very convenient means through which PCs can put their activities into public space, it is also a form of social organization, which helps PCs to maintain social relations, control and determine contents/desire, as well as gain surveillance over their members (Bagdikian, 2014).

This approach enables the churches to become physically and virtually present in the lives of their members, following the notion of 'moving with the church in their pockets' (Allmer 2015; Campbell, 2007). In keeping with this mission, the creation of different apps is meant to keep Christians continuously connected to the church and to be out-of-sync with the general secular apps (Christensen, 2012), 'in order to project a version of religion that is less influenced by secular media' (Hjarvard, 2016: 10). Consequently, creating the church apps is indicative of the competition from culture wars – the apps are meant to shield Christians from secularity. Albeit, the apps serve as a medium that facilitates interactive religious activity, follows the activities of Pastor Chris, other pastors and connects with CE Christians worldwide as well as enabling users to see activities of other

sister churches. Conversely, the platforms are not only about providing the actual service that the app is designed for, but also about generating data/information on the users of the app, for various uses related to and beyond the app itself.[5]

This study draws on Stig Hjarvard's concept of mediation as a point of departure. Whereas Hjarvard's (2016, 2011, 2008) understanding of mediatisation relates to contemporary media, he fails to incorporate historical underpinnings such as the evolution of print media and TV to its current digital form. Acknowledging Morgan's (2011) concept of mediation, I adopt mediatisation of religion, given its specific contemporary development of high modernity (Hjarvard 2011:127). Several scholars have also indicated that 'mediatisation involves a complex dynamic between how religious organisations incorporate the affordances of various media in order to be able to communicate with the external world, but also use and appropriate media for their own purposes' (Lövheim, 2011: 161). SM, which is the focus of this paper, falls within that category. Hjarvard posits that 'mediatisation entails a dual process by which the media have developed into a semi-independent societal institution at the same time as they have integrated into the workings of other institutions and become an indispensable part of "doing religion"' (2016: 9; 2011). The media therefore becomes a social tool that focuses on transformations in society and a conduit that helps co-construct the routines and social relationships of ordinary life – integrated into the social fabric and workings of social institutions (Hjarvard, 2011: 121, 2008; Lövheim and Lundby, 2013). As conduits, media have become an important source of information about religion in society (Gelfgren, 2015; Hjarvard, 2016, 2011; Lundby, 2009). Specifically relating to religion, Hjarvard intimates that mediatisation entails the transformation of three aspects of religion:

> media become an important source of information about religious issues; religious information and experiences become moulded according to the demands of popular media genres and media have taken over many of the cultural, and social functions of the institutionalised religions and provide spiritual guidance, moral orientation, ritual passages and a sense of community and belonging (2011: 124).

However, with regard to the last point, I will re-echo Clark's argument that in the contemporary period, the processes of mediatisation are contributing to a personalisation of what it means to be religious. It would appear, albeit, that Pastor Rita is inspired by the above tenets and engages her Christians to have Smartphones in order to be active users of the various SM platforms.

Religious app development therefore invokes a consensus-based authority within CE. In this respect, Schulz (2004: 88-90; see also Hjarvard, 2011: 122), considers four points that elucidates mediatisation. First, a process in which mass media extend human communication, second, subsume social activities and institutions, third, join with non-media activities and lastly, engage people and organisations in their media logic. With regard to SM substituting face-to-face communication, while it may be the case to an extent, evidence from this study shows that SM, especially WhatsApp, is used to plan face-to-face meetings. For instance, the cell WhatsApp group postings speak to this:

> Good evening mighty precious team of XXX! We have another glorious cell meeting tomorrow, and we have an amazing word we have been instructed to listen to from Pastor, and we will discuss it. Next week Thursday we will have a-bring-

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[5] Hence Pastor Rita can see all those joining the platform after her intervention.

and-share to celebrate birthdays we have had so far in the month of January. We can't do that tomorrow because of time... see you soon![6]

1 hour to go to our cell meeting! Come ready to receive from the Spirit! Our lives will never be the same again.[7]

SM appropriation by PCs influences how it is represented as well as how the church and followers interact with one another. However, the level of interaction is limited to church members or a drive towards proselytization. Campbell (2007) and Hjarvard (2011) adduce that the media challenges the authority of religious institution. Acknowledging their views, I posit that it also enhances the authority of the religious institution, such as the encounter between Pastor Rita and the Christians. Through live stream broadcast, Pastors can encourage or challenge Christians to use the platforms. SM thus offers Christians a degree of self-selection and self-determination as well as ways in which subjection works and governs people's lives.

Similarly, social media allows the users to retrieve information based on individual needs and interests (Schulz, 2004: 94). Relatedly, rather than substitute existing face-to-face communication as Schulz (2004) indicates, the new media supplements and complements old media. While certain platforms privilege virtual interaction, the underlying fact is to use the apps to occasion face-to-face interaction. Encouraging Christians to download the various apps (see Pastor Rita's excerpt), SM platforms becomes 'intermediaries through which Christians can experience the divine; providing for greater interreligious conviviality', as opined by Nyamnjoh (2015: vii). Similar findings show how SM becomes synonymous to a support mechanism that provides moral orientation and emotional consolation in times of crisis for individuals (Cerulo, Roane, and Chayko 1992; Hjarvard, 2009).

Methodology

Data collected for the paper is informed by qualitative research. Participant observation proved quite useful as the author participate in church services at CE and AGLC and cell group meetings of CE and other related events.

Participation at services was facilitated by the fact that the Sunday services preceded each other; hence I would navigate between both congregations. Participant observation involved sustained engagement and attentiveness – observing how Christians, in the course of the service, navigate the various digital platforms was quite educative. Listening to the pastor on both occasions via live stream gave a sense of the importance attached to the platforms as well as brought the stark reality of how much the church had invested in social media.

Interviews and informal conversations, such as the one with Naomi (a hairdresser) were very useful. Interviews complemented participant observation; they provided opportunity for follow-up conversations on events/happenings in church. At C E 16 persons were interviewed – 5 women/10men and one assistant pastor, while at AGLC 10 persons – 4 women/6 men and the Bishop. I also had six follow-up interviews with some

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[6] Message posted on 01/02, 21:12 by Blessing, Cell group leader, Cape Town.
[7] See footnote 4.

members of both churches. Comparative methods provide a general explanation on the levels of SM appropriation by CE and AGLC to discover specific characteristics that are similar or different between cases. Relatedly, downloading the apps to view its contents and using the apps provided a sense of what it entails and an opportunity to closely follow the activities of the Pastors and the church. The same applies to reading the chapter on 'Technology and our Gospel' in the Foundation School manual. These give a sense of direction as to how the church engages in the use of ICTs in general and SM in particular. Listing all the platforms and their usage invites the Christians to interact with it.

Annette Markham (2013) highlights the looming concerns about the appropriateness of using traditional ethnographic research methods when doing research in a digital context. She maintains many of these underlying conditions 'prevent us from using our creative, interpretive authority to "See. Things. Differently"'(Ibid, 436). One way of overcoming these challenges was to take seriously entries into my research diary that permits detailed recordings of happenings besides formal interviews as seen below:

> My first day at Christ Embassy, I was struck by how much Christians interacted with their phones in church. More so, I was taken aback by the pastor's use of her phone on the pulpit. Lots of questions came to mind; what are they doing with phones turned on in church? Including the pastor? Each time a bible chapter/verse is displayed in the screen people turn to their phones. I quickly noticed from my neighbours that they use it to access the Bible app…

In a conversation with Naomi later she explained to me that Christians navigate between the Bible app and King's chat.[8]

The Smartphone Era: "Stones" or Phones?

> You cannot be a leader and have a 'stone'.Be on the go! Reach people! Those who have downloaded King's chat should stand up. … Those who have all the apps stand up. I am sure those of you with smart phones have been alerted that the apps are draining your battery or are occupying too much space. Don't uninstall them, instead delete other apps in order to make space for church apps. Those of you who are yet to download the apps, why do you still go around with those 'stones' in the name of phones? What are you waiting for to change your stone into a phone? You should pray and change your phone today. Save up and buy real phones and not stones! Share for those who are downloading. We have got a gift for you but you have to prove. I am watching you all over the region.[9]

As noted in the introduction, Pastor Rita calls on church group leaders and the entire church to have smartphones and be connected to all the church apps, have data to reach out to other members of the church, and win souls. Using the live streamed broadcast to Southern African Zone 5 churches (South Africa & Zimbabwe) to ensure that she reaches out to those under her zone, emphasises the seriousness with which Pentecostal churches, especially CE, consider social media. Recalling that this is the second time in a fortnight that the pastor has come up on live stream to talk about the apps and the need for Christians to download them denotes the importance the church attaches to social media

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[8] Research notes: 03/04/2016.
[9] Live stream communiqué of Pastor Rita of Christ Embassy Southern Africa Zone 4, Cape Town: 29/05/2016.

and the notion that social media can only work with Christians switching to smart phones instead of having "stones" that do not facilitate the work of the church. CE has recognised the importance of these platforms to facilitate communal activities where participation is key (Van Dijck, 2013: 11). Again, vouchers were distributed to all who had downloaded the apps. The vouchers become a bait to lure Christians to the platforms and keep them hooked onto it, consequently resulting in 'data generating audience traffic' (Villi and Matkanein, 2016). By using the vouchers it is hoped they will appreciate other activities and interesting literature that will keep them continuously on the apps. By the same token, addressing the church leaders directly is cognizance of the 'alpha distributor' role that they are expected to play. This refers to 'users who act as key nodes in social media and whose recommendation/communication has an extensive reach and influence' (Villi & Matkanein, 2016: 112). These leaders would include; mentors, cell group leaders and their assistants, ushers, and choir members and foundation school teachers.

Although relatively new in the scene compared to mainline churches (Catholic and Protestant), PCs have been quick to understand the importance of ICTs for evangelism, dissemination of information and reaching out to many more Christians. This trend has steadily grown and the coming of SM has increased the demand for ICTs for proselytization, as evident in Pastor Rita's call as well as the phenomenal resources CE has invested in developing different apps tailored for specific groups and purposes in the church. Pastor Rita's ability to see the increasing number of members downloading the app confirms the church's ownership and control. The platforms do not simply provide services that they are designed for, but equally they generate data/information on the users of the app for various purposes beyond the superficial uses. Her remarks, 'I am watching you all over the region', confirm this. As Nyamnjoh (2004: 58) intimates, it is therefore a philosophy of ownership and control that seeks to marry individual and group or community property rights, rather than seeking to impose the illusion of the autonomous individual.

Given the importance of social media in the workings of the church a month of sensitization has been dedicated to it. According to Pastor Rita:

> We will focus on the digital platforms for the month of June because we want to avoid those platforms where one is not allowed to talk about Jesus Christ/God. Platforms like these are because the future of our God can be harnessed on these platforms. We can't be complacent about it. There is a world of tech in preaching the gospel.[10]

The focus and emphasis for Christians to migrate to the church platform is acknowledgement that the development of tailored specific social network sites (SNSs) does not equate to social presence, participation and connectivity. As such, social presence, participation and connectivity are intertwined, as they are influenced by intimacy and immediacy. Relatedly, innovation and competition can be achieved when members change from having 'stones' to having 'real phones' to give the church a physical presence from a virtual world.

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[10] Statement by Pastor Rita to congregants of Christ Embassy Southern African Zone 5, Cape Town: 29/05/2016.

Being Relevant in Modern Life: Christ Embassy's Quest for Visibility

> Technology actually constitutes 90% of the modern life. It is about speed, about efficiency, and reaching out faster to everyone. It's about easy communication, and faster communication. People don't want things that take long to happen. People want things to happen immediately and we took advantage of that. Technology has to be incorporated into our day to day life. This is the modern. So the church has got to move with the speed of how the world is also advancing so that we will be able to reach out to the generation that makes the future. They are the church; they will make the church, so we focus on them. That's why we say, technology into the church is the modern life and they believe in technology. So if you don't give them technology, if you don't give ministry Apps they will not be part of it, they don't want to read books any more, they don't want to read pamphlets, but we give them books in form of pdf, in different formats, which can actually be uploaded into their phones or downloaded into their gadgets.[11]

Like previous ICTs to have been appropriated by PCs, SM is no different and has been created and programmed with similar objectives – evangelisation, connectivity and interaction. However, SM appropriation is further underpinned by the need to be relevant and keep up with modern pace as underscored by Moses. Hence, CE's investment in the creation of software aimed at providing management software and religious-themed apps for the church. It is prompted by the need to attract young Christians; often referred to as the 'android generation' and 'inefficient attendance monitoring and financial tracking, poor communication and engagement with church members and difficulties in promoting events' (Kleinman, 2016). For the church, the platforms are important components, hence: 'It is strategic for the platforms to be popular. The popularity of the apps is you; I mean the number of people who are there. Like, share and talk within the platforms. Start your groups and migrate it to King's chat; …. Pastor Chris should have you communicate his orders'.[12]

The importance of the apps is attested by Christians who navigate the various platforms. Joan details its importance:

> It is important because they want to help us not to be distracted. Take for example Facebook, it's not specifically for Christians. Facebook is for everyone. Now the ministry has given you – Yookos – where there is the word of God, where we get to pray with pastor …, there are specific times in the day when we pray with pastor, he gives us petitions and we pray. I say that they've made Christianity so simple. It's not enough to go church. So if you want to play around with your phone, go to Yookos. Then you see testimonies there, you see teachings, you see prayers, petitions and answered prayers. If you want to listen to music you go to CeFlix, there you'll be listening to gospel music. So it's way of helping us to grow and not to be distracted at all because sometimes what can happen can be disastrous.[13]

Similarly, the frequency and interval between the communiqués by Pastor Rita, is an indication of how seriously CE takes the use of the various social media platforms. The insistence of sharing communication is underpinned by the fact that 'consumption of media content has gone from being an individual activity to one in which the consumer

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[11] Interview with Moses of the IT department at Christ Embassy, Cape Town: 14/02/2017.
[12] See footnote 7.
[13] Interview with Joan, Cape Town: 20/05/2016.

has the opportunity to interact with others' (Villi and Matikainen, 2016: 112). Consequently, interaction on the platforms becomes central to the way Christians experience the media's contents, and conversely the way the contents/platform get visibility. Perhaps Pastor's Rita's call for members to migrate their groups to the platforms is informed by thinking that a higher social presence and larger social influence that the communication partners have on each other's behaviour, will better enable joint and simultaneous creation of content by many end-users. This inevitably leads to a better outcome than any actor could achieve individually (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: 61-62).

To stay relevant and encourage a higher social presence, SM platforms are dynamic as they are continuously tweaked in response to their users' needs and their owners' objectives by way of aping current SM platforms, as well as in response to competing platforms (Van Dijck, 2013). In this connection, CE's platforms mirror that of other platforms; for instance, Yookos is a hybrid of Facebook and WhatsApp. Informed by their needs, CE has become one of the leaders in the appropriation of SM and software development to enhance proselytization, interaction and control. This is confirmed by a chapter dedicated to 'technology and our gospel' in Christ Embassy's Foundation School manual. It states that 'technology provides a platform for us Christians to "hold forth the word of life" and even better with SM as 'we can evangelize and make disciples in another country without the need of physical appearance'. Further, as Christians what differentiates their use of SM from the rest of the population is 'their conduct, practices, and decent language.' Unlike people who are not 'born-again' they are reminded of the powerful tool that they have at their disposal to win souls, to change the course of someone's life for better. Relatedly, Christians are reminded that their presence on the platform should be meaningful – create and share contents; one's communication should be impactful on the community. CE has twenty-one apps that are tailored for various needs, but this study focuses on seven apps. Describing the how the apps function, Daniel notes that:

> These apps are free if you have got an Android gadget. Whether it's a mobile phone or tablet… these apps will give you access to ministry material. Some of the ministry material can be downloaded for free and others are for sale. Books can be bought directly from your gadget onto your gadget using the apps; making life easier. You just have to link your debit or credit card to the app that you are using and your phone then you can purchase directly and download. People don't want things that take much time, so the convenience of apps attracts so many people to the church.[14]

The demand for apps and software development in Africa is perhaps an acknowledgement that many Pentecostal Christians in Africa are on mobile devices, hence the need for reachability, accessibility and interaction. Daniel of CE confirms the dependency on one's mobile phone as he pulls out his phone to show this researcher the various apps he has on his phone:

> Okay, let me take my phone out so that I will be able to check some of the apps that I have. …. I will start with the Bible, which is the most important. I've got the Bible and other versions, and the Bible toolbox as well. The Bible toolbox helps me to study the Bible properly without repetition. I have our app; the CE app, which I can download messages for free by Pastor Karen, and I can also watch services live every Sunday if I'm not in church, then I can log on to the app, boom!

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[14] Interview with Daniel, Cape Town: 22/07/2016.

I'm already in church. I have The Rhapsody which I usually download from the rhapsody app every day and that's one of the apps that I love most. Then Pastor Chris online, this is where you find most of the material by Pastor Chris. I have got quite a lot of apps on my gadget.[15]

After showing the researcher the various apps on his phone, Daniel goes on to list the rest.

Social Media and Proselytization: Christ Embassy's Apps

The addition of SM to its impressive mass media outlets (television, radio and print media), exemplifies CE's products and services that are part of a 'comprehensive, cohesive marketing and outreach plan to create a product that resonates with today's consumer-conscious religious shopper' (Einstein, 2008:14), and also a product that reflects the changing times – on-the-go.

Pastor Chris Online

This is a one-stop and highly interactive app packaged with inspiring interfaces and aptly designed to keep Christians connected on-the-go, to the ever-expanding world of global impact, peculiar to the multi-faceted ministry of Rev. Chris Oyakhilome. Through this app, users are able to connect into the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ as preached by Pastor Chris. *Pastor Chris Online* is designed to serve as a highly interactive, entertaining, inspiring and spiritually uplifting app which brings to millions God's eternal word on the go. *Pastor Chris Online* gives you the opportunity to share your testimonies, join a social community, participate in live blogs, upload comments, and participate in prayer sessions. The app aims to make authentic Christian broadcast available 24 hours on the internet.

As a cell group leader, Blessing uses this app to conduct meetings especially when it comes to prayer points, affirmation and confessions that are found on this platform. For the benefit of those who do not have data, she reads aloud for members to repeat after her, those who have data read along from their phones. Daniel summarizes this platform as follows:

> This is where you find most of the material by Pastor Chris. I can download for free and I can buy. Besides, Pastor Chris Online is also connected to Yookos. You can find the prayers/confessions for the day. You don't have to lag behind when you've got these apps. With Pastor Chris Online, it means whatever is happening in the ministry, you are connected to that. So that is one way we are connected to Pastor Chris anointing because he will give, he will ask the church to pray together at 12 midnight/noon, for example. So if you are connected to Pastor Chris Online, it means you will have access to that information. You … will know there is a conference in China. In short, we follow pastor's activities. It's a way to connect the ministry with us and that is very important for me.[16]

A similar sentiment is shared by Pastor Rita who tells Christians 'how much they are missing by not joining King's chat to follow his activities, especially the Holy Land tour, and urge members to download this app'. For Naomi, although all the platforms are

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[15] Interview with Daniel, Cape Town; 22/07/2016
[16] See footnote 13.

important, *Pastor Chris Online* is very important as it invites Christians all over the world into the life of the Man of God, and follows his movements and activities.[17]

Pastor Chris Digital Library

This is a mobile platform that lets users access hundreds of audio and video messages by pastor Chris, spanning various life issues, such as healing and health, faith, Christian living, fellowship with the holy spirit, prayer, prosperity and finance, from anywhere at any time. Its main objectives are for users to get instant access to life changing videos and audio messages directly from Pastor Chris straight to your mobile device, and to share and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ by sharing this app with your friends/loved ones. Through this platform, some subscribers have experienced life changing miracles and testimonies through the messages from Pastor Chris inspired by the Holy Spirit. Users are able to choose to be a free user, silver member or gold member all with various benefits as you go higher. While this platform has been designed to enhance connection with the entire CE church and constant connectivity with Pastor Chris, it has also built in communication to monetize the platform whereby E-books, DVDs, and sermons are for sale, while few messages can be downloaded for free. The library contains hundreds of impactful messages in both audio and video formats. One can also send gift vouchers to friends and family and also invite friends to join.

King's Chat

This app is a fast, simple and effective way for users to send and receive messages, pictures, audios, location and video messages – all for free. The app has been upgraded to allow users' blog and broadcast messages on the platform with the possibility to see other users' activities. This app is a hybrid of WhatsApp and Facebook. It is orientated towards the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ and sharing the word the world over. It also offers interaction with Pastor Chris, group conversation and makes provision to add or remove group participants, change group subject and set a group icon. And *King's Chat* is compatible with multiple languages.

Rhapsody of Realities App (ROR)

This is the best-selling daily devotional and Bible study guide distributed to over 242 countries in 608 languages. The ROR app provides a new world of inspiration following its redesigning. It comprises of a ROR combo book – audio book and E-book, exclusive to Rhapsody app users only at no additional cost. The newly designed reader is complete with improved bookmark, highlight, search and comments features. Through this platform, users can send their prayer request, share testimonies, read that of others around the world as well as become partners to sponsor contributions of Rhapsody to others. Features of the app can be shared on Yookos and other social networks.

Yookos

This device is a Christian social networking app developed by Christ Embassy International and available to users worldwide, with the mandate to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Besides worldwide interaction with other users, members can have a one-on-one access with the Pastor. Other than its Christian mandate, members can create blogs

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[17] Conversation with Naomi, Cape Town: 11/05/2016.

within the platform, connect with friends online, have free chats, and create groups and have discussions. Rating this platform Daniel notes that:

> As far as I can say, Yookos is like a link between WhatsApp and Facebook because you can do a lot of stuff that you do on WhatsApp with Yookos. At the same time, some functions of Facebook are on Yookos as well. So it's like a combination of both, which makes it even much better. It's actually developing but they've already come to that point where you can make a call on Yookos.[18]

Healing School App

The vision of the Healing School is 'taking divine healing to the nations and people of the world'. The Healing School mobile app gives you access to a multi-lingual experience with translations in French, German, Russian and Spanish. With this app you can watch inspiring videos, listen to faith stirring audio podcasts, register for upcoming sessions, and connect with the healing school on Yookos. The app offers users the opportunity to watch videos of Testifiers at the Healing School, inspiring documentaries from the minister's visitation program and exciting testimonies of visitors to the international Easter youth camp with Pastor Chris. It also offers a Healing School monthly magazine available in English, Dutch, Spanish and French which can be downloaded for free, as well as archives of the healing school magazine within the app. Having participated at the Healing School, Faith maintains that:

> I was inspired to attend the Healing from watching LoveworldSat before I joined CE and later listening to testimonies from the app on my phone when I became a member. What I like about the healing ministry is they teach you the word of God about healing so that you understand it's not magic, it's a process and it's what the word of God says.[19]

Through this app, Christians evangelise to others who are sick and in need of help. Testimonies from the app are shown to friends in one's circle. Jess' excerpt echoes this:

> I have a colleague who is very sick and needs help. I showed her testimonies from the healing app on my phone and implored her to seek help. A week later the friend told me she has been thinking about what I said. Having encouraged her, I am now praying for her that she takes up the offer.[20]

LoveworldSat App

This is a mobile application developed to deliver TV experience of LoveWorld Satellite station for Christians on-the-go. It is a premium television station that provides rich, quality content that is meaningful and life changing. It also offers a wide variety of TV programs ranging from faith-based inspirational programs to world news and current affairs, lifestyle, entertainment, kiddies' show, education, movies and music. Besides this TV station, there are other broadcasting channels that apps have been created to enable Christians to access news and information on-the-go. These include; Loveworld TV, Loveworld Plus, Loveworld Radio, and Loveworld news. The design and programmes on these platforms are informed by the stiff competition that the church faces with the secular

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[18] Interview with Daniel, Cape Town: 22/07/2016.
[19] Interview with Faith, Cape Town: 21/05/2016.
[20] Conversation with Jess, Cape Town: 09/02/2017.

world. In order to attract Christians to the church, while privileging church contents, they must be able to provide them with similar worldly entertainment contents but couched in the work. Blessing elucidates:

> Competition between the church and the secular world is real! This is even so because of the fast world in which we live today whereby young people, especially, want to enjoy the world, but unfortunately what is being thrown at them are all the things that could destroy their lives forever. As a church we thought, what are the things that these youth like to do so we can provide to them for free but couched in the word? This is the only way we can fight this competition; by providing similar things that they would normally pay for out there, but for free and there will be abundant fun. This is the bait to bring them into the word.[21]

The above statement encapsulates the culture war and fears of the churches through the eyes of this young pastor and cell group leader. Competition is not so much with other Pentecostal churches than with the secular (modern) world. The sentiments shared by Blessing and Moses concur with Einstein's, that faiths of all kinds must compete not only with each other, but with a myriad of more entertaining and more convenient leisure activities (2008).

Commending all the apps, Daniel concludes that:

> Yes, you can also receive calls through our apps, of which it is similar to what people in the world are doing. However, we have taken technology into the church so that instead of young people thinking there is nothing in the church, they will realize the church has got even better stuff than in the world. It's also a way to lure the young men and women into the church so that if they think Facebook is the best, wait until they download Yookos. They will find the Word of God on Yookos. You can post pics, connect with friends and with Pastor Chris, which is much better. But when they go to other worldly social apps, there are a lot of things that can destroy their lives. But when they get connected to our apps, they are actually connected to the anointing. They are connected to the Word of God. They are connected to true life; to Jesus Christ.[22]

CE's appropriation of SM suggests that in order to compete effectively and for reachability to be impactful, mega PCs have had to become brands – easily recognizable symbols with which Christians can make immediate connections (Einstein, 2008). However, despite the perception that Pastor Chris is just a click away, accessibility and reachability is often virtual, hence their present-absent nature. How does Ark of the Glory of the Lord church fare in this regard?

Ark of the Glory of the Lord Church (AGLC)

AGLC is not as resourceful and equipped with the internet mediated communication and Social Media as Christ Embassy (CE). Most Christians here are economically marginalised and from the townships, and many are attracted by healing, miracles and prosperity gospel. They are less enthused about SM and rely on announcements made in church and

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[21] Conversation with Blessing, Cell group leader, Cape Town: 27/11/16.
[22] Interview with Daniel, Cape Town: 22/07/2016.

WhatsApp messaging for those who belong to a particular group in the church. The daily lives of most Ark Christians are enmeshed in navigating work, social/family crises or requesting prayer intercessions for job offers consequently impacting on the finances of the church, resulting in the church's inability to invest in SM as it would like to. Jonah, a Minister of the church explicates further:

> But then we just looked at it and said no it's expensive, very expensive. We can't afford that for now because now we are focusing on like making sure we pay the rent of the place and do everything that we need to do: pay electricity, pay water, bills and everything so it was too much money to think.[23]

This notwithstanding, WhatsApp has become the main form of SM communication. According to Jonah, it is a good and inexpensive medium for communicating and organising church's activities/meetings. Because the church is made up of different subgroups that are entrusted with different activities/functions, the activities of various groups are coordinated via WhatsApp. These groups include: Ministers of the church, Partners, Elders, Mighty men, Women of value, Intercessors, Evangelists, Ushers, and Youth group – new Generation and Social team. The tendency is to get every member of the church involved in at least one group of the church. WhatsApp, to these groups, becomes a convenient tool to plan meetings, share information/announcements that pertain to the specific groups and to liaise with the Bishop and spouse. According to Simon, 'every cell group have a WhatsApp group. In every department they have their own team on WhatsApp to communicate so that if there is information about the church or something happens, the same minute, most will know'.[24] However, a significant number of Christians without smartphones means that members still rely on SMS and even voice calls. There is little interest to engage in developing SM software like Christ Embassy for lack of finances.

Unlike CE Cape Town that has an up-to-date website, AGLC has no official website other than a Facebook page and postings on YouTube. The link to their website carries the information 'This Account has been suspended. Contact your hosting provider for more information'. Unlike most PCs and Mega PCs, AGLC is not as dependent on ICTs/social media to carry out evangelism or to encourage actual religious experiences such as praying for people or getting them to confess their faith as noted by Asamoah-Gyadu (2007) regarding the church of Pentecost in Ghana. Rather, there is intense focus on evangelism that privileges face-to-face encounters – operate a four-day-a-week program; Tuesdays – prayer session, Thursdays – healing session, Saturdays – meetings of various church groups and Sunday service. Acknowledging this trend Jonah notes that:

> We depend on prayers in the church, like on Sunday we come here. People come to pray, and on Tuesday people come to pray, on Thursday people come to pray. So what we are doing is to make sure there is that closeness, that people should have that closeness to the church. They need also to know God more. They must come to church.[25]

It is this face-to-face contact that lured Paul from CE to AGLC. According to Paul:

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[23] Interview with Jonah, Cape Town: 12/07/2016.
[24] Interview with Simon, Cape Town: 12/07/2016.
[25] Interview with Jonah, Cape Town: 12/07/2016.

> The services at CE were amazing, but I didn't like the constant live streaming services. I felt it did not have an impact on my spiritual life. I wanted to see and hear from the Pastor and not a virtual preacher. I was not getting enough of face-to-face contact at CE and moved to Ark.[26]

Paul expected an experiential practice, one that gives him a more personal connection to God wherein he experiences His presence (Einstein, 2008). Contrary to others who are happy with a mix of virtual and corporeal preaching, he prefers sermons from the pulpit. The lack thereof sends him searching in the spirit of competition. The lack of enthusiasm to appropriate SM underscores the co-existence between the old and the new forms SM. Despite its far-reaching qualities, the old forms of worship are still sought after.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to provide new insights into the phenomenal success and growth of Pentecostalism in the case of Christ Embassy following the appropriation of Social Media. Through this lens of SM appropriation, this study has been able to show how, propelled by competition, the quest for innovation becomes a continuous work in progress for Pentecostal churches (PCs), especially megachurches such as Christ Embassy. Their goal is to repackage religion for proselytization in order to retain existing Christians, appeal to would-be converts, and stay permanently connected with Christians on-the-go. By contrast, rising PCs – such as Ark of the Glory of the Lord Church (AGLC), privilege face-to-face evangelisation and as such, appropriation of SM is limited to WhatsApp. Compared to the virtual arena of spiritual warfare in the past, today's warfare is a virtual competition, (re)branding for mass recruitment of new members, interaction and disseminating Christian messages. This trait of appropriation is a manifestation of competition among mega PCs in particular. It places them at the forefront of religious innovation, competing with the secular world to appeal to the generation of the future (youthful).

Compelled by competition due to cultural wars, appropriation and creation of SM software/platforms, in addition to the multitude of existing Internet-mediated platforms contribute to the strengthening and expansion of their congregations. These apps are seen as an attraction to the youth given their interactive features. Accordingly, this allure is quite instrumental, given that most youth have been taken off from one form of internet – browsing 'unwanted websites' to the apps of the church. In the context of South Africa, these apps are credited for mitigating engagement in illicit activities. The conscious decision to educate Christians about the role of technology in evangelism raises awareness on the role of users as active empowered users of new media. They can make distinctive choices about their relationship/participation with technology, rather than assuming that technology usurps their choices (Campbell, 2010).

The coming of the Internet was much celebrated for having established a significant electronic medium towards development of religious communities that complemented earlier appropriations of writing, printing and moving images (Beckerlegge, 2001). The arrival of SM has proven much more significant as it has equipped Christians to seek Christ on-the-go; offering possibilities to move with the ministry in their pockets or seek the 'divine' in the comforts of their homes. These SM platforms thus become intermediaries

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[26] Conversation with Paul, Cape Town: 16/07/2016.

through which people can experience the 'divine' and provide for a greater sense of conviviality following the spread of religious contents inter-denominationally (Nyamnjoh, 2015). Investments in media technologies as Hackett and Soares (2015) adduce play a role in Christian conversions and reconversion as much as they lure others to be born-again; what Meyer (2004) has termed 'Pentecostalite'.

That religious products would turn to 'branding' (Einstein, 2008) indicates the current cultural environment. To maintain relevance in the commercialisation and consumerist culture means at a minimum being heard among the multitude of competing messages. SM becomes the linchpin for reaching the old, new, and would-be religious consumer.

Although the platforms/apps are designed to be interactive, they are equally lucrative resources for popular entertainment such as DVDs and downloads from the digital library following the monetisation of most of the materials on this platform. While each app/platform has a specific purpose, the generic position is to give followers a sense that their leaders are reachable – they are a click away from them. In so doing, members are enthused, especially, by the simplicity of the Man of God – Pastor Chris – and become glued to the church and apps. Ownership and control become by-products of accessing the divine on-the go.

The fact that AGLC has timidly appropriated WhatsApp while still privileging face-to-face contacts does not exonerate them from exerting control. Engaging with members through various groups introduces another form of control. Nevertheless, while social media innovations are appropriated by mega PCs, others are selective in their appropriation. The preference for old and new forms of social media technologies, as Nyamnjoh explicates, 'bring the old and the new into conversation in a process of creative domestication and innovation' (2015: viii).

Pastor Rita's call for Christians to switch to smartphones that would give them access to the different platforms illustrates that appropriating ICTs and SM is insufficient to enhance the workings of the church, but what gives the platforms credence and visibility is getting Christians on board – 'giving up their stones for phones'. As users, they have to actively engage with the SNSs – 'like it, share and create groups and migrate to the platforms' as insisted by Pastor Rita.

By contrast, Paul's move from CE to AGLC confirms Nyamnjoh's call for domestication of the old and the new. CE has appropriated SM, but many Christians are unwilling to migrate to the different platforms or upgrade to Android phones. Meanwhile, AGLC privileges face-to-face forms of worship. Paul's move may be out of sheer frustration at the number of platforms CE pelted at him or the failure by the church to connect with what people's values/preferences are. While new technologies may be celebrated as 'Jesus technology', old methods of face-to-face encounter still appeal to others. In this regard, this paper has shown that social media has differing impacts on the reception of religious authority and thus is appropriated differently by PCs.

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