

## **"Navigating Faith in The Digital Age: A Study Of Social Media And Online Churches In Communicating With Congregations In The Madurai Region"**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores how social media platforms and online church services have been employed as means of communicating faith to congregations in the Madurai region, particularly in response to the obstacles brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. It specifically examines the emergence of online churches and the heightened use of social media within traditional religious communities. Employing a comprehensive methodology integrating both qualitative and quantitative research techniques, the study delves into the effectiveness in communicating faith through sermons, singing and music to the congregants within traditional churches. Through surveys and in-depth interviews conducted among a representative sample of congregants, this research explores the extent to which social media platforms and online church services are integrated into religious communication strategies. The qualitative component of the study seeks to uncover the motivations, challenges, and opportunities associated with the adoption of digital technologies for religious purposes, while the quantitative analysis provides insights into the prevalence and patterns of usage among different demographic groups within the congregations. By examining the intersection of technology and religious communication in a specific cultural and geographical context, this paper enhances a nuanced understanding of the evolving dynamics of faith expression in the

digital age. This paper also contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between technology, religion, and society in the post-pandemic era.

***Keywords : Social media, Online churches, Faith communication, COVID-19 pandemic, Madurai region, congregation, social communication, online worship***

### **Introduction:**

Evangelical leaders use social media to encourage and inspire their followers, as well as to convey parodic information about their work (Burge, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has irrevocably reshaped the landscape of religious practices worldwide, compelling traditional churches to adopt rapidly to the challenges posed by social distancing measures and restrictions on gatherings. In response to these unprecedented circumstances, many congregations have turned to digital platforms such as social media and online church services as alternative means of fostering community, delivering spiritual guidance, and maintaining congregational engagement. This paradigm shift has been particularly pronounced in regions like Madurai, Tamil Nadu, where traditional religious practices have long been central to the social cohesion of the community.

Social communication will be more successful and focused if Catechesis is used as a communication of faith ( Taek, 2023). This research paper aims to investigate the efficacy and impact of utilizing social media and online church services for communicating faith within traditional churches in within the city. Social media platforms are also recognized as potent avenues for religious leaders to reach out to people and influence their knowledge of religion (Chukwuma, 2018).studies how these digital tools have been leveraged by religious leaders

and congregants to navigate the challenges of the post-pandemic era and uphold the tenets of their faith.

In exploring this phenomenon, the research will adopt a multifaceted approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Through surveys and in-depth interviews with members of traditional churches in the Madurai region, the study seeks to elucidate the motivations, experiences, and perceptions surrounding the use of social media and online church services for religious communication. By examining the attitudes and behaviors of congregants in this context, the research aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of these digital strategies in fostering spiritual connection, community engagement, and religious participation.

Firms, organizations and governments can employ this “new new media” to market themselves. Compared with traditional media, social media provides a more convenient, participative, open, transparent and interactive dialogue (Zhou 2014) will consider the broader socio-cultural implications of the digitalization of religious practices in Madurai city, including its impact on traditional modes of worship, religious identity, and social cohesion. By shedding light on these dynamics, the research endeavors to foster a deeper understanding of the evolving relationship between technology and faith in the post-pandemic era, particularly within the context of traditional churches.

## **Literature Review**

Virtual worship is common in developed countries and has become an option during lockdowns. Computer mediated communication (CMC) has been used to eliminate social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic Singarimbun (2021). Makhutla (2021) findings

include the definition of social media, recommendations for churches to promote the use of relevant equipment, and the need for support to sustain the use of social media for promoting the gospel. Ratcliff, A.J., (2017) explores relationships between new media and religion, exploring how technology usage predicts specific religious behavior and how attitudes towards technology and social media play a significant role in shaping how individuals perceive religion as a means of meeting their needs, with three specific needs related to religion identified. The Uses and Gratification Theory, as applied to church, suggests that individuals actively seek out media, including TV worship services, to fulfill specific needs and gratifications (Filipović, 2012). Teaching, enabling, and preaching are identified as aspects of sowing in the Stage Theory of religious communication, with the Religious Communicator responsible for facilitating these activities (Attfield, D.G. 2001).

The surge in the adoption of digital platforms, including social media and online church services, by traditional religious organization in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been widely documented. This transition has been primarily motivated by the necessity to adapt to social distancing measures and sustain congregational involvement amidst constraints on physical gatherings.

This research elucidates the transformative influence of digital technologies on religious practices, fostering novel avenues for worship, community-building, and outreach. Online church services have emerged as a conduit for broader participation and accessibility, affording congregants the opportunity to engage in religious activities from the confines of their homes.

Literature underscores the escalating prominence of digital platforms in shaping religious communication practices in the post-pandemic epoch. By examining the adoption, impact,

efficacy, challenges, and user motivations associated with social media and online church services, this review furnishes invaluable insights for scholars, religious leaders, and practitioners navigating the ever-evolving terrain of faith communication

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research paper draws from two distinct yet complementary perspectives: the Media Uses and Gratification Theory and Rhetoric Communication Theory. The Media Uses and Gratification Theory, emphasizes the active role of the audience in selecting media based on their needs and motivations (Qiao, 2011). In the context of social media preaching during the COVID-19 lockdown, this theory suggests that congregants engage with online church services and religious content on social media platforms to satisfy various gratifications and needs. These gratifications encompass information seeking, social interaction, entertainment, escapism, and personal identity expression. By exploring the satisfactions and gratifications sought by media users through social media preaching, this theoretical lens provides insights into the motivations driving congregants' engagement with online religious content during the pandemic. Pettersson (1986) study aimed to investigate the "uses and gratification" of Swedish broadcasted Sunday morning worship services through a nationwide postal survey

Concurrently, the application of Rhetoric Communication Theory underscores the persuasive power of language and discourse in shaping attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Rhetoric is indeed a powerful tool for effective communication, especially when delivering speeches or lectures to a diverse audience (Asriadi, 2020). effectiveness of sermons in three different denominations of churches by applying a theoretical framework grounded in this theory. The framework incorporates key rhetorical principles, including Aristotle's concepts of ethos, pathos, and logos, and Cicero's five canons of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and

delivery. It examines verbal and non-verbal techniques, such as storytelling, repetition, body language, and vocal variety, used by preachers to engage their congregations. The framework also considers audience analysis, including demographics, psychographics, and feedback mechanisms. Effectiveness is measured through both qualitative methods, such as congregation feedback and observational studies, and quantitative metrics, like attendance figures and engagement indicators. By analyzing sermons from different denominations, the study aims to identify how rhetorical strategies can enhance sermon delivery and improve the listening experience of congregations, ultimately fostering a more engaged and spiritually enriched community. Crafting compelling narratives and storytelling techniques further enhances the persuasiveness and memorability of social media preaching, capturing the attention and imagination of congregants in the digital space.

By integrating the Media Uses and Gratification Theory and Rhetoric Communication Theory, this research paper strives to deliver a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of preaching on social media during the COVID-19 lockdown. Through the exploration of satisfactions and gratifications sought by media users and the persuasive communication strategies employed by religious leaders, this theoretical framework sheds light on the effectiveness of utilizing social media and online church services in communicating faith to congregations in Madurai city during the pandemic and its aftermath.

## **Methodology**

This research employs a systematic approach to analyze the effectiveness of communicating faith through social media and online church platforms. Random sampling technique is utilized to select respondents from three major denomination churches, ensuring a representative sample. Questionnaires, comprising demographic inquiries and targeted queries on

communication patterns, are distributed to gather valuable insights. Additionally, the survey prompting respondents to rank various communication attributes on a Likert scale, from 1 denoting the least importance to 5 indicating the highest. This approach aims to discern the relative significance of factors influencing effectiveness of faith communication within each denomination.

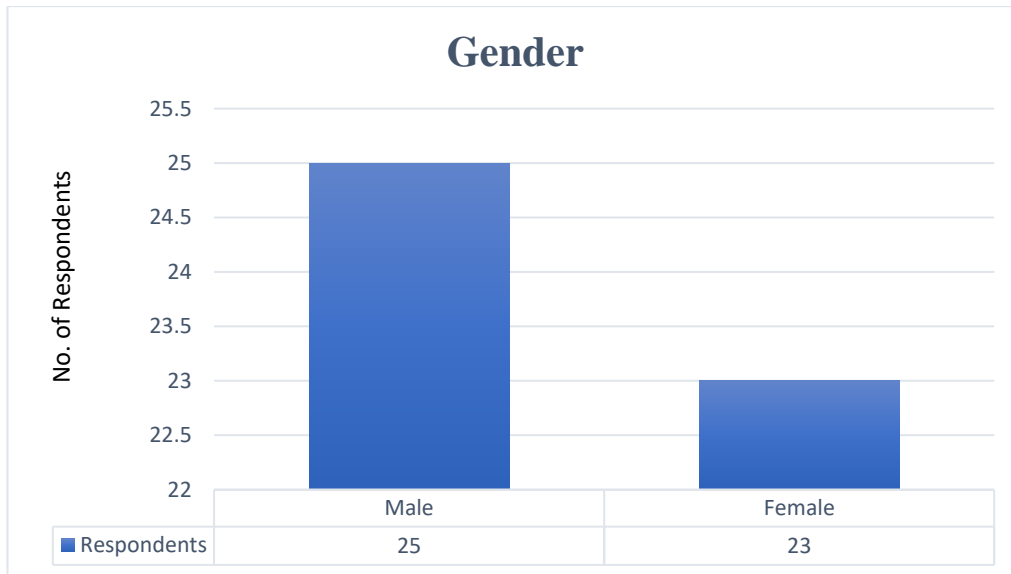
This study employs a snowball sampling method to select participants from three traditional denominations of churches: Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal. Snowball sampling is particularly useful in this context because it allows for the identification and recruitment of participants who are deeply embedded within their church communities, ensuring a representative and informed sample. This approach ensures a balanced representation and allows for comparative analysis across the denominations. A total of 48 respondents were selected across the three denominations included regular church attendees who actively participate in church services and have a comprehensive understanding of their church's sermon delivery and listening experience. The researcher conducted self-observation during church services to complement the questionnaire data. This involved attending sermons in each of the three denominations and making detailed field notes on various aspects of sermon delivery and congregation engagement.

### **Data Collection**

The methodology for data collection in this research study involved the implementation of a structured survey administered in-person. A meticulously crafted questionnaire served as the primary tool for gathering data, featuring a blend of closed-ended questions, Likert-scale items, and demographic inquiries.

## Sample Distribution

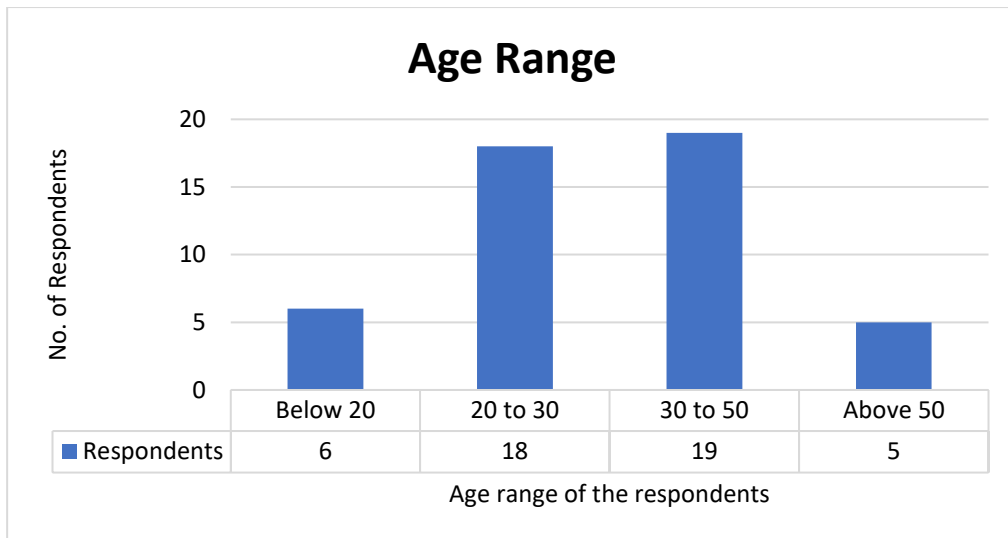
The sample selection process for this research study involved choosing participants from three distinct denominations of churches located within Madurai city. Graph 1 illustrates the gender distribution among the selected samples, with 52% representing males and 48% representing females.



Graph 1

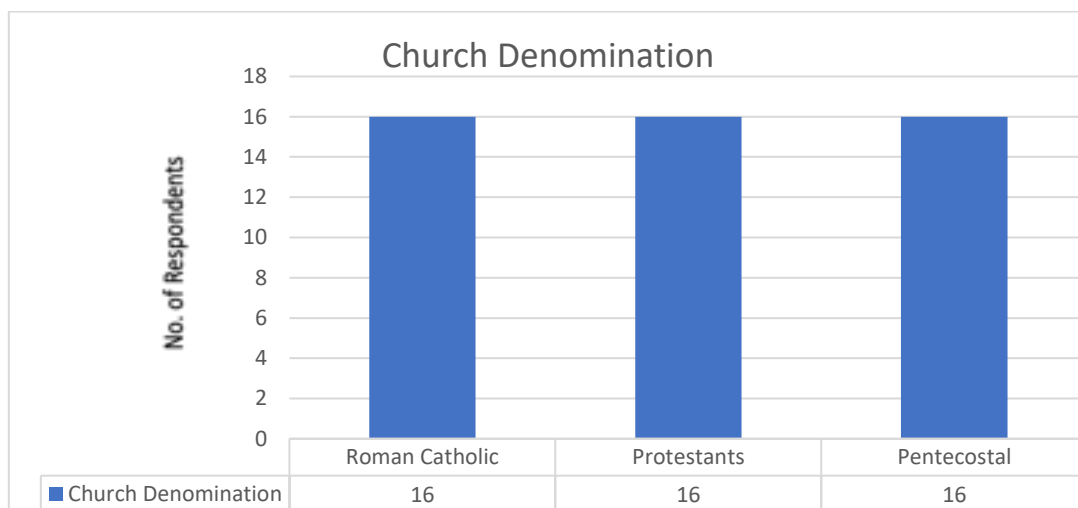
This graph depicts the demographic distribution of survey respondents categorized by age ranges. The x-axis delineates different age categories, while the y-axis represents the number of respondents within each age group. Each bar on the graph corresponds to a specific age range, with its height indicating the number of respondents falling within that category.





Graph 2

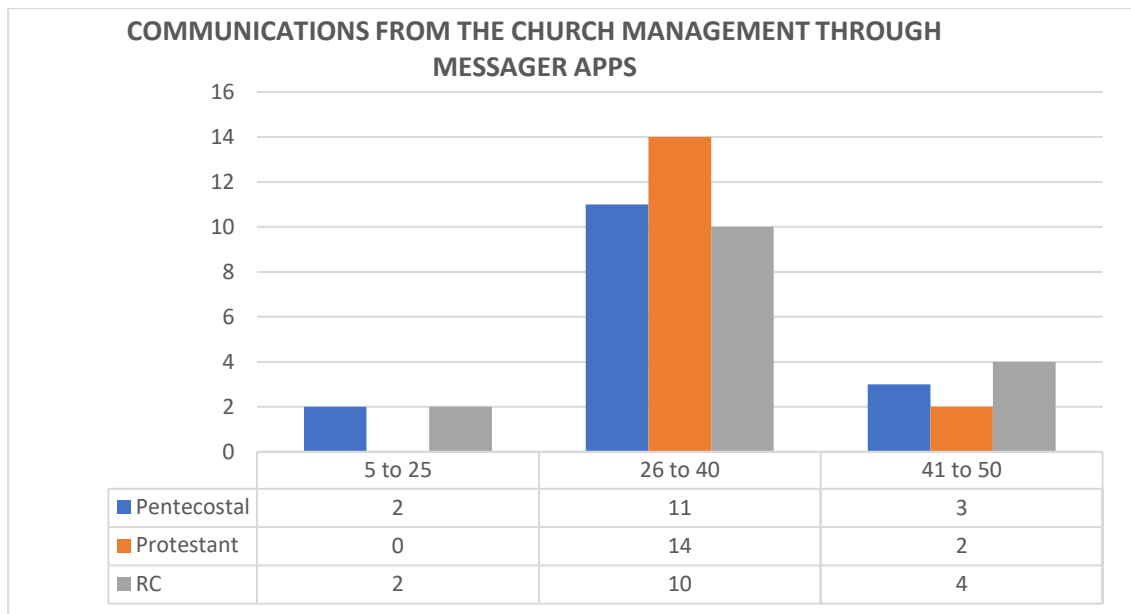
This graph offers a comprehensive overview of survey respondents' affiliations with different church denominations. The x-axis displays various church denominations, while the y-axis quantifies the number of respondents affiliated with each denomination. Each bar on the graph corresponds to a specific church denomination, with its height reflecting the count of respondents belonging to that particular denomination.



Graph 3

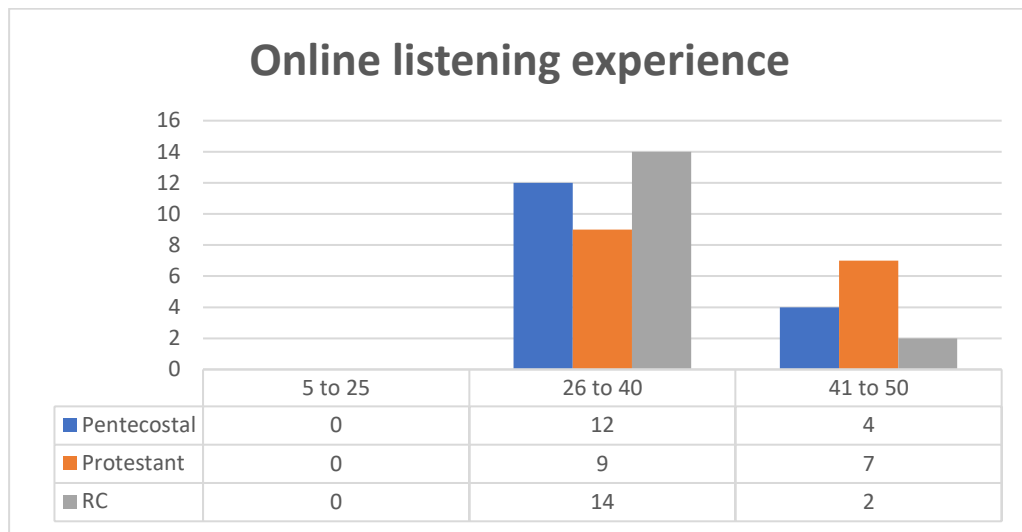
## Data Analysis

The findings of this analysis churches have increasingly turned to messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and others as means of communication with their congregations. Through a systematic examination of congregants' feedback, this research aim to inform and empower church leaders in leveraging messaging apps effectively to foster stronger connections and engagement within their communities of faith.



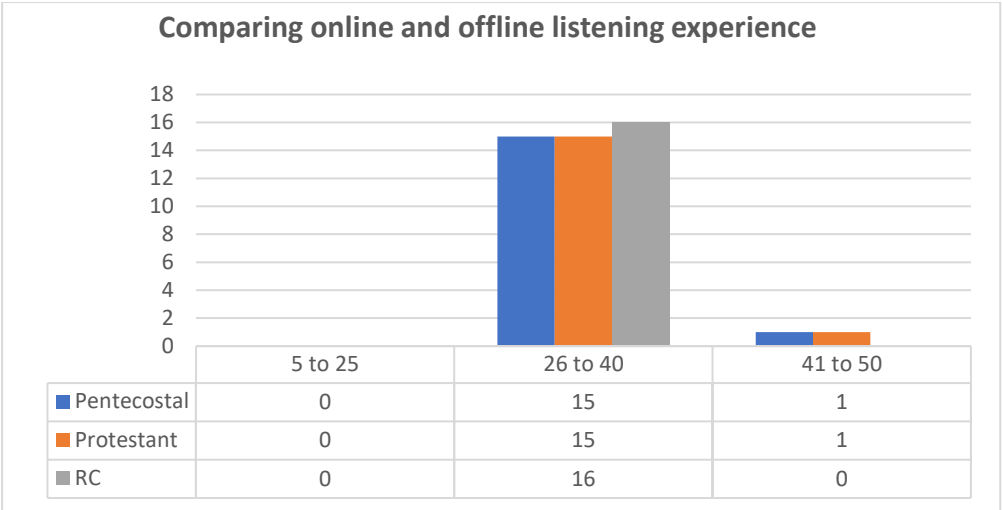
Graph 4

(Graph:4) graph offers a comprehensive analysis of respondents' feedback regarding various official communication channels from the church management, including "Daily Manna," "Promise Verses," and "Information on Special Services." Official church communications are vital for keeping the congregation informed, engaged, and spiritually nourished. In this graph, respondents' opinions were quantitatively represented, reflecting their level of satisfaction using a Likert scale, typically ranging from [insert scale details, e.g., 1 to 5 where 1 represents "Never" and 5 represents "Frequently"]. The graph showed only 18% of the respondents could receive communication from their churches, and 72.9% of the respondents could receive communication from their churches occasionally. The remaining 9.1% of the respondents were not communicated through online mode from their churches.



Graph 5

(Graph:5) graph presents the result of comprehensive analysis of respondents' feedback regarding their online church experience, specifically comparing two distinct approaches: "Live Streaming" and "Pre-Recorded Church services." In light of the significant shift toward virtual worship experiences, churches have adopted different methods, including live streaming of services and pre-recorded video services, to engage with their congregation. This graph provides valuable insights into how respondents perceive and engage with these diverse approaches, either "Live Streaming" or "Pre-Recorded Church services" and reflecting their level of satisfaction using a Likert scale, typically ranging from [insert scale details, e.g., 1 to 5 where 1 represents "Very poor" and 5 represents "very good"]. The graph shows that 27% of people are more than satisfied 73% of the respondents felt average with their online church experience, either it was "Live Streaming" or "Pre-Recorded Church services."



Graph 6

(Graph-6) presents the result of comprehensive comparative analysis of respondents' feedback regarding their church experiences, contrasting offline worship with online experiences utilizing two distinct methods namely "Live Streaming" and "Pre-Recorded Programs." In the face of evolving worship practices and the widespread adoption of online platforms, churches have embraced various approaches to connect with their congregation. This graph provides valuable insights into how respondents perceive and engage with these diverse modes of worship. The graph shows that there are only 4% of people prefer online worship whereas 96% of the respondents feel that offline worship create a wonderful experience then worshipping through online at homes.

Table 1 Ranking analysis for usage of mass media

Usage of Mass Media	Pentecostal	Protestant	Roman Catholic
Songs	3.38	4.47	7.75
Music	4.75	6.40	10.13
Display of Subtitles, Lyrics and Bible verses	6.75	6.33	10.50
Streaming video resolution	7.44	6.87	8.75
Streaming video bitrate	6.81	8.87	8.13
Encoding of broadcaster	7.13	8.80	8.75
Aspect ratio	10.19	8.93	5.44
Video transition	9.38	9.67	5.88
Overlaying videos	10.13	10.87	9.63
Audio streaming Quality	9.38	8.07	6.63
Video streaming Quality	9.56	9.13	7.69
Streaming Platform (zoom, FB, YouTube)	12.13	9.33	7.06
Audio video synchronization	8.88	9.33	8.00
Accessibility of link	10.88	8.27	5.81

(Table 1) show the ranking analysis from the three denominations of churches. The purpose of this analysis was to evaluate the importance of various communication parameters in the context of sermons within three distinct denominations of churches. In the present research the responses were collected and respondents were asked to rank 15 communication parameters, music parameters, online listening experience based on their perceived significance. This analysis aims to provide insights into how these denominations prioritize parameters that makes the communication through sermons, music and worship through online were effective. The data collected were then analyzed to determine the average ranking for each parameter within each denomination, with lower average rankings indicating higher importance.

## Statistical Analysis

### Denomination wise response with respect to effectiveness of online communication

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>
Between Groups	123.180556	2	61.5902778	1.6957935	0.18717344	3.06029177
Within Groups	5121.04167	141	36.3194444			
Total	5244.22222	143				

#### Describing the Output Table:

- 1. Source of Variation:** This part of the table categorizes the variation into 'Between Groups' for differences among various denominations, and 'Within Groups' for variations within each denomination group.
- 2. SS (Sum of Squares):** Reflects the total variability in the data. The 'Between Groups' SS was 123.180556, indicating the variability due to differences in denominational responses to other online communication. The 'Within Groups' SS was 5121.04167, representing the variability within each denomination group.
- 3. df (Degrees of Freedom):** The 'Between Groups' df was 2, corresponding to the number of denominational groups being compared. The 'Within Groups' df was 141, calculated from the total number of observations minus the number of groups.
- 4. MS (Mean Square):** Obtained by dividing SS by df, with the 'Between Groups' MS at 61.5902778 and the 'Within Groups' MS at 36.3194444.
- 5. F (F-Statistic):** The ratio of Mean Square Between to Mean Square Within, here being 1.6957935.

6. **P-value:** Indicates the probability of observing an F-statistic as extreme as, or more extreme than, the one observed under the null hypothesis. The P-value was 0.18717344.
7. **F crit (Critical Value of F):** The threshold for rejecting the null hypothesis, set at 3.06029177.

**Interpretation of the Table:**

- The F-statistic of 1.6957935 was below the critical value of F (3.06029177), suggesting that the variance between different denominational groups in response to other online communication was not significantly greater than the variance within the groups.
- The P-value of 0.18717344, while lower than in some cases, was still above the conventional alpha level of 0.05. This indicated a reasonable probability that the observed differences between denominational groups were due to random chance. Consequently, the null hypothesis was not rejected, implying that denomination did not have a significant effect on responses to other forms of online communication.
- The 'Within Groups' SS significantly outweighs the 'Between Groups' SS, further supporting the conclusion that most of the variability in the data was within the individual denominational groups, rather than between them.

Overall, this analysis suggested that, based on the collected data, there was no statistically significant difference in responses to other forms of online communication across different denominations. The variations observed were likely due to random variation rather than a systematic effect of denominational background.

**Online Communication and social media usage within denomination (with reference to the years of attending church)**

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>
Between Groups	60.6138889	3	20.2046296	0.54569095	0.65184836	2.66925636
Within Groups	5183.60833	140	37.0257738			
Total	5244.22222	143				

- **F-Statistic:** 0.55
- **P-value:** 0.65
- **F critical:** 2.67

**Interpretation:**

For "Online Communication and social media usage," the results also indicate no significant difference as the F-statistic was below the F critical value, and the p-value was above 0.05. This implies that the length of church attendance did not significantly affect how respondents perceive other forms of communication in church services.

**Over All Observation**

The data analysis conducted in this study provides valuable insights into the evolving landscape of communication and worship practices within traditional churches in the digital age, especially within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As churches grapple with the challenges posed by social distancing measures and restrictions on physical gatherings, the role of digital technologies in facilitating communication, community-building, and worship experiences has become increasingly prominent.



One of the key observations gleaned from the findings is the widespread adoption of messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and others as essential tools for communication with congregations. In an era marked by rapid technological advancements and shifting communication norms, traditional churches have recognized the importance of leveraging digital platforms to stay connected with their members. The convenience and immediacy afforded by messaging apps have made them indispensable for disseminating information, sharing updates, and fostering engagement within church communities.

By examining rhetorical principles like ethos, pathos, logos, and Cicero's five canons of rhetoric, the research aimed to understand how these strategies enhance sermon delivery and improve the listening experience across these denominations. In Roman Catholic churches, the structured liturgical context often dictates the sermon format. The ethos of the priest is paramount, with the congregation placing significant trust in the clergy's authority and moral character. Homilies often involve theological and scriptural analysis, focusing on logos. However, emotional appeal (pathos) is generally more subdued. Protestant churches often see a balanced use of ethos, pathos, and logos in sermons. The preacher's credibility is crucial, with a strong emphasis on logical argumentation through detailed scriptural analysis. Emotional engagement is achieved through storytelling and analogies, making sermons relatable and resonant. Pentecostal churches are characterized by their dynamic and emotive preaching style, with a strong emphasis on pathos. Preachers often use vocal variety, body language, and spontaneous expressions to create an emotionally charged atmosphere. While the preacher's credibility is important, the emotional connection with the congregation is paramount. This study indicates that while Pentecostal sermons are highly engaging, incorporating more structured logical arguments could provide additional depth and reinforce the sermon's message.

Virtual worship, whether facilitated through live streaming or pre-recorded services, has increasingly become a fundamental aspect of religious practice. However, despite its widespread adoption, levels of satisfaction among participants remain relatively modest, suggesting a pressing need for improvement. Despite the accessibility and convenience offered by online platforms, survey respondents consistently express a strong preference for in-person worship due to its inherent sense of community and shared experience.

The significance of effective communication and engagement cannot be overstated in nurturing and strengthening connections within religious congregations. Transparent communication is particularly vital in this regard, serving as a cornerstone for building trust and fostering a sense of belonging among members. Striking a delicate balance between embracing technological innovations and preserving the essence of communal worship is imperative for traditional religious institutions as they navigate the increasingly complex digital landscape.

## **Conclusion**

The utilization of messaging applications by traditional churches as vital communication channels with their congregations represents a significant adaptation to the evolving dynamics of communication in the digital era. This transition, particularly accentuated by the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the resilience and adaptability of religious institutions in responding to contemporary circumstances. By embracing platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and others, churches demonstrate a commitment to maintaining connections, facilitating information dissemination, and enhancing engagement within their faith communities.

The integration of messaging apps into the communication strategies of traditional churches reflects a multifaceted approach to meeting the diverse needs of congregants in an increasingly digital world. These platforms offer a convenient and accessible means of communication,

transcending geographical barriers and enabling real-time interaction among members. Moreover, the flexibility and versatility of messaging apps empower churches to disseminate timely updates, share resources, and provide spiritual guidance, thereby enriching the religious experience of their followers.

Furthermore, the adoption of messaging apps by traditional churches highlights the importance of adaptability and innovation in navigating contemporary challenges. In the face of unprecedented disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, religious institutions have demonstrated a willingness to embrace technological solutions to uphold their mission of fostering spiritual growth and community cohesion. By leveraging digital platforms, churches have been able to bridge the gap created by social distancing measures, ensuring that congregants remain connected and supported during times of uncertainty.

Applying the rhetorical communication framework across these denominations highlights both commonalities and differences in sermon delivery. Roman Catholic and Protestant sermons benefit from strong ethos and logos, with potential for increased emotional engagement through pathos. In contrast, Pentecostal sermons excel in emotional appeal but could be strengthened by integrating more logical structure. Understanding and applying rhetorical principles can enhance sermon delivery across different denominations, fostering a more engaged and spiritually nourished congregation. This research underscores the importance of adaptability and continuous improvement in religious communication to meet the evolving needs of diverse congregational audiences.

Additionally, the integration of messaging apps into the communication strategies of traditional churches has implications for the future of religious engagement and outreach. As digital communication continues to evolve, churches must remain proactive in leveraging emerging

technologies to enhance their ministries and reach new audiences. By embracing innovation while staying true to their core values, religious institutions can effectively adapt to changing communication trends and remain relevant in an increasingly digitalized society.

However, it is important to recognize that the transition to digital communication platforms is not without challenges and limitations. While messaging apps offer numerous benefits, including convenience and accessibility, they also present concerns related to privacy, security, and digital overload. Religious leaders must therefore navigate these complexities thoughtfully, ensuring that their use of messaging apps aligns with ethical guidelines and respects the privacy rights of congregants.

In conclusion, the increasing integration of messaging apps into the communication strategies of traditional churches reflects a pragmatic response to the evolving landscape of digital communication. Through utilizing these platforms, churches can effectively sustain connections, distribute information, and cultivate engagement within their faith communities, especially given the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moving forward, it is imperative for religious institutions to continue exploring innovative ways of utilizing technology to support their mission and adapt to the changing needs of congregants in an increasingly digital world.

While messaging apps have emerged as valuable tools for church communication, there remains room for improvement in ensuring consistent communication and enhancing the quality of online worship experiences. By heeding congregants' feedback and preferences, church leaders can effectively leverage messaging apps and online platforms to strengthen connections and foster meaningful engagement within their congregations.

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