

THE INFLUENCE OF E-MARKETING PROMOTIONAL TOOLS ON CHURCH MEMBERSHIP GROWTH DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN CALABAR MUNICIPALITY

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Abstract

This study assessed the influence of e-marketing promotional tools on the growth of churches in Calabar Municipality. Specifically, this study sought to establish the extent to which the use of e-advertising, social media, direct marketing, e-images, and e-videos enhanced church attendance/growth during the COVID-19 lockdown in Calabar Municipality. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted whereby structured questionnaires were personally administered to 376 purposefully selected Pentecostal church leaders identified from the list of attendees to the regular monthly meetings organized by the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, Calabar branch. A final sample of 261 respondents was used to test hypotheses after conducting the necessary preliminary data checks. Results of hypotheses testing using multiple regression analysis technique shows that while the use of social media and e-videos significantly enhanced the growth of churches during the COVID-19 lockdown, e-advertisement, e-images and direct marketing had no such effect. The study also found that, relatively, social media handles are more powerful in enhancing church growth than e-videos. Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded/recommended that churches could improve their membership strength by increasing their use of social media and e-video tools as the primary channels of engaging their audience when conditions make it impracticable for physical face-to-face assembly, while e-advertisement and direct marketing tools may be used as supplementary tools because of their marginal benefits.

Keywords: E-marketing; Promotional tools; Church marketing; E-advertising; social media; e-videos; e-images; e-pictures; church growth; church attendance; Pentecostal churches.

Introduction

Today, we live in a very dynamic environment where consumers and their needs are becoming more sophisticated to satisfy. This therefore calls for the effective application of innovative strategies by all organization or institutions in order to gain advantage over their competitors. The church as an institution cannot be exempted in the application of e-marketing strategies in its everyday practices, especially when considering the growth objectives of her various arms. A church is an assembly or association of followers of Jesus Christ (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). In the New Testament, the church is basically referred to as “assembly”. In the wake of the global Corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic, churches were increasingly adopting e-marketing promotional tools to promote and deliver their contents to congregants around the world as part of encouraging their belief and faith in God amidst the pandemic. According to Strauss and Frost (2014), e-marketing is the use of electronic data and applications for planning and executing the conception, pricing and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational goals. E-marketing promotional tools are web-based resources that are used to carry out marketing objectives or that aid organizations to achieve their online marketing goals (Goshal, 2019). They hugely impact the growth of churches, due to their transformative impact in the way

information is generated, shared and consumed (Mahajan & Golahit 2017). Although church founders and religious leaders perceive the progressive increase in the number of individuals and families that decide to constantly attend programs or religious gatherings to have spiritual reasons (the God factor), churches in recent times have seen tremendous application of marketing principles, theories and frameworks (Kuzma *et al.*, 2009), especially after the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, where churches were not permitted to congregate in their worship centers. A lot of churches had to seek for ways and means of maintaining, building and achieving their church objectives, and e-marketing promotional tools came to the rescue.

Consequently, the glaring question is: have churches been able to enhance their growth/maintain their membership through the application of e-marketing promotional tools? Although, some scholars have explored the relationship between marketing promotion tools and several organizational outcomes (e.g./ Fagunwa, 2015; Thota, 2018; Appiah *et al.*, 2013; Adebayo, 2015; Wanyoike & Orwa, 2016; Goshal 2019), none of the authors has considered the use of e-marketing promotional tools in churches, or their relative importance in influencing church growth in a developing country like Nigeria. Also, even though church founders and leaders postulate spiritual reasons for the emergence and expeditious growth of the church, research has shown that the pivotal reason for their emergence is economic, (Adebayo, 2015) and as such, marketing strategies are inevitable in church growth. This is why Adebayo (2015), concluded that the mandate of the church in fulfilling its social values is shrouded by a lot of marketing principles and strategies. Therefore, the potentials of e-marketing promotional tools in churches should not be overlooked considering its ability to integrate plans that relate the strategic advantage of the church as a commission to the challenges of the environment thereby ensuring the achievements of the basic objectives of churches through proper execution. As a target market of the church, man must be communicated with in order to get attracted to the churches' products and offerings, after which they are persuaded to become members of the church. Thus, this study sought to determine if the application of these e-marketing promotional strategies by churches during and after the COVID-19 induced lockdown had enhanced church growth, and to

identify which of the e-marketing promotional tools applied by churches was most effective.

Literature review

Theoretical Framework

Technology Acceptance Model

This study is anchored on the technology acceptance model (TAM) propounded by Davis (1985) in his doctoral thesis at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Davis (1985) proposed that system use is a response that can be explained or predicted by user motivation, which in turn, is directly influenced by an external stimulus consisting of the actual system's features and capabilities. By relying on the prior work of Fishbein & Ajzen (1975), who formulated the theory of reasoned action, Davis (1985) further refined his conceptual model to propose the technology acceptance model. In his proposal, Davis (1985) suggested that users' motivation relative to new technology could be explained by three factors, namely: perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and attitude towards the system (or technology). Davis (1985) hypothesized that the attitude of a user towards a system was a major determinant of whether the user will actually use or reject the system. The attitude of the user in turn was considered to be influenced by two major beliefs: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, with perceived ease of use having a direct influence on perceived usefulness. Finally, both beliefs were hypothesized to be directly influenced by the system's design characteristics. Later development of TAM included behavioral intention as a new variable that would be directly influenced by the perceived usefulness of a system. The technology acceptance model is relevant to this study, because the electronic media can be seen as a very recent technological innovation and so the model suggest that its level of acceptability will depend on its perceived usefulness and the behavioral intention of users in the church. Therefore, it could be deduced from the model that for church leaders to fully adopt and use e-marketing promotional tools in pursuit of their growth objectives, the tools would have to be perceived as useful and easy to use for the realization of intended growth objectives.

Electronic Marketing (e-marketing)

Electronic marketing is the marketing of goods, services, via the internet and other electronic medium (Amruta, 2014). Bridges and Florsheim

(2008) view e-marketing as the process of realizing marketing objectives through the application of digital technologies at a firm's disposal. In the opinions of Strauss and Frost (2014), e-marketing involves the use of electronic data and applications for planning and executing the conception, distribution and pricing of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational goals. E-marketing utilizes the potential of the Internet to disseminate promotional marketing content to the intended target audience. Its popular tools can include email marketing, search engine marketing, social media marketing, display advertising (including web banner advertising), and mobile advertising, among others. In recent times, the internet has made great progress and many companies are using it for marketing their offerings as well as corporate activity to their target markets (Amruta, 2014).

E-Advertising

Electronic advertising is an attempt to release information on the internet in order to establish relationships among vendors and buyers. It is aimed at strengthening the position of a specific brand in the market (brand building) or attempt to evoke direct responses from consumers (Mehta & Purvis, 2006). In the views of Shamim and Fajana (2017), e-advertising is every form of commercial content, available through the Internet, usually designed by a company to inform consumers of services and products to gain patronage. E-advertising holds enormous benefits for business organizations in comparison with conventional advertising platforms such as television or radio, which may impede the flow of bi-directional communication between companies and their audiences. Furthermore, e-advertising is the process of publishing advertisement on the Internet. In advertising through the internet, churches can use various approaches (Shamim & Fajana, 2017).

Social media

Social media is a set of online means of communication, broadcasting, cooperation, and cultivation among interconnected and interdependent networks of people, communities, and organizations reinforced by technological development and mobility (Sherman & Delvin, 2001). It is the online space where companies, brands, businesses create news, make updates, communicate with individuals, and build communities. In e-marketing, social media deals

with influencing people and obtaining peer communication that promotes awareness, adoption, and action. Siegel and Scrimshaw (2012) opined that the usage of social media platforms such as Facebook, and Twitter for advertising had significantly risen. Applying social networks as tools of communication plays an important role in brand-building, maintenance, and protection. George and Babu (2017) posit that social media increases customer engagement and enlarges the scale of interaction between groups of people by sharing contents, profiles, views, thoughts, experiences, and conversations

Direct Marketing

Direct marketing consists of connecting directly with carefully targeted individual consumers to both obtain an immediate response and cultivate lasting customer relationships. According to Kotler and Keller (2009), direct marketers communicate directly with customers, often on a one-to-one, interactive basis. Using detailed databases, organizations tailor their marketing offers and communications to the needs of narrowly defined segments or even individual buyers. Beyond brand and relationship-building, direct marketers usually seek a direct, immediate, and measurable consumer response. Similarly, churches could interact directly with customers, by telephone, through their website, or even on their Facebook page to give materials, sell products, or service members. The major forms of direct marketing as described by Kotler and Keller (2009) include direct-mail marketing, catalog marketing, telephone marketing, direct response television marketing, kiosk marketing. Furthermore, Stephen and Susan (2011) maintain that direct marketing refers to activities by which products and services are offered to market segments in one or more media at a personalized level. Usually, direct marketing is conducted by phone or mail with the attempt to either solicit immediate response (catalogue buying, phone shopping) or deliver promotional materials.

Electronic Pictures (E-pictures)

E-pictures are diagrams that delineate a product which are being offered for by an organization (Novak *et al.*, 2015). It is imperative to understand that eye catching images can attract more target audience. In e-marketing, attractive images that represent the original product are used by company to decorate their website. Mehta and Purvis (2006) demonstrated that image relates positively with customer patronage, loyalty and

the growth of an organization. In promoting a product or service through electronic means to target audience, image is one of the components which give a clearer picture of what is being promoted. According to Hoffman and Novak (2009), e-picture creates a good opportunity for churches to advertise their product and services via the Internet. Through this medium, messages about product and services can be sent to members and prospective members of the church no matter where they are. Through the use of electronic images consumers can be reached wherever they are, even if their geographical areas are beyond reachable by conventional media. Furthermore, the size, color and content of an image also generates impact on consumers' attention to any posted advertisement in an online platform. This is because the size of an element is among the attention-grabbing tool to capture consumer's attention (Lee & Ahn, 2012), which is why Taute *et al.* (2011) are of the view that big-sized images have a better impact on consumers' attention than smaller-sized ones.

Electronic Videos (E-videos)

Video is a vital e-marketing communication channel for churches. For this reason, Rogers (2009) posit that majority of audience enjoys videos and they are always eager to watch them because of their easiness of lodging information. Sometimes people just do not have time or patience to read the whole marketing text, no matter how great it is. Electronic-videos do not only play the entertaining role in brand marketing campaigns, but they also bring the sense of customer's engagement, and this is what makes them more popular compared to TV videos. E-videos can be educative and provide the viewer with interesting and cognitive facts about the company's activities. Creating a video might be essential for raising awareness among a potential target group, as videos are supposed to be an integral part of the marketing communication mix (Rizwan *et al.*, 2013). In other words, it can be posted on different marketing communication platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, a website, with providing the same promotional message and idea. Nowadays it is easy to access videos via various Internet techniques, so companies and people use them as a way of messaging and communicating with each other (Rogers, 2009). To visualize the level of advancement and impact within the church in form of healing, miracles signs and wonders, churches are increasingly using e-video as part of

a promotional campaign. Often, videos are posted on the church website, as well as on special services as YouTube or other social media. The reason for using e-videos as a promotional tool is to visually showcase church product and services in a more impactful and persuasive way to viewers. To that end, Lee and Ahn (2012) posit that the main objective is to raise and spread awareness about the institution and its commodities to potential customers. This is because a video supports the deeper understanding of the marketing message, and makes it more lucid.

Empirical Review and Hypotheses

In terms of empirical literature, many studies have provided evidence on the impact of marketing on firms' growth. For instance, Conrad (2008) examined how churches promote themselves using modern marketing tools, through interviews with 12 respondents made up of church pastors and leaders. Findings of the study established that marketing is a vital and necessary component for church promotion and growth, and recommended an effective communication plan for marketing local churches. Dhliwayo (2013) examined in to promotion marketing strategies (advertisement, personal selling, face to face church service sending invitation to friends and relation, miracle services, communion services) and how they influence churches growth in Zimbabwe. The study used 140 respondents, and a cross sectional research design. All promotional strategies had an effect on church growth, and a combination of the elements made a stronger impact on church growth. It concluded that all church leaders must develop their skills and become more marketing oriented. A study conducted by Fagunwa (2015) on Church growth and information communication technology: A case study in some selected churches in Nigeria and United Kingdom, revealed that the use of ICT by churches in their marketing exercises significantly enhance church growth. Acheampong, (2014) conducted a study on the effects of marketing communication on churches growth in Ghana, using advertisement, sales promotion, publicity, direct marketing and personal selling as independent variables and church growth as the dependent variable. The Researcher used both qualitative and quantitative approaches, sample size used was 412, and a purposive sampling technique was used. Findings from qualitative analysis revealed that churches in Ghana use all the names marketing communication mix and that

the type of tool used by them has an effect on respondents' choice of church. Qualitative analysis showed a significant relationship between advertising, personal selling, direct marketing and church choice, but no significant relationship between publicity and church choice.

A research work done by Wanyoike and Orwa (2016) titled strategic management practices and sustainability on faith based organizations, was done to determine the strategic management practices adopted by the Anglican Diocese of Thinka (vigorous pursuits of cost reductions, providing outstanding services, improving operational efficiency, controlling quality of products and services, intense supervision of frontline personnel's, developing brand and company name identification, targeting a specific market niche and providing specialty products or services) and to establish its relationship with the church's performance (total revenue growth, total asset growth, net income growth, market share growth, and overall performance). A semi structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data. They were pre tested on a selected number of respondents judgmentally. Data profile of respondents was analyzed using content analysis. Descriptive statistics (correlation, regression and measures of central tendencies) was used to determine the relationship between porter's generic strategies and performance. Findings revealed that a significant relationship exists between the strategies adopted and the church's performance. Similarly, Thota (2018) conducted a study on social media: a conceptual model of the why's, when's and how's of consumer usage of social media and implications on business strategies. This paper mainly focused on consumer motivations behind using social media. The Hoffman and Novak's (1996) 4Cs model (Connecting, Creating, Consuming and Controlling) was used to suggest dozens of propositions regarding why, when and how consumer motivations drive consumers to use the social media. It was revealed in this study that the motivations by consumers to use social media, do impact business outcomes and firm strategies. Goshal (2019) conducted an empirical study on Social Media as an effective tool to promote business, where studied into the impact of Social Media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter) in customers' purchase decision and their expectation from social media. It also sought to question into the variability in attitude towards social media usage between male and females.

The researcher found that there was no significant variability in the attitude of males and females towards Social Media, and also found that there is a significant difference between social media performance with Facebook as the leading social media network site, and expectations of consumers in promotion of brand of consumer's durable and luxury products. The researcher concluded that the effectiveness of Social Media as a marketing tool is only possible, when organizations will provide effective and timely information about their products or services in social media and their pages; daily updating of social media pages is a must to create positive impression on consumers' mind.

A study by Appiah *et al.* (2013) revealed a significant positive association between church promotion and church attendance growth. The study found that amongst adverting, word of mouth and radio pr, 'Radio PR' was found to exert greater influence on church attendance growth in Ghana. 120 churches were used in the research, with 20 respondents each from each church. The issue of strategic planning in marketing among the clergy in England was a study conducted by Sherman and Devlin (2001). The result from the clergy was unfavorable in regard to marketing planning techniques or methods and church growth. However, the study found some management and marketing principles used most often by these clergies in their respective churches. Although, respondents were adamant regarding the use of marketing planning tools and techniques, it appears majority use marketing principles and management practice unconsciously. Also, Mahajan and Golahit (2017) carried out an exploratory study on the application of digital marketing strategies (social media, search engine optimization and others) to increase profit of organizations. The main purpose of the research was to study digital tools, and determine the most suitable method for an organization to represent itself online. The researcher used secondary data gotten from gotten from previous interviews and also used primary sources of data through distribution of questionnaires on the basis of literatures reviewed, theoretical material and made the following suggestion: the researcher encourages that all information on social media should not just be about the products of the company but also information on the company's image must be present, and encouraged quality control not just in products but also in design and supply of the

brand image through web page, videos, photos text etc and also recommended the application of innovative thinking and approaches, keeping abreast with emerging social media channels and tools for digital marketing. Likewise, Siegel and Scrimshaw (2002) conducted a qualitative research on how consumer’s perception influence church growth, using 30 pastors and 170 church members from orthodox churches. The study was able to establish that members attend church, because of the benefits (prayers, the word of God, and individual prayer) from church activities, to which intrinsic motivation (spiritual) and motivation (social drives) of are propellers of worship activities

Furthermore, Runtuwene *et al.* (2018) Conducted a study on effects of promotional strategies on Church growth in Manado, to test the effect of Promotional strategies (advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, direct marketing and public relations) on church growth. The research applied the qualitative approach, using a population of 300 respondents. Findings indicated that personal selling and sales promotion significantly influence on church growth. It was recommended that churches need to add more efforts into promotional resources so as to make communication more effective and efficient. Chan *et al.* (2010) conducted an empirical study on increasing church revenue and church worship of Baptist churches in Canada using data collected from the churches, to investigate factors affecting the two variables by the panel two – stage least square estimation method. Findings revealed a positive relationship between total church revenue, average Sunday school attendance, the number of youths in bible study and Sunday worship attendance, with only one variable (church Sunday attendance) directly affecting church revenue. The study concluded that

worship attendance is affected by only by Sunday school attendance and youth Bible study attendance. This means that Baptist churches that want to increase their donations should consider focusing their efforts on increasing their Sunday worship attendance. According to Adebayo (2015) it is clear that there is a positive link between church practice and marketing activities. The author argued that the attachment between people and religion is the same as the attachment between people and brand. Adebayo (2015) examined how marketing principles are transferred into the church and church growth. The study further investigated the ways in which marketing core values are interconnected to the church, as well as social values. The study adopted the qualitative approach to interview 8 respondents and 10-12 focus group discussion. The study found that the mandate of the church in fulfilling its social values is shrouded by a lot of marketing principles and strategies. The study found marketing components in the planning of church activities and programs. This clearly indicates that marking strategies form part of church program planning, directing and implementation. Despite all the literatures presented from various researches, no study has been able to effectively measure e-marketing promotional tool’s influence on the growth of churches, using e-advertising, social media, direct marketing, e-image and e-videos which are the focal point of this research.

Based on the foregoing review, this paper posits that E-Marketing (H₁), Social media (H₂), Direct marketing (H₃), and E-Pictures (H₄) shall significantly influence church growth. The hypotheses proposed and tested in this study are schematically represented by the conceptual model below.

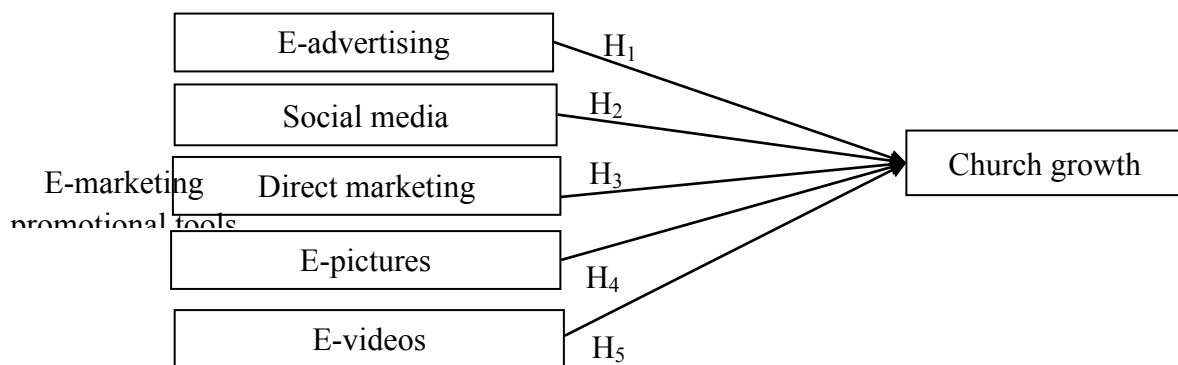


Figure 1: Conceptual model of the study

Research Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. The target population comprised all the Pentecostal churches in Calabar Municipal. Unlike the so-called ‘orthodox’ churches Pentecostal churches are the neo-classical or new generation churches that believe in speaking in strange tongues/languages, baptism of the Holy Spirit, and other such practices. The researchers could not locate an official record of the number of Pentecostal churches in Calabar Municipal. Consequently, this study relied on the list of Pentecostal churches branches/representatives in Calabar who attend the monthly Pentecostal Fellowship Meetings hosted by the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN). The average attendance for the period considered in this study (i.e., August 2020-February 2021) was ninety-four (94) church branches. This constituted the sampling frame from which the study sample was drawn. The sampling units/unit of analysis was made up of four (4) members from each of the ninety-four identified church branches (that is, the pastor-in-charge and other assistant pastors or church administrators). These are church members who, by their explicit responsibilities in the organization, should know about their church’s digital policies. This also ensured that a broad spectrum of opinions on the subject matter is accommodated. In all, a sample size of 376 church representatives was determined for this study.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to locate the target respondents and to administer the 5-point Likert-scale type structured questionnaires

designed for this study. A total of 281 copies of the administered questionnaires (representing a response rate of 75%) were successfully retrieved. After checking for completeness of data, only 261 copies of the retrieved questionnaires found usable for the study. All the construct measures employed in this study were adapted from extant literature, and the respective scale for main constructs generated Cronbach’s alpha (α) ranging from 0.69 to 0.86, thus suggesting that the measurement scales are internally consistent (Field, 2009).

Prior to hypotheses testing, preliminary data analysis checks were conducted to test some of the important assumptions of multivariate techniques as they apply to this study, as well as to ascertain the appropriateness of the testing method adopted (Table 1). The means (standard deviations) for each of the sub-scale are: E-Advertisement = 3.08 (1.92), social media = 3.48 (0.97), direct marketing = 3.67 (1.02), E-Pictures = 3.99 (0.95), E-Videos = 3.60 (0.89), and church growth = 3.88 (0.91). From Table 1, it can also be seen that the scores on variables asymmetry and kurtosis fall between the conventional thresholds of -1 and +1, and the *Kolmogorov-Smirnoff* test statistics value are all above the recommended threshold of $p < 0.05$. These results suggest that all the variables are continuous and normally distributed (Field, 2009). Furthermore, the variance inflation factor for each of the predictor variables is far below the conventional threshold of 5, thus suggesting that none of the predictor variables in the model is redundant.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Asymmetry</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>	<i>K-S P-value</i>	<i>VIF</i>
E-Advertising	3.08	1.92	-0.634	-0.764	0.095	1.482
Social Media	3.48	0.97	-0.348	-0.298	0.563	1.302
Direct Marketing	3.67	1.02	-0.564	-0.453	0.761	1.973
E-Pictures	3.99	0.95	-0.872	-0.652	0.213	1.554
E-Videos	3.60	0.87	-0.911	-0.208	0.096	1.657
Church Growth	3.88	0.91	-0.366	-0.643	0.129	

Results

Before examining the results for test of hypotheses, the demographic characteristics of the studied sample is first considered (Table 2). From Table 2 below, it can be seen that the number of male leaders (152 or 58.2%) are more than females (109 or 41.8%) in the Pentecostal churches investigated in this study. This may be

an indication of males’ continuing hegemony in church administration. Result of data analysis also shows that none of the church administrators/leaders (0, representing 0%) fall within the age range of 18 and 25 years; 5 respondents (or 1.9%) are aged between 26 and 35 years; 54 (20.7%) of the surveyed leaders fall within the age bracket of 36 and 45 years. While

102 (i.e., 39.1%) of the surveyed church leaders are aged between 46 and 55 years, the rest (i.e., 100 respondents or 38.3% of them) are over 56

years old. This analysis suggests a preponderance of people over 45 years old in Pentecostal church leadership.

Demographic characteristics of respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percent
Male	152	58.2
Female	109	41.8
Total	261	100.0
Age range		
18-25 years	0	00.0
26-35 years	5	01.9
36-45 years	54	20.7
46-55 years	102	39.1
56 years and above	100	38.3
Total	261	100.0
Marital status		
Married	173	66.3
Single	81	31.0
Divorced/Separated	0	0.0
Widowed	7	2.7
Total	261	100.0

To test the model proposed in this study with a view to confirming/disconfirming the veracity of the hypotheses put forward, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted (Table 3). The model summary (as shown in the notes accompanying Table 3 below) indicates that only 12.4 percent of the changes/variations in church

growth during the Covid-19 lockdown period could be attributed to the factors proposed in this study. Nevertheless, the variance in the dependent variable explained by the independent variables is significant ($F_{5, 254} = 7.195, \rho < 0.001$), thus suggesting a model-data fit.

Table 3: Results of regression analysis

Model	Unstd. β	S. E.	Std. β	t	ρ -value
1. (Constant)	10.992	.718		15.310	.000
E-Advertising	.026	.047	.039	.548	.584
Social Media	.110	.038	.196	2.922	.004
Direct Marketing	.051	.042	.083	1.216	.225
E-Pictures	-.021	.055	-.027	-.390	.697
E-Videos	.111	.042	.180	2.629	.009

Notes: $R^2 = 0.124, Adj R^2 = 107, F(5, 254) = 7.195, \rho < 0.001$

To verify the hypotheses proposed in this study, the standardized beta weights of each predictor variable (see Table 3 above) was examined. The results indicate that E-Advertisements ($\beta=0.039, \rho > 0.05$), Direct Marketing ($\beta=0.083, \rho > 0.05$), and E-Pictures ($\beta=-0.027, \rho > 0.05$) are not significant predictors of church growth, while the use of social media ($\beta=0.196, \rho < 0.05$) and E-Videos ($\beta=0.180, \rho < 0.05$) proved to have important influence on church growth. Hence, our data only partially provided support for the

hypothesized model – the expected effects of E-Advertisement (H_1), Direct Marketing (H_3), and E-Pictures (H_4), on the one hand, and church growth, on the other hand, were not verified, while the influence of both social media (H_2) and E-Videos (H_5) on church growth was established.

Discussion/Implications of Findings

This study aimed at determining the importance/usefulness and relative effects of e-marketing promotional tools (E-Advertisement,

social media, direct marketing, e-pictures, and e-videos in relation to enhancing/sustaining church growth during the COVID-19 lockdown in Calabar Municipal. Given the novelty of the COVID-19 situation which necessitated a global lockdown and the need for social distancing, churches, like most innovative organizations needed to find remote ways to continue to congregate and sustain/grow their membership. One among the most effective ways open to them was the use of e-marketing promotional tool. Consistent with extant studies on the usefulness of e-marketing promotional tools in enhancing performance in service organizations (e.g., Mahajan & Golahit, 2017; Stephen & Susan, 2011; Tayebi, 2010; Daum *et al.*, 2012), this study developed a model which envisaged and hypothesized that e-advertisement, social media, direct marketing, e-pictures and e-videos will significantly explain church growth during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

This study found no support for the hypothesis that E-advertisement is a useful tool for enhancing church membership growth (H_1), thus suggesting that churches did not attach much attention to internet-based advertisement tools as a means for furthering and sustaining church attendance/growth during the lockdown period of the pandemic. Though contrary to our expectation, this finding may imply that during the lockdown period, Pentecostal churches in Calabar Municipal were less interested in evangelizing and attracting new members (an outcome that would have been helped by deployment of e-advertisement strategies) than in keeping its existing membership from dwindling.

In line with expectations, and consistent with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Mahajan & Golahit, 2017), our results support the assertion that the use of social media platforms by Pentecostal churches in Calabar Municipal is critical for maintaining and sustaining church membership numbers (H_2) at periods when congregating physically is impossible. This implies that churches can continue to keep in touch with their members and continue to provide those required spiritual services and guidance without physical distance being a barrier. Given the fast-paced digitally-oriented environment the society is metamorphosing into, our finding suggests that churches that increase their online presence by using such social media tools as WhatsApp, Tweeter, Facebook and TikTok for

interacting with their members, as well as packaging and disseminating their messages, will be able to sustain and grow their membership number.

Contrary to our expectation also, our data did not support the hypothesis that customizing messages and services for specific members' consumption via digital medium will enhance church growth (H_3). While this e-marketing strategy has been found to be effective in other contexts (e.g., see Stephen & Susan, 2011), our finding suggests that the practice whereby churches narrowly define/segment their church membership into distinct groups with a view to customizing e-mail messages to them is discriminatory and counter-productive to church growth. Though marginally useful (as indicated by the positive-but-not-significant *beta* and *t-values* of 0.083 and 1.216 respectively), direct e-mail marketing is restricted and churches may only use it to deal with established target audience who have requested updates from the church as part of their ongoing relationship with the institution.

Similar to the result obtained for hypothesis three, this study failed to prove that the use and internet-enabled distribution of the pictures of venerated men of God and their profile will significantly influence church growth (H_4), thus suggesting that the e-pictures of church founders/overseers and pastors have marginal effects in convincing people to attend church activities in Calabar Municipality. The negative *beta weight* for e-pictures (-0.027) might be suggesting that the more churches continue to use internet-based images to project their products or venerate their founders/overseers and pastors rather than God and His words/messages, the less likely they are to attract discerning members of the public to their church. This interpretation may be plausible because many Pentecostal churches appear to accord more reverence to their founders/overseers (the so-called 'daddy' and 'mummy' or 'spiritual fathers' in the Lord) to the point of making God of secondary importance, and this may be displeasing to a lot of discerning members.

In tandem with our proposition and consistent with finding in the relevant literature (e.g., Daum, *et al.*, 2012; Amruta, 2014), our data analysis supported the hypothesis that e-videos are important tools in the hands of Pentecostal churches for the purpose of engaging and sustaining/growing their membership base (H_5).

This finding suggest that Pentecostal church members are very interested in the audio-visual messages and services provided by their churches, and church administrations can leverage on this interest to sustain/increase their numerical strength. Indeed, studies have shown that people may be aroused by what they see/hear, and Pentecostal churches have come to appreciate this very well. In addition to modern Pentecostal churches adopting sitcom theatrics in delivering their messages, show-business type of comedies and other entertaining programmes are being packaged and disseminated to church members and the general public as short e-videos with the aim of retaining/attracting membership.

On the whole, the findings of this study imply that church leaders should improve their online presence by utilizing the various online strategies available to them, like social media channels, mails, and animated videos, so as to improve their level of engagement with both existing and potential members. Secondly, church leaders should channel more of their resources to engaging both their existing and potential members via their social media handles because it has a grater probability of improving the church growth. Third, in situations where churches cannot hold their regular meetings or want to hold a central service that can be accessed by anyone, anywhere in the world, e-videos should be utilized because it has the capacity to reach a wider audience.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Studies

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that some e-marketing promotional tools are more important than others in enhancing church growth in situations where physical face-to-face meetings are impracticable. Furthermore, this study concludes that e-marketing promotional tools, like social media and e-videos should be maximally utilized due to their effectiveness in enhancing church growth in the 21st century; E-advertising and direct marketing, though not statistically significant, may be used as supplementary tools in enhancing church growth, while the use of e-pictures should be discouraged because of their potential negative effects on desired outcomes.

Valid as the findings and conclusions of this study may be, further studies are needed to confirm/refute the conclusions/findings of this

study. This study only examined the online behaviour of Pentecostal churches in Calabar Municipal. Given the cultural diversity of Nigeria, generalization of our findings may only be valid if further confirmatory studies are conducted in other states/regions. Moreso, there is need for future studies to test the level of adoption of e-marketing promotional tools by different categories of churches (e.g., orthodox versus Pentecostal churches) so as to determine differences in pattern of application of technology in church activities. Secondly, literature suggest that the use of e-advertisement, direct marketing and e-images should significantly and positively predict organizational outcomes, though this study did not confirm that. It is possible that the effects of these variables on church growth may be moderated/mediated by other factors such as age and educational level of church leadership, organizational values orientation, openness-to-change, etc. Future researchers may consider exploring possible intervening variables that may throw more light on the true effects of these tools on church growth. Finally, this study only assessed Pentecostal church leaders' perception as to the extent to which e-marketing tools enhance membership numbers in their churches. It would also be interesting to find out from the church-going population the extent to which these -marketing promotional tools inform their decisions to attend one church rather than another.

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