

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

The contents and discontents of Internet and social media use in the religious lives of Ghanaian young adults

Kwaku Golo, Ben-Willie; Sjö, Sofia; Benyah, Francis

Published in:
Digital Media, Young Adults, and Religion

Published: 01/01/2020

Document Version
(Peer reviewed version when applicable)

Document License
Publisher rights policy

[Link to publication](#)

Please cite the original version:
Kwaku Golo, B-W., Sjö, S., & Benyah, F. (2020). The contents and discontents of Internet and social media use in the religious lives of Ghanaian young adults. In M. Moberg, & S. Sjö (Eds.), *Digital Media, Young Adults, and Religion: An International Perspective* (Routledge Studies in Religion and Digital Culture). Routledge.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

4. The Contents and Discontents of Internet and Social Media Use in the Religious Lives of Ghanaian Young Adults

Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo, Sofia Sjö, and Francis Benyah

Introduction

In today's media-saturated world, new media and digital communication technologies provide numerous ways in which religious ideas and information can be shared, religious identities formed, and connections for religious purposes established (cf. Campbell 2013). Data from the *Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective* (YARG) survey and interviews point to the increased centrality of new media in the lives of Ghanaian young adults. The data highlights and illustrates the many ways in which university students in Ghana use the Internet and social media to form different kinds of networks, search for information, and to discuss matters relating to their religious lives. Our findings suggest that social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, have come to provide important channels of interaction among young adults in Ghana, thus influencing the ways in which Ghanaian young adults engage with religion and their religious lives more broadly. However, it is also evident from our data that the young adults' use of the Internet and social media is not without its discontents.

This chapter explores young Ghanaian adults' use of the Internet and social media for religious or spiritual purposes, focusing on the respective main benefits and problems that young adults report in their use of the Internet and social media in reference to their religious lives. We also relate our findings to the increasingly central role that the Internet and social media play in the religious landscape of Ghana more generally and highlight aspects that help us better comprehend

our respondents' engagement with the Internet and social media for religious reasons. We also explore how the young adults who took part in our study negotiate their media use in reference to varying views on social media and in relation to traditional agents of religious socialization. Thus, this chapter seeks to contribute to the ongoing academic research on the interconnection between the Internet more broadly, and social media specifically, and the religious lives of young adults (cf. Lövheim 2012; Bobkowski 2014; Moberg and Sjö 2015). We focus particularly, but not exclusively, on aspects relating to agency and religious authority. We wish to highlight our respondents' active use of social media and the agency to develop religious beliefs and thinking that the Internet and social media work to support. Agency in this case refers to the ability of an individual to express himself/herself and explore issues central to him/her within a broader social and cultural context (cf. Lövheim et al. 2013). In addition, we explore how active use of the Internet and social media also includes engagement with different religious sources and authorities, both online and offline, and the contextual and relational character of our Ghanaian respondents' religious media use (cf. Lövheim 2004).

The discussion in this chapter draws on the YARG national survey data (N=436) and interview data (N=46) from Ghana. In the survey data, we focus mainly on the results for four survey questions (see chapter 3 and Appendix A for further details). The purpose of the first question "In the past month, how frequently did you use the following media?" was to find out the frequency by which respondents reported using four types of media (newspaper/magazines, radio, television, and the Internet). The second question "If you ever use the Internet, for which of the following activities do you use it?" sought to inquire into the frequency by which respondents reported using the Internet for a range of different purposes, including, among others, "religious or spiritual services and issues." The third question "From where do you get information about news and current affairs?" asked respondents to choose among altogether seven options, including social

media. Finally, the fourth question “Which of the following do you rely on for guidance and as you live your life and make decisions?” similarly sought to find out, from a list of options including social media, which sources respondents reported most commonly turning to for everyday guidance when making life decisions. The interview data complements the survey data and provides a more detailed understanding of the importance of the Internet and social media in the religious lives of our respondents.

We begin by introducing the religious and media landscapes of Ghana and then proceed to account for the results for the abovementioned four survey questions. We then turn to the interviews, giving our respondents a voice in relation to their use of the Internet and social media for different types of religion-related purposes. Here we focus in particular on the respective benefits and challenges – or content and discontents – that they report. This is followed by an exploration on how the uses and attitudes reported by our respondents can be related to aspects of university life, the religious media landscape of Ghana, and questions relating to agency and religious authority. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and some suggestions for future research.

Young adults, religion, and media in Ghana

Ghana is in many ways a unique context in regards to both religion and media. In terms of religion, Ghana constitutes a diverse and highly religiously active terrain (Golo and Yaro 2013: 285). The country has in multiple studies been shown to be one of the most religious countries in the world. In Wave Six of the World Value Survey (WVS) (Inglehart et al. 2014), only Jordan, Libya, Qatar, Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen scored higher on the question of whether or not one finds religion to be important. On the question of whether or not one considers oneself to be a religious person,

Ghana, with 97% answering affirmatively, was outscored only by Georgia and Pakistan. A previous 2010 Population and Housing Census survey carried out by the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS 2012) also found that Ghanaians reported high levels of both religious affiliation and participation, with Christianity and Islam emerging as the most prominent religions. According to the GSS (2012), various forms of Christianity (including both Catholics and a large variety of different types of Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic Protestantism) make up 71.2% of all religious affiliations in Ghana, followed by 17.6% for Islam, 5.2% who report professing different types of indigenous African religion, and 5.3 % who report no religious affiliation.

Even though results from the World Value Survey show that young adults in many contexts report being less religious than previous generations, in Ghana, the difference between generations has remained modest. On the question of whether one considers oneself to be a religious person in Wave Six of the World Value Survey, Ghana displays the highest score for all studied contexts among those of the age 29 or younger. The youngest group in fact scores higher than the other studied age groups. Regarding religious practice, only Nigerian young people report higher levels of weekly religious service attendance. The same goes for those reporting praying several times a day (WVS; Inglehart et al. 2014). Similarly, the Ghanaian YARG sample displays the highest degree of religious self-identification among all thirteen national samples included in the project, with 65.2% of respondents reporting that they consider themselves “as belonging to one or more religious groups, communities, or traditions” (cf. Moberg et al. 2019: 247; see also Golo et al. 2019: 185). The Ghanaian sample also displays the highest levels of self-assessed degrees of personal religiosity with a mean of 6.8 on a scale from 0 to 10 (cf. Moberg et al. 2019: 247; see also Golo et al. 2019: 186). A further 82.4% of the sample report engaging in private religious activities such as prayer and meditation on a daily basis. As few as 1.1% report not engaging in such types of activities at all (cf. Golo et al. 2019: 186).

Ghana also in many respects stands out when it comes to its current media-landscape. Although radio remains the most widely used media outlet, the past couple of decades have witnessed considerable expansions in digital media infrastructures and provisions (Degadjor 2010; FES 2017). The Ghanaian media landscape has undergone an accelerating process of digitalization as “traditional” media outlets, such as print, radio, and television, have branched out into the online media sphere (Degadjor 2010). According to a recent Pew Research Center study (2018), in comparison to for example Europe or North America, rates of Internet use still remain low among the Ghanaian population at large, but it is rapidly expanding and increasing, especially among younger people. Younger people also report considerably higher levels of social media use compared to people of previous generations. While only 16% of those aged 37 years or older report social media use, 46% of individuals aged 18–36 report using social media (Pew Research Center 2018).

While there are few empirical studies on social media use among young people in Ghana, consistent with global reports (cf. Pew Research Center 2018), young people are noted to be the most enthusiastic group of social media users in the country, irrespective of economic and educational status and background (Markwei and Appiah 2016). A study of social media use among Ghanaian high school students indicates that social media is largely used for making friends, discussing school-related matters, and for entertainment, which suggests that social media platforms have come to provide Ghanaian young people with new environments for identity exploration, self-expression, and networking (Markwei and Appiah 2016; see also Ocansey et al. 2016). These findings are somewhat similar to the results of the Ghanaian YARG survey, where respondents reported the highest levels of daily Internet use for the following purposes: “communication” (70.9%); “finding information” (49.5%); “entertainment” (40.1%); and “developing social networks” (27.3%). Ghanaian respondents also reported high frequencies of

Internet use for “religious or spiritual services and issues,” with 11.2% of the sample reporting using the Internet for such purposes “every day,” followed by an additional 19.3% who reported doing so “almost daily.” While these figures are low compared to uses for other types of purposes as noted above, they nevertheless clearly exceed the figures reported in all other samples included in YARG, with the exception of the Israeli Muslim sub-sample. In the total YARG sample, only 2.4% report daily use of the Internet for “religious or spiritual services and issues.” Moreover, while in the total sample as many as 54.4% of respondents reported “never” using the Internet for such purposes, in Ghana, only 9.5% of respondents did so.

Ghanaian respondents also show a great fondness for the Internet as their most widely and commonly used media, with 69% of respondents reporting daily Internet use, as compared to other media sources such as newspapers (3.2%), radio (18.4%), and television (22.8%) (cf. Moberg et al. 2019, 248). In the total YARG survey sample, “social media” emerged as the most commonly reported source of “information about news and current affairs,” with 80.7% of all respondents choosing this option. The numbers for Ghana were slightly higher at 89.5%. 27.1% of Ghanaian respondents also reported turning to “social media” for guidance and everyday life decisions, as compared to only 15.1% in the total YARG-sample.

The Internet and social media in the religious lives and identity work of Ghanaian young adults: contents and discontents

Because of the centrality of religion in the lives of Ghanaian young adults, it is not surprising to find that the Ghanaian YARG respondents also report incorporating the Internet and social media into their everyday religious lives. Although the Internet and social media are far from the only factors that shape our respondents’ constructions of religious identities, the interview data

nevertheless reveals some frequently recurring types of usage and commonly expressed thoughts on the relationship between respondents' Internet and social media use and their everyday religious lives and commitments. While Ghanaian respondents most commonly reported using Facebook and WhatsApp (cf. Ocansey et al. 2016), they also mentioned using a wide range of additional types of media and media platforms for religion-related purposes (cf. Moberg et al. 2019). Ghanaian respondents primarily reported using the Internet and social media to supplement, complement, and further explore religious topics that they were already familiar with and/or that had a direct relation to their offline religious engagements. One common type of frequently reported usage that has also been identified in previous research (Tuursong and Faisal 2014) is the downloading or sharing of messages by pastors. Our respondents also reported similar uses:

The media, yeah. We have this online preaching stuff --. Like they send me newsletters every day. And then I also listen to some men of God. I like Bishop Prince (FGHFB318P).

As clearly indicated by the survey results, Ghanaian respondents commonly view the Internet and social media as useful information sources in religion-related matters. The interviews illustrate that they, among other things, provide many types of concrete material that can be used for religious exploration, such as sermons and other forms of religious teachings and messages. In comparing the affordances offered by television in this regard, one respondent specifically highlighted the benefits of the Internet:

Yeah, I use the Internet. I really, really use the Internet. In fact, I even use the Internet more than watching television and radio when it comes to listening to men of God because there I

can get like -- very bulky materials on preaching and stuffs compared to the TV's. (FGHFB043P).

As is illustrated through the words of this respondent, the Internet is commonly viewed as providing a richness of content that other types of media are unable to match. For these reasons, respondents reported a clear preference for the Internet in searching out various types of religious materials and content that related to their own personal religious interests and engagements. For example, a young man who said he was very spiritual, but did not go to church because financially he was not where he wanted to be in life, reported turning to the Internet for guidance:

And also, I learn a lot like establishing your own self. Because I read about a lot of people who made it on their own self. And also, I learn a lot about letting your money work for you but not working for money as Robert ((Corsaro)) or something like that. So yeah I learn a lots from the Internet. (YGHFB211P).

Expressing and reflecting on religious beliefs online is also mentioned by some of our respondents. When asked whether she talks to people on social media about salvation, one respondent answered:

Yes! Most of my friends I do tell them about my beliefs. Sometimes they post things that I think their understanding of it is not clear so I try to help them (FGHFB095P).

Several respondents reported both receiving and distributing religious content via the Internet and social media, often with the expressed intent to learn more and expand on their own religious thinking. Such activities are further encouraged by various types of online religious groups and

communities (cf. McKenna and West 2007; Leurs et al. 2012). One respondent who mentioned belonging to many church “WhatsApp groups,” highlighted the benefits she saw with both the groups and their use of social media:

Yeah! But am on so many group pages on WhatsApp. So I use WhatsApp to chat a lot -- People send messages pertaining maybe motivational messages, Christian messages, yeah! -
- They encourage me. I can even show you some. (FGHFB162P)

Having showed the interviewer one of the messages from one WhatsApp group, which was a church cell group based in one of the hostels at the university, the respondent commented that the message was sent by a group member “trying to share the quiet time that says that if you love God you will obey his commandment” (FGHFB162P). The account of this respondent provides a good illustration of the ways in which social media can work to facilitate connections between young people who share similar religious views and encourage personal religious reflection.

Our respondents also reported that when using the Internet and social media for religious purposes, they did not only do so in order to share beliefs with friends and members of online groups or to follow their religious leaders’ messages. Some of the young adults also reported using the Internet and social media in order to supplement the teachings and beliefs they had already been socialized into through their own religious communities (cf. Moberg et al. 2019). Responding to the question of whether his use of social media for information meant that he did not entirely accept what had been taught in church, one respondent answered:

It’s an add on to what I’ve been taught in my church (FGHFB145P)

This way of approaching religious content online was also shared by other respondents who, rather than viewing new religious content found online as posing a direct challenge to previously held beliefs, instead tended to view such content as providing potential resources for deepening and complementing their own religious learning. As is clearly illustrated by the accounts of the respondents quoted above, many viewed the Internet and social media as a useful part of their personal religious lives. Such attitudes reflect a general contentment with the possibilities offered by the Internet and social media in various aspects of their everyday religious lives.

However, our respondents were also keenly aware of the proliferation of negative or problematic content online. This brings us to what we refer to as the perceived discontents of social media. On a general level, the concerns that our respondents expressed in this regard extend far beyond religion. For example, some respondents lamented the fact that some people use social media to project an untrue image of themselves:

I think people abuse social media a lot. Take Instagram for example. I feel most people on Instagram are narcissistic. Like too self-loving. They are self-loving. They want – they do things to get people to see them and to like what they -- is they are not really showing you themselves, but they are showing you what they want -- like what they think others want to say. That is what they do on Instagram so I don't really like Instagram. And on Twitter people say anything on their minds just to get people like re-tweet. [...] So, I think social media is not really friendly. (YGHFB035P).

Regarding information and material relating to religiosity, a respondent who reported using social media to disseminate her own beliefs expressed the following concerns about the type of content she sometimes comes across online:

Oh, sometimes some of the information there are not, I feel, they are not positive. They are negative. Yes! (FGHFB095P)

In this instance, the respondent was talking about how the information and content she encounters online may have an either positive or negative impact on her life as a believer. For this respondent, then, the Internet and social media are viewed as having the ability to affect her religiosity in undesired ways. Another respondent highlighted the risk of miscommunication on the Internet and on social media as a problem that could also influence religious communication:

Social media, you might be communicating to me and the way I will take it might be different from what you will be telling me. Do you get it? (YGHFB225P).

Our respondents therefore also frequently report exercising some degree of caution when it comes to their own use of the Internet and social media in religion related matters. As one respondent noted:

Yes, I like reading stories and those stuffs from the Internet so at times I read and when I want to confirm them, I can contact my Muslim friends and discuss the things that I've read with them and sometimes they will confirm or deny some. So I think that where I got some of the things. (FGHFB148P).

In the case of this respondent, the perceived risk of being exposed to misinformation online requires that one also relies on and negotiates with other offline sources and authorities, such as friends.

Others clearly question the extent to which they are influenced by the Internet and social media, highlighting other much more important influences:

I use but I don't learn much from there. Like the things that influence my life. Hardly, hardly, hardly but I think the church and the school are the two major influence of my values in life. (YGHBG085P).

The Internet and social media thus clearly play a part in the religious lives of many of our respondents and are actively used to, for example, find material for reflection and engagement. However, some also clearly found new media problematic in a number of ways. To better comprehend the active use of the Internet and social media for religious purposes among our respondents, we need to explore further the media landscape that the young adults are a part of and aspects of agency and authority in their media use.

Understanding the role of the Internet and social media in the religious lives of young adult university students in Ghana

The open and liberal media landscape in Ghana provides considerable access to new media. However, smartphones, tablets, and other gadgets are still rather expensive (FES 2017: 8). In comparison to many other groups in Ghana, however, our respondents have easy access to the Internet and social media sites (SNS) via mainly Wi-Fi at the University of Ghana campus where the study was carried out. It is, therefore, not unexpected that the frequency of use of new media, especially social media, among this sample is quite significant. This is reflected, for example, in the 88.8% who reported using social media and the 70.2% who reported using online news sources for acquiring information about news or current affairs. It is also highlighted in comments by

respondents such as “Yes, I use the Internet a lot” (FGHFB148P) and “Oh yeah, I do WhatsApp” (FGHFB225P). These responses illustrate that the Internet is a taken for granted part of everyday life for particularly young adult university students in Ghana. Many of our respondents can be argued to live “onlife,” that is to say, with the Internet and other new media as an integrated and natural part of daily life (cf. Floridi 2014; Elwell 2014), including their religious lives.

The fact that this particular Ghanaian young adult sample displays high levels of Internet and social media use for religious purposes must also be understood against the wider backdrop of the massive online and social media presence of religious groups and communities in Ghana (cf. Moberg et al. 2019). It is well known, and expressed in our data too, that many religious communities and faith groups actively use different forms of media, including social media, to communicate with members and engage potential new members. Religion in Ghana can thus be argued to be quite strongly mediatized; media is intertwined with religious life in multiple ways and plays an important role in shaping religious interaction and understanding (cf. Hjarvard 2011). The centrality of (new) media in the religious lives of Ghanaians has been discussed in previous research too (cf. de Witte 2008; Meyer 2006). We would dare say that in it would be difficult to understand the dynamics of religion in contemporary Ghana without taking media into account. Still, the connection between mediatization and secularization that has been suggested in Western contexts (Hjarvard 2011) seems more difficult to argue for in the case of Ghana. Though in Ghana media can be understood to shape many aspects of religious life, at least among our respondents, this would not seem to lead to any types of decline in religious beliefs or engagements.

The young adults in our study are thus a part of a broad religious media landscape, while also having easy access to the Internet and social media. The issue of easy access is an important one. Many of our respondents considered it easier to access and share information and to engage in communication using smartphones and other mobile gadgets than turning to more “traditional”

types of media. This was already indicated by a respondent in the previous section who preferred the Internet to TV. Others point in the same direction, such as this respondent who preferred Nigerian to Ghanaian preachers because they are easier to access:

Yeah! But one interesting thing too is that, I um -- when I compare the Ghanaian preachers -- I have listened to more of the Nigerian preachers more because for them I get access to their preaching like on the net easily compared to -- yeah, so it's, I just have access to their preaching (FGHFB043P).

Similarly, the availability of WhatsApp groups that focus on faith or religion also play a role in the religious online engagements of many of our respondents. The popularity of social media use for religious purposes must also be understood against the background of “the strong presence of religious communities and the prevalence of various types of religious activities on the University of Ghana campus where the sample was gathered” (Moberg et al. 2019: 248). A concrete example mentioned by one respondent is a Roman Catholic youth affiliate Pax Romana group online:

I am a Pax-Romana. That is my church on campus. Yeah so we have the Pax-Romana group in my class. Yes, there is -- people always put this devotionals messages and we read. At times if there are any matters arising, like we discuss. (YGHFB325P).

In a higher educational settings, as in society more broadly, social media is often perceived critically. Several studies have looked into the risks and negative consequences of social media use among youth and young adults. Social media has been argued to have a negative effect on learning outcomes and it has also been linked to cases of cyberbullying (e.g. Sam et al. 2017), as well as

outcomes that impact negatively on the social, psychological, and emotional well-being of students (Markwei and Appiah 2016).

In Ghanaian society more broadly, some of the concerns with social media also have to do with the challenges that social media is perceived to pose to traditional modes of religious authority. Among our respondents, we find similar views. Some found that the information disseminated on the Internet and social media distorts religious beliefs and views and is therefore problematic. This leads to a need for negotiations and the incorporation of other, complementary sources. Considering that the majority of the young adults who took part in our study still follow religious leaders, teachers, or religious groups online (and offline) means their use of new media is interlinked with traditional religious authorities. While many of them deemed it necessary to search for and verify traditional religious views, they were also often able to identify media contents that contradicted their beliefs by relating these to traditional religious sources. Despite perceptions about the negative aspects of social media, many of our respondents thus seemed to be able to negotiate their social media use in ways that was useful for them and their own personal religious lives. However, while they were clearly active agents in this process, their negotiations cannot be understood as separate from their very specific religious context and its rich religious media landscape.

Conclusion

Ghana is a fascinating context both when it comes to religion and to media, and when exploring how religion and media can intersect. In this chapter, we have, based on the data gathered in Ghana for the YARG project, illustrated how the young adults who took part in our study were not only highly religiously active, but also active new media users. We have explored the ways in which

they reported using the Internet and social media for religious and spiritual purposes and reflected on different factors that influence this use.

The rich religious landscape and the expanding religious media landscape in Ghana provide young adults with many types and sources of information about religion and many forms of material for religious engagement. As indicated in previous studies based on YARG (Moberg et al. 2019), our respondents predominantly use media and new media to complement traditional religious sources, not to challenge these. However, as illustrated above, many also use the Internet and social media to find material of interest for personal development relating to religion. Critical attitudes towards social media that are prevalent in many contexts in Ghana are also noticeable in the accounts of our respondents. Such critical perspectives seem to encourage our respondents to try to be careful media users and to question the information they seek out and encounter online. Thus, while respondents displayed high degrees of agency and actively used social media to, for example, establish connections, seek out and explore religious information, and develop their own religiosity, they were simultaneously acutely aware of social medias' many problematic aspects, or its discontents.

It is worth reiterating, however, that our sample is not representative of all young adults in Ghana. Our respondents were university students with easy access to the Internet and new media via Wi-Fi at the University of Ghana campus. As university students, they were part of a vibrant religious context, where new media is frequently used by a variety of religious groups. Nonetheless, the findings do highlight some important aspects of the religious lives of young adults in Ghana and of religious life more broadly in this part of the world. To understand religion in Ghana we clearly need to take media into account. An important question remains to what extent theories developed in Western contexts – such as the mediatization of religion thesis – can help us explain the contemporary intersection of religion and media in the Ghanaian context, or indeed in that

broader geographical region. Regarding other questions for future research, studies should further explore how different media are used for religious purposes, delving deeper into question of agency and religious identity work. Religious apps are, for example, in wide use in Ghana, and exploring the different uses and views on these would provide an important new insights about the impact of new digital technologies and mobile communications on contemporary modes of religious life and practice in what is generally a highly vibrant religious context.