



## Research Article

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## Virtual Pastoral Care During the Digital Age: The User Experience of Neo-Pentecostals in Bushbuckridge

Vusimuzi Goodman Nkuna

Postgraduate Student at South African Theological Seminary, South Africa.

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**Abstract:** The study sought to establish the influence of User Experience (UX) in the Neo-Pentecostal Movement's (NPM) use of information and communication technology (ICT) to render pastoral care. It employed a qualitative approach to conduct the study in Bushbuckridge in South Africa. Using an interview guide the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with twelve research participants who were purposively sampled. Data analysis was done thematically with effect from the transcription of the first interview, and data interpretation was done using theories from the fields of computer science and information technology. The findings revealed that all participants have participated in pastoral care using ICT as both caregivers and care seekers, interchangeably in their lives. They predominantly use cell phones as an electronic device of choice, and WhatsApp being the dominant platform of communication. Through these technologies, they offer and/or receive virtual counselling, conduct virtual prayer meetings, transmit caring content, and render self-care. Conceptual interpretation of these findings suggests that the choice and continuous use of these technologies is informed by reachability, acceptability, usability and portability. The author argues that these factors make the use of technology in society indispensable and hence recommends that future study should consider testing this assertion using theories from management sciences and/or social sciences as this study only used concepts from ICT.

**Keywords:** virtual pastoral care, user experience, neo-Pentecostalism

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## INTRODUCTION

The Neo-Pentecostal Movement (NPM) is part of the broader Pentecostal Movement that can be traced back to the day of Pentecost as experienced by ancient believers (Orogun and Pillay 2021:3). Trying to find a universal definition of Pentecostalism may be problematic as it is a diverse movement (Cartledge, 2021:82). In simple terms Pentecostalism is the movement that is extensively known to claim to stand for the restoration of the experience of the Holy Spirit as initially manifested amongst the apostles. These include belief in the gifts of the Holy Spirit for Christian ministry as recorded in the Bible (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:101). Neo-Pentecostal Movement was also founded from the same principles but further exacerbate the fluidity and diversity of Pentecostalism within its ranks (Soothill, 2014:196).

Of significance to this study is that in its diversity, the NPM in South Africa, inclusive of Bushbuckridge Pentecostal churches have crossed denominational boundaries with much emphasis on miracles, healing and deliverance (Kgatle 2017b:1). In other words, its main characteristic is that it puts much emphasis on the supernatural abilities that are derived from the Holy Spirit (Kgatle, 2017a:3). Consequently, research participants have provided much insight on healing and supernatural interventions on issues that were dealt with under the auspices of pastoral care.

With technological invention co-existing with human development, the global church has come to embrace the use of ICT as a complementary mechanism to do ministry (Afolaranmi, 2020:169). This has evolved from the use of television and radio in the past to the recent deployment of internet-based platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram (Campbell and Evolvi, 2020:5, Wobodo, 2020:282). Pentecostal Christianity's use of technology in this regard dates back to the use audio tapes to record their message to reach out to the people (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2018:13). Lindhardt (2014:22) argued that they had used these means to somehow gain a competitive edge over mainline churches. Consequently, they have adopted it to a point of rendering pastoral care remotely (Danbolt *et al.*, 2021:21). Hence, this paper has adopted the concept of virtual pastoral care to refer to any pastoral care activities that a mediated by information and communication technology. Such activities include among others, rendering of prayer meetings, reading scriptures, and conveying words of comfort (Mendonça *et al.*, 2018:3).

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Pastoral care is a crucial pillar of Pentecostalism as this tradition puts emphasis on a theological response to suffering or need (McClure, 2012:270). The proliferation of communal contextual pastoral care which promotes pastoral care as a communal responsibility of church members (Danbolt, *et al.*, 2021:21), contributes to ministers and faith workers increasingly getting approached by members of their

congregation to seek pastoral care (Meyer 2020:2). With the Pentecostal movement having adopted and integrated the use of ICT in ministry (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2018:13), and the subsequent increase in the use of technology by the church since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic (Masoga, 2020:1), the study on how the NPM optimise the use of ICT in pastoral care is imperative. The choice of Bushbuckridge as a research site is important as Ngomane (2013:26) notes that scholarship on Pentecostalism is limited in this area.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Review

The theoretical review focuses on neo-Pentecostalism, pastoral care, general use of technology in Pentecostalism and user experience. As this study is delimited to neo-Pentecostalism, it is necessary to provide special attention to existing scholarship on the NPM. The movement is a Christian tradition that emerged from Pentecostalism. NPM is not a unified tradition, just as Pentecostalism is diversified (Wariboko 2017, 10). To this effect, Asamoah-Gyadu (2015:101) postulates that NPM covers groupings such as “renewal groups within historic denominations, trans-denominational charismatic fellowship and prosperity teaching churches”. While this movement is regarded a part of the broader Pentecostal movement, Robbins (2019:190) argues that it is distinct from classical Pentecostalism because of its apparent “shift from a focus on innate human sinfulness to one on demonic causes of evil and misfortune”. In other words, most of its adherents subdue the message of eschatology but extol physical and material well-being (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015:109).

Historically, NPM emerged in the 1950s and 1960s (Orogun and Pillay, 2021:2). Since then, it continues to evolve, of which its latest current encompasses faith, healing, miracles and prosperity movement that emerged from the 1980s to date (Orogun and Pillay, 2021:2). Concomitantly, Banda (2020:1) argues that this current comprises a movement of prophets, apostles and pastors who claim to have received an anointing from God to fulfil these roles. While this self-proclaimed appropriation of the attributes of the ancient church has its advantage, it has made some members of this movement vulnerable to abuse by their leaders. Studies in South Africa showed that leaders of some neo-Pentecostal churches subject their congregants to inhumane treatment such as enticing them to ingest petrol, snakes and grass (Kgatle, 2017b:1).

With their link to the ancient church, neo-Pentecostal churches have somehow positioned themselves as resourceful when it comes to pastoral care. Notably, the term pastoral in pastoral care is derived from the Latin *Pastorem*, meaning shepherd, whereas the term care implies attentive concern for others (McClure, 2012:269). While in this study the term is confined to pastoral care from the perspective of NPM, it is worth

noting that it holds a special place in the broader Christian tradition as it was developed from situations of congregational life (McClure, 2012:269). Accordingly, Magezi (2019:1) argues that in the Christian faith it entails providing care from a spiritual perspective, i.e. the cure of the soul or what is termed *cura animarum*. Mills (2011:108) clarifies that historically such practice was associated with the priestly role of the ordained clergy.

Due to its historical association with situations of congregational life, for a while certain professions such as nursing had in the past linked their caring obligations to soul care. Consequently, Mendonça Pereira, Barreto, and Silva (2018:7) argue that due to the positive results emerging from the fusion of faith and religious practice, health professionals sometimes collaborate with pastors and spiritual leaders to guide patients in decision-making regarding ethical conflicts involving medical treatment. This interdisciplinary approach suggests that the ultimate objective of pastoral care is to empower care seekers to “live meaningfully and apply faith and hope to the daily existential realities of life” (Louw, 2018:21). Similarly, the integration of spiritual or religious care with medical intervention denotes that pastoral care focuses on the total human being and their needs for care and cure (Magezi, 2019:2).

In Africa pastoral care applies different approaches that are informed by “denominational background and practices” (Magezi 2016, 6). In some instances, these practices include prayer, reading Scriptures, and conveying healing words (Mendonça *et al.*, 2018:3). These practices also incorporate what Danbolt *et al.* (2021:21) term pastoral care a conversation that is intended to be helpful between the caregiver and the care seeker.

In the NPM pastoral care reflects a blended approach of caring that is offered by both the clergy and laity. This propensity has resulted in scholars developing theories on this subject, such as communal contextual pastoral care which positions care as a communal responsibility of church members (Danbolt *et al.*, 2021:21). The concept of communal responsibility entails that pastoral care is no longer limited to caregiving offered by the ordained ministers but is increasingly offered by the community of believers and members of the local church (Osmer 2012:275). Communal responsibility in pastoral care is also described as mutual pastoral care whereby members of the congregation care for each other in everyday life (De Vries, 2019:17).

Based on the above articulation of the concept of communal pastoral care, one may argue that this approach seems to encourage active involvement of laity in pastoral care which mirrors what is also described as “priesthood of all believers” (De Vries, 2018:41). The concept of priesthood of all believers infers that every congregational member has a contribution towards

pastoral care, e.g. hosting communal prayer meetings, visiting the sick in hospital, attending to members' events to celebrate life etc. The congregational members who minister to one another under these conditions understand that caring for one another is not reserved to the ordained but is a vocation of every Christian (De Vries, 2018:42). As such it is offered on a voluntary basis.

As contemporary society is characterized by reliance on the use of ICT, it is prudent to assess the general use of technology in the broader Pentecostal movement. The adoption of technology in Christian ministry has generally been embraced by the global church to complement the conventional ways to do ministry (Afolaranmi, 2020:169). Musa (2020:55) argues that the church does not take time to adopt, integrate and incorporate technology in its architecture. This has evolved from the use of television and radio in the past to the recent deployment of internet-based platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram (Campbell and Evolvi, 2020:5, Wobodo, (2020:282). This propensity is contrary to the predominant historical use of technology in the business world to facilitate business transactions in the first instance (Hacker, Vom Brocke, Handali, Otto, and Schneider, 2020:563). Therefore, it could be said that the evident use and pervasion of ICT in religion, inclusive of the Christian ministry plays a diverse role in the issues of faith. Pavić, Kurbanović, and Levak (2017:242) posit that internet and other media increasingly play a role in areas such as the numerical growth of some religions.

Pentecostal Christianity has taken advantage of technology to further the gospel of Jesus Christ in this regard. Its use of technology in this regard dates to the use of audio tapes to record their message to reach out to the people. For instance, Asamoah-Gyadu (2018:13) states that Christians in sub-Saharan Africa first encountered Oral Roberts through his media ministry, which included the use of audiocassette tapes that were used to share his messages. Furthermore, during that non-digital technology and media era, the use of analogue television also played an instrumental role in Pentecostal Christianity, Asamoah-Gyadu (2018: 13) further explains.

Congruent to Asamoah-Gyadu's observation, Lindhardt (2014:22) also explicates that Pentecostal churches have for a while been using technological aids as a means to somehow gain a competitive edge over mainline churches. With their adoption of televangelism and use of media in general, the Pentecostal Movement and some contemporary African Pentecostals also make extensive use of the mass media to an extent that some churches run their own publishing houses and radio and television stations (Lindhardt, 2014:22).

Pentecostal as well as charismatic churches' use of technology seems to adapt to technological

advancements. In a study conducted in Nigeria more than a decade ago, Chilwa (2012:747) discovered that already then, the church had successfully spiritualized the Internet and technology. From a sample of the seven largest and fastest growing Pentecostal/Charismatic churches in that country, Chilwa (2012:735) discovered that these churches were able to render their core practices and rituals online, such as praying for the sick and conducting sermons online. From these findings, it would be fair to extrapolate that amongst Pentecostal churches, a virtual church service offered through the use of technology is not an alternative but a complement to the physical church services. This assertion affirms Evolvi's (2022:12) assumption that there is no clear distinction between religious actions that exist online and those that occur offline.

Of significance, the adoption of ICT in everyday life is influenced by user experience (UX). In generic terms, UX encompasses all the "feelings, thoughts, sensations and actions of engaging in some activity" (Benyon, 2019:3). In information and communication technology terms UX is an umbrella term for everything that has to do with the user's interaction with an ICT product (Oyedele, Greunen, and Veldsman, 2018:792) That interaction creates an experience that varies from one individual to another, and such experience will determine whether the user will continue to use the product or not (Oyedele *et al.*, 2018:792). Chute and French (2019:13) argue that in order to achieve UX, the design of ICT systems should be human-centered, a design that accommodates diversity.

Developing ICT devices and platforms that are human centered considers among other factors the usability of such systems. The term usability refers to what was previously termed "user friendly," and has to do with the ease of use and acceptability of a product for a particular class of users carrying out specific tasks (Bevan, Kirakowski and Maissel, 1991). In general terms, accessibility refers to the extent to which a product, device, environment, or service is available and navigable for persons with functional limitations (Kulkarni, 2019:91). Accessibility in ICT centers around access to technology products, resources, and services even for persons with disabilities and/or for those with functional limitations (Kulkarni, 2019:91, Lazar, Goldstein and Taylor, 2015:2).

UX also entails acceptability, an aspect that is about fitting technologies and services into people's lives (Benyon, 2019:113). In Holthe *et al.*'s perspective (2018:882) the technology that is simple to use and enables a person with reduced cognitive capacity to cope independently with daily tasks and obligations is classified as being usable and acceptable. Concomitantly, these concepts also relate to reachability. Reachability is the capability of contacting or communicating with another party, which in case of mobile devices is presumably 24/7 depending on the availability of the network and the user's choice to keep

the device on during the period (Okazaki and Mendez, 2013:102). Related to reachability, is the experience in relation to portability. From the perspective of Okazaki and Mendez (2013:102) portability is physical characteristics of the device in relation the quality of being light enough to be carried. Similarly, this concept has often been considered synonymous with mobility whereby mobility has been defined as people's independence from geographical constraints.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Varpio, Paradis, Uijtdehaage and Young (2020) define theoretical framework as a set of concepts that are logically developed and connected used by researchers in their argumentation. Developed from one or several theories, it presents a structure that guides the researchers to discuss their findings with clarity by providing a framework to validate their arguments and recommendations (Kivunja, 2018). This implies that theoretical frameworks form an integral part of any academic article (Lederman and Lederman, 2015). Kivunja (2018) advises that in order to develop a sound theoretical framework, the researcher has to review the theories that are relevant to the research topic. Based on the outcome of the theoretical review, this study adopted a theoretical framework drawn from User experience, pastoral care, and neo-Pentecostalism as unpacked in the theoretical review above. The identified framework asserts that the neo-Pentecostal movement has adopted the use of technology to render its ministry. Integral to its ministry is pastoral care which emphasizes support to fellow humans. Offering support through the use of information technology could be better explained by the user's personal experience with technology.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study followed an empirical study that was qualitative and phenomenological in nature. I chose a qualitative design in order to enable respondents to provide high-level and original accounts of their experience in order to enrich the findings (Williams, 2021:381). The use of qualitative approach enriched the study because it made the participants to open up in their responses as the experiential experts of the phenomenon that was under investigation (Noon 2018:80). In this regard, it simultaneously enabled the study to explore "the complexity and rich nature of experience in order to generate an in-depth appreciation of social reality"

Based on the above background, the study purposefully sampled twelve participants from neo-Pentecostal churches that are based in this area, inclusive

of both care seekers and caregivers. While the original idea was to interview caregivers only, it became imminent during the design of the data collection tool that the care seekers' voice should be represented in the study. This became necessary as knowledge and experience do not only reside primarily with the caregiver, but also with the person being cared for (Khosa-Nkatini, 2022:4). Furthermore, getting the care recipients' perspective was necessary as it enriched the understanding of the lived experiences of those involved or are affected by the phenomenon. As matter of clarity, some of the caregivers have confirmed to have also assumed the role of care seekers at some point in their lives. Hence, they were able to share experiences of both caregiver and care seeker, respectively. Interviews were preferred in the collection of primary data in this study as they helped the study to collect data that provided an understanding of the interviewees' subjective perspective (McGrath, Palmgren and Liljedahl, 2019:1002).

Data analysis commenced the moment I started transcribing the first interview. As recommended by McGrath *et al.* (2019:1004), I transcribed each interview the same day as soon as possible after completing the interview. As I transcribed each interview, I also highlighted key phrases to start building the data analysis process. While there is no universally adopted way of analyzing qualitative data, it is common practice to start with data analysis as early as when transcribing the first interview. In fact, in interpretive studies there is no clear point when data collection stops and analysis begins (Terre Blanche and Kelly, 2002:139). One of the reasons why this approach is followed in qualitative studies is that such studies rapidly generate a large amount of data which could be time consuming to analyze if left until all interviews have been transcribed (McGrath *et al.*, 2019:1005). Although the process started early, it involved going back to the table of themes from each participant's transcript to review and amend the themes or sub-themes where necessary (Bremborg 2011, 317). This made the process to be iterative and fluid (Noon, 2018:77-78). I went through this process to a point of saturation, whereby new themes ceased to emerge from the data (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar and Fontenot, 2013:11).

The entire research process followed Osmer's (2008) theory of theological interpretation. This theory follows a non-linear but logical process that he terms four tasks of theological interpretation. I summarize these tasks in Table 1 below:



**Table 1.** Four Tasks of Theological Interpretation (Source: Osmer, 2008)

No.	Description	Approach
1	Description-empirical task	Collecting empirical data to answer what is going on about the topic under investigation.
2	Interpretive task	Application of theoretical concepts to interpret empirical findings.
3	Normative task	Utilization of ethical practices and/or theological concepts to describe the required ethical practices.
4	Pragmatic task	Using findings from the three tasks to develop a practical framework to address the issue under study.

This paper only applied the first two tasks, i.e. collected empirical data to understand the extent of the use of ICT in offering pastoral care, and then used the concepts of UX to explain the rationale of what is going on. I use this sequence to discuss the findings in the next section.

## FINDINGS

### Empirical findings

Research findings start by highlighting the context of Bushbuckridge, with specific reference to theological scholarship and the history of Pentecostalism in the area. The section then covers the scope of virtual pastoral care practices that the NPM in Bushbuckridge has adopted. Getting an understanding of the context of Bushbuckridge is necessary in order to justify its choice as a research site. The context provides a brief socio-political situation, religious contexts, concise history of Pentecostalism in the area and deficiency of theological scholarship on the Pentecostal movement in Bushbuckridge. Bushbuckridge is one the five local municipalities of Ehlanzeni District of Mpumalanga Province of South Africa. Before 1994 this local municipality was composed of the former Lebowa and Gazankulu homelands (Mokoena and Moeti, 2017:2). Former homeland areas in South Africa are predominantly rural. Contrary to the sparsely distribution of the population in typical rural settlements, villages in Bushbuckridge are densely populated with between 146 people/km<sup>2</sup> to over 300 people/km<sup>2</sup> (Ragie, Olivier, Hunter, Erasmus, Vogel, Collinson and Twine, 2020:3). This is due to the historical forceful resettlement of the local population imposed by the apartheid government during the establishment of Bantustans in the 1960s and 1970s. This has contributed to the creation of the peri-urban settlement pattern in the area (Ragie *et al.*, 2020:2). Regardless of this settlement pattern and having established townships, the Bushbuckridge area is predominantly rural (Ngomane, 2013:6).

Of significance to this study is the people's spirituality in the area. Christian traditions co-exist with other religions and belief systems. One of these other beliefs is witchcraft, of which Isak Niehaus, a prominent scholar in this scholarly area has conducted numerous studies on this subject in the Bushbuckridge area. In one of his studies, Niehaus (2012:45) discovered that belief in witchcraft has a long presence in this area. He also clarified that in Bushbuckridge the concept of witchcraft

is widely used to denote possession of mystical malevolent power that people use to cause harm to others (Niehaus, 2012:47). In addition to witchcraft, there is a realization of the pervasion of other malevolent currents within the rubric of the occult in the area. In a study that I conducted in Mkhuhlu area, I discovered that the prevalence of occult practices among primary school children in this area is rife (Nkuna 2021:4). In my research findings I articulate how children as young as eight join the occult, and also delineate the role played by educators of neo-Pentecostal tradition in offering pastoral care for children affected by the occult (Nkuna, 2021:22–46). The problem of the occult and the pastoral care response by educators of Christian faith highlights the need for further theological inquiry in the Bushbuckridge area and the urgency of the crafting and implementation of a strategy to reach the general population of the care seekers and younger generation who are technologically aware.

While the respective work of Niehaus and Nkuna highlights some scanty scholarship on witchcraft and the occult, scholarship on the history of Pentecostalism in Bushbuckridge is limited (Ngomane, 2013:26). Amidst this scholarly deficiency on Pentecostalism in Bushbuckridge, Ngomane (2013:26) asserts that this movement has more than a century of existence in the area as he established that as early as 1910 Bushbuckridge had pockets of Pentecostal churches. These churches were pioneered by Luka Mhlongo, a man from Bushbuckridge who was converted to this tradition while serving as a migrant work in Johannesburg in 1910 (Ngomane, 2013:45). Ngomane (2013:45) further postulates that its spread in the area accelerated from 1967 after evangelist Nicholas Bhengu's visit to the area.

With their literary belief in the powers of the Holy Spirit as presented in the New Testament, members of the NPM still believe in healing and deliverance through supernatural interventions. While for many years this was done in a physical interaction between believers, the NPM has now integrated the use of technology to discharge the supernatural intervention from a virtual setup. This study has discovered that the integration of ICT in this environment brought to pass key virtual pastoral care practices that include virtual prayer meetings, sharing of audio recorded prayers and messages, virtual counselling sessions, technology mediated self-care and electronic ministry resources.

Table 2 below provides a summary description of these pastoral care practices used by members of the NPM in

Bushbuckridge which are elaborated thereafter in this section.

**Table 2.** Summary of Technology Mediated Pastoral Care Practices (Source: Researcher Constructed List)

Practice	Description
Virtual prayer meeting	An online prayer meeting that is held by people from various locations connected technology.
Virtual counselling	One-on-one conversation held between the caregiver and the care recipient via audio or video call for the purpose of facilitating the care seeker's relief from any adversity that he/she is facing.
Technology mediated self-care	The use of technology for caring for the spirit person. This mainly entails mediating praise and worship through streaming of gospel songs from the cell phone to an audio player via Bluetooth for the purpose of singing along.
Recorded digital content	Any pre-recorded audio or video content that is transmitted to WhatsApp group members for instant and/or later use.
Electronic ministry resources	Bible verses, prophetic word or any form of ministry content that is generated from digital platforms and shared with care seekers on a regular basis.

Virtual prayer meetings were predominantly adopted during the coronavirus pandemic on a need basis. Online virtual prayer meetings entail creation of a WhatsApp group that is used to connect family members, church prayer group or colleagues to virtually congregate to render a prayer meeting. These meetings usually follow the pattern applied in face-to-face meetings whereby the proceedings are led by a program director who collaborates with members to share the scriptures, testimonies and prayer together during the allocated time of virtual live fellowship. In some instances, bilateral prayer meetings are held between a caregiver and a care seeker to pray for confidential issues using WhatsApp or conventional voice calls.

Live prayer sessions are sometimes not practically possible and, in such cases, sharing of recorded prayers is used as an option. These prayers are recorded and shared to address needs identified by care seekers, while others are generic prophetic prayers shared randomly to encourage the broken hearted. This have been praised by some researcher participants who claim that such prayers lift their souls when they are unable to pray for themselves, they get to pray along with those voice notes to a point that they sense some relief during the process. In that way, such voice notes bridge physical distance between the care seeker and the caregiver.

Virtual counselling was also highlighted by the respondents. This practice entails counselling a caregiver over the phone. Contrary to face-to-face counselling sessions held in a physical meeting venue which has relatively less constraints regarding the time factor, virtual counselling happens within the confines of resource constraints in the form of airtime and data. Regardless of the constraints of data and airtime, virtual counselling also mirrors the practice that is implemented in the physical or contact counselling session. These include the caregiver listening to the care seeker's presentation of the issue, sharing scriptures and praying for God's intervention at the end of the listening and

conversation session. This model was broadly shared by research participants in respective interviews.

Research participants have also revealed a new way of self-care through the use of technology. Technology mediated self-care is about the caregiver or care seeker using technology assisted mechanisms as ministry resources to address a specific spiritual need. These include, among others listening to recorded prayers, sermons or gospel songs. Research participants who testified to the use of technology for self-care mainly cited the streaming of gospel content from their cell phones to audio devices, predominantly motor vehicle audio systems using Bluetooth connection while on the road. One participant alluded that this kind of self-care had set her free from fear of driving in heavy traffic. She stated that each time she had to drive in heavy traffic she would connect her cell phone to the vehicle audio system through Bluetooth to play gospel songs that instill courage to overcome any obstacle. By co-chanting those words, she eventually overcame that fear.

The last finding alludes to the use of digital ministry resources. In this study digital ministry resources refer to all content that Christian websites or social media accounts generate and share electronically with users. Both caregivers and care seekers tap into electronic ministry resources to access the content that they use to care for one another. In many instances, they access these resources from the internet which they then share with fellow members of the NPM. These are usually accessed by members who have subscribed to various platforms who then download them to share directly with individual members, on group platforms or via their individual WhatsApp status updates. This content ranges from pictures with caring content, video clips and or links to related content. For instance, some participants alluded to their subscription to Bible Apps whereby they receive the verse of the day which they either share randomly or with specific individuals on a need basis.

### Interpretation of the findings

Findings from this study revealed that both caregivers and care seekers predominantly use cell phones as a choice device for communication. WhatsApp came as a preferred platform for communication during the caring process. Consequently, this section examines the reasons for the choice of these technologies. The section further extrapolates the general justification for the use of technology in this regard.

The use of cell phones offers several technical advantages which fall under the broad concept of user experience. Benyon (2019:5) argues that ICT devices and platforms are said to be designed with the purpose of creating UX in mind. Cell phones create interactive experiences for people to derive the outcome or output that they desire from their use (Benyon, 2019:5). In the case of the use of cell phones in pastoral care, the findings suggest that cell phones have been unwittingly adopted mainly due to reachability, accessibility, portability and ubiquity. Cell phones offer reachability as they enable the users to communicate with one another around the clock seven days a week and anywhere, depending on the availability of the network and the user's choice to keep the device on during the period (Okazaki and Mendez 2013, 102). This is contrary to the fixed lines which were traditionally used for communication which are fixed to specific locations.

Cell phones have also been identified as user-friendly in that they offer all forms of usability in pastoral care. The term usability has to do with the ease of use and acceptability of a product for a particular class of users carrying out specific tasks (Bevan, Kirakowski and Maissel, 1991). In this study cell phones proved to be useful in sharing messages through voice notes, audio and video calls, and facilitating the atmosphere of worship that brings spiritual healing to users. These forms of media are transmitted through cell phones to groups with various needs and levels of literacy. This practice is aligned to Holthe *et al.*'s (2018:882) clarification that the technology that is simple to use and enables a person with reduced cognitive capacity to cope independently with daily tasks and obligations is classified as being usable and acceptable. Similarly, all the technical features of cell phones as mobile devices are complimented by their portability. Okazaki and Mendez (2013:102) define portability as the quality of being light enough to be carried. This feature contributes to them being kept in the possession of the users, thereby facilitating accessibility.

Another significant UX offered by cell phone utilization is its catalytic value through device ecologies. The term device ecologies is derived from the conventional concept of ecology which typically refers to an environment where a number of different organisms work together to create an environment (Benyon, 2019:7). Benyon (2019:7) clarifies that in the field of information technology it refers to an

environment whereby several electronic devices are used to deliver a certain output or service to offer the user a certain UX. The study revealed that some research participants exercised self-care within the milieu of device ecologies whereby the cell phone played a catalytic role. For instance, one participant reported to have used her cell phone as a repository of music which she used to receive therapeutic relief from fear of driving in traffic congestion. The music is stored in her cell phone which she uses to connect via Bluetooth to her vehicle audio system and play while driving during peak hour. While the cell phone serves as a repository of the user's music play list, connecting it to the vehicle audio system amplifies the quality of music to a point that the output brings relief from fear. Such experience was made possible within an ecology of devices rather than on a single device (Benyon 2019:7).

Related to the predominant use of cell phones, was the prevalent adoption of WhatsApp as the preferred communication platform. With the discussion of usability and accessibility, it was also evident that this platform offers both forms of user experience. As research participants unpacked how they use this application, it became apparent that it has won their hearts due to its usability. The term usability refers to what was historically called "user friendliness" which has to do with the ease of use of a product to carry out specific tasks (Bevan, Kirakowski and Maissel, 1991). In case of this study, WhatsApp has provided different options to both caregivers and care seekers to accomplish their pastoral care endeavors.

In addition to the concepts that were covered in the discussion about cell phones utilization, WhatsApp also presents the users with the advantages of perceived ease of use (PEU). In simple terms PEU refers to the level of one's belief that a system can be easily understood (Basuki, Tariganb, Siagianb, Limantaa, Setiawana and Mochlara, 2022:225). From this definition it implies that research participants found WhatsApp as the platform that they believe is easily understood by users of different levels of comprehension. Which means that just like in many other instances that inform the choice to use technology, ease of use plays a significant role on users' decision to use this application (Zuniarti *et al.*, 2021:483).

Research participants' positive experience with this application has contributed in them developing a positive attitude towards its usefulness, a factor that Zuniarti *et al.* (2021:480) allude is important in users' decision for technological use. For instance, as the users predominantly access it on their mobile devices, they identify with its services as a platform for voice and video calls, sharing text messages and circulating caring content in picture or video formats. Based on empirical data from this study, these media are accessible to users of various cognitive levels. Research participants have indicated various ways that they use to accommodate

users of various cognitive abilities. They generally send audio media those with limited literacy level and send text messages to those are adequately literate.

## CONCLUSION

The study sought to ascertain the influence of UX in the NPM's use of ICT to render pastoral care. It employed qualitative methods to gather data from interviews with twelve members of the NPM who were purposively selected to participate in the study. Empirical data were analyzed thematically with themes formulated from field data. The findings were interpreted using concepts from the field of information technology with specific reference to the concept of UX. The findings revealed that research participants continue to rely on prayer and counselling blended with scripture reading to care for each other. However, technology has catalyzed the emergence of technology aided caring practices, namely technology mediated self-care and use of electronic ministry resources. Data interpretation revealed that UX has an influence in device choice and electronic platform preference. In this regard, cell phones and WhatsApp are preferred technologies in pastoral care. Cell phones offer them the advantages of reachability, portability and usability, whereas WhatsApp complements these features with perceived ease of use.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this study, I recommend that some future studies should consider conducting a detailed analysis of UX in the use of mobile devices in pastoral care, whereas others may focus on WhatsApp only. Likewise, I also recommend that similar interdisciplinary studies be conducted and use concepts from other disciplines such as management sciences to interpret similar empirical findings.

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