A SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE MEDIA AND CHURCH GROWTH: A CASE STUDY OF MOUNTAIN OF FIRE AND MIRACLES MINISTRIES

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Abstract

The influence of media on societal dynamics has been transformative, particularly in communication, information dissemination and social connectivity. This transformation has significantly impacted religious institutions, reshaping how churches operate, evangelize and engage with their congregations, ultimately affecting church growth. The elite makeup of several Pentecostal churches in no small way unites them with modern technologies. In Nigerian Pentecostalism, communication channels play a crucial role in spreading teachings, sermons and information among the congregants. The communication channel encompasses the use of media, which includes electronic, print, broadcast and social media. The rapid growth in the number of church attendees at the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) has caused a lag in the dissemination of information, as well as the inability to reach the unreached. This vacuum led to a call for strategies and effective measures to solve this challenge, such as the use of the media as a way of communication. This study is concerned with a sociological exploration of the use of media in harnessing the growth of the Church and communication with her members. It adopts the mixed methodology (qualitative and quantitative exploration) approach to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Key informant interviews were conducted among 4 persons (3 males and 1 female), comprising Pastors and an administrator. Questionnaires were also distributed among 209 respondents, encompassing both males and females. Using the inferential statistics, the data were descriptively analysed using frequency distribution tables and appropriate charts for the assessment. Sociologically, the media has resulted in membership retention, economic gain and promotion of the church's image, increased community Engagement and Social Integration. This research recommends the need for intensive follow-up and discipleship, reevaluation of messages and sermons and the need to reinstate the emphasis on social inclusivism times among members of MFM.

Keywords: Media. Social exploration. Church growth. MFM

1. 1NTRODUCTION

Historically, the Christian church relied on traditional communication methods, such as sermons, pamphlets and word of mouth to spread its message. The arrival of print media in the 15th century marked a significant shift, enabling the wider dissemination of religious texts and ideas. However, the potential for mass communication precisely expanded in the 20th century with the rise of electronic media. Radio and television became powerful tools for reaching broader audiences, breaking geographical barriers and allowing the Christian church to extend its influence beyond local communities. The elite makeup of several Pentecostal churches in no small way unites them with modern technologies[xxxv]. Pentecostal missions have been able to usher in a massive emancipation of members from the non-Pentecostal missions as well as those from other religions through media contact. In a bid to finding ways of survival amidst the social, economic, cum political unrest facing the nation Nigeria, socio-religious cum economic programmes and interventions by Pentecostal missions have been on the rise thereby creating avenues for Pentecostalism to strive.

According to Igbari, some of the major characteristics of Pentecostalism includes: the emphasis on the gift of the Holy Spirit, works on faith, healing, prophesy, prosperity teachings and speaking in tongues among other church activities-fellowship meetings, bible study sessions are pertinent features in these churches[xxxv].

In Nigerian Pentecostalism, communication channels play a crucial role in spreading teachings, sermons and information among the congregants. The communication channel encompasses the use of media, which includes electronic, print, broadcast and social media. Speaking of The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Mepaiyeda and Oluwadoro ₙoted that social media, which includes the use of blogs, YouTube, TikTok, Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, and podcasts, has contributed to social networking and the Church's expansion among members of this denomination[xxxv]. In buttressing this claim, Adeloye stated that the development of science and technology has positively impacted the mission of various religious bodies and organisations. The use of media technologies by

churches and para-church organisations is considered an acceptable weapon for God's army in the battle against Satan[xxxv]. Adedibu discussed that the religious space through sacred has responded positively to the dynamic cultural shifts that have taken place across the globe through the impact of the forces of technological advancement, communication migration and globalization[xxxv].

There are multiple numbers of Pentecostal missions in Nigeria, although among these are some mega Pentecostals which including Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM). Anderson[xxxv] and Ojo[xxxv] chronicle the rise of MFM within the Nigerian context, highlighting socio-political challenges and its appeal to a demographic seeking tangible deliverance as causal factors. The movement's growth underscores its adaptive strategies in merging traditional African spiritual practices with charismatic Christianity, resonating deeply within local communities grappling with spiritual malaise and societal instability. This view corroborates the opinion of Adogame, who underscores MFM as one Pentecostal denomination with a focus on shaping public discourse on faith and morality, influencing ethical values and civic engagement among its adherents[xxxv]. MFM has over 5000 branches across the nation, which are categorized under mega regions, regions, zones and branches. These classifications are based on the population of members in the locations[xxxv]. However, the Prayer City mega region stands in annexe to the international headquarters of the church situated in Iwaya-Yaba area of Lagos State, Nigeria. As a result of the proximity of this mega region, owing to its accessibility and strategic location along the Lagos-Ibadan expressway, it served as the choice sample scope for this study. This position makes it easily accessible to worshippers and visitors from Lagos, as well as those travelling from other parts of the country along this major transportation corridor.

The Prayer City houses most of the Church's mega programmes, which are interdenominational. Some of these include: Power Must Change Hands (PMCH), which takes place every first Saturday of every month, Prayer Rain, which comes up every Friday except the Friday preceding the PMCH, Annual Anointing service, amidst other weekly programmes which incorporate deliverance services on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. In prayer city, prayer goes on 24 hours a day[xxxv].

Due to the influence of the rapid growth in the number of church attendees at the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) which has caused siege in communication, dissemination of information and the inability to reach the unreached, this has created a vacuum and a request to strategizing effective measures to solve this challenge which included the use of the media as a way of communication. As a result, this study is concerned with a sociological exploration of the use of media in harnessing the growth of the Church and communication with her members, with the following research questions serving as guides:

i. What are the perceptions of the specific media used to conduct and support church activities among members of MFM Prayer City?

ii. What is the perception of the quality of media content for supporting church activities among members of MFM Prayer City?

iii. What is the perception of the influence of media content in fostering community engagement among members of MFM Prayer City?

iv. What is the perception of the implications of the use of Church media in enhancing the church's growth among members of MFM Prayer City?

To proffer answers to these questions above, the study examines the perception of the media that are used to conduct and support church activities among members of MFM Prayer City, the perception of the quality of media content for supporting the church's activities among members, it also assesses the perception of the influence of media content in fostering community engagement among members to authenticate the perception of its implications on church growth among members of MFM Prayer City.

2. THE USE OF MEDIA IN MOUNTAIN OF FIRE AND MIRACLES MINISTRIES

The following are the media that are used in MFM Prayer City in communication, evangelizing and during Church service:

Social Media: Social media have been perceived to be an effective communication channel[xxxv]. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube have helped to reach a wide range of audiences[xxxv]. It allows sharing of inspirational cum motivational messages, sermons including devotionals, announcement and interactive content which enhance participation of church members. In MFM, the social media in use include: Facebook, Telegram, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube. Software application which enables members to access daily devotionals online rather than carrying print copies all around have also been in use. The application used in MFM is called "Mountain Top Devotional app" for daily devotionals, prayers, messages and evangelistic outreaches. The WhatsApp platform is also another means explored by the church for creating awareness of important church programmes and sermons. The use of YouTube for live streaming of messages such as Power Must Change Hands (PMCH), an interdenominational prayer meeting held every first Saturday of the month, Prayer Rain service every first Friday of the month except the Friday presiding over the PMCH, Sunday worship services, and vigil programmes to mention a few. The use of social media platforms fosters a sense of community among church members as they give room for discussions, comments, sharing of personal stories and peer support, creating a stronger bond within the church group[xxxv]. YouTube and Instagram offer opportunities for interactive learning through video, live streaming and question-and-answer sessions. Each of the Church's programmes streamed on YouTube has over 15,000 viewers. At the time of this research, there are 69, 761,053 viewers on the Church's YouTube channel, with 334,000 subscribers.[xxxv]

Broadcast Media: Broadcast media include television and radio communication. It contains both audio and visualization, which transmit information or entertainment to a large number of people simultaneously. It is a medium which

enables the widespread dissemination of news, adverts, educational and spiritual content to a diverse audience. MFM has a television platform known as "MFM TV" on satellite television networks[xxxv]. This offers an opportunity for members to listen and participate in the church programmes at will from the comfort of their homes. The MFM TV programmes feature past messages of Dr. D.K. Olukoya, church services, daily teachings using the MFM devotional (Mountain Top Life), ministration in songs, Prayer warfare, Film shows, among many Christian and inspirational activities[xxxv].

Print Media: This includes the use of banners, bulletins, handbills, magazines, newspapers, posters, flyers and pamphlets[xxxv] to reach out to the attendees of various church programmes. In MFM, there is are series of magazines such as the "MFM Digest" and the "Battle Cry" monthly bulletins. Posters and banners placed at strategic positions in and around the church premises display the church's tenets and inspirational bible quotations. The banners and billboards are used as a source of creating awareness of the church's programmes, such as the PMCH, Prayer rain, and in-house programmes among the various units, departments and ministries within the Church. Every PMCH, pamphlets are printed and distributed to the attendees, which contain the order of activities, hymns, and prayer points to be used during and after the programme[xxxv].

Electronic Media: Electronic media involves media such as the use of projectors, smartphones and iPads, etc. In MFM during most services at Prayer city, such as PMCH, large screen Projectors are used during ministrations because of the population of the audience, it is used to project what is going on at the altar during ministration to give everyone a sense of belonging especially for those who are unable to get a seat close to the pulpit. Also, it is used during crusades to project gospel movies for the sake of evangelising salvation within the community where the programme is being held. More so, the projector is used for live transmission of the church programmes, most especially from the international headquarters and Prayer City to viewers at various branches of the church's locations where they are connected. The use of iPads and smartphones for teaching, dissemination of information and other religious content is fast gaining attention. It has helped to

reduce the cost of printing and also allows for quick dissemination of information among the members of the Church. In addition, this has helped to reduce environmental pollution caused by the littering of waste papers, although they may be recycled, but the iPad and smartphones allow for a longer storage of information and content in the cloud[xxxv].

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts the Mixed methodology (qualitative and quantitative exploration). These methods are combined to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. Key informant interviews were conducted among 4 persons (3 males and 1 female), comprising Pastors and an administrator. It also adopts a survey approach, as it enables the systematic collection of data using questionnaires. A simple random sampling approach which ensures that the sample is a representative of the diverse socio-economic backgrounds and education levels of respondents, thereby giving an equal chance to everyone being selected, including the members of congregations. The sample size is 209 respondents, encompassing males and females, out of a population of 5000. Using inferential statistics, this study adopted descriptive data analysis using frequency distribution tables alongside visualization achieved using appropriate charts for the assessment of the data that were collected for this study.

4. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

This session contains the results of the analysis of data gathered in the survey carried out in the sociological exploration of the media and church growth. The tables consist of frequency distribution tables and bar charts alongside the presentation and visualization of the various media that were prevalent among the respondents

4.1   Results of the Distribution of Socio-Demographic Information

This section presents the results of the distribution of the socio-demographic information of the respondents considered in this study. Table 4.1 shows the frequency distribution of the socio-demographic information of the respondents that were considered in this study. It shows the frequency distribution of each respective item that constituted the socio-demographic information of each respondent, alongside the percentage proportion of the sample size. In total, information was collected from 209 respondents, resulting in a response rate of 69.7% of the sample size in this study.

*Table 4.**Error! Main Document Only.**: Frequency distribution of the socio-demographic information of respondents.*

Gender		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	93	44.5	44.5	44.5
	Female	116	55.5	55.5	100
	Total	209	100.0	100.0	

Age Group		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	18 to 28 years	106	50.7	50.7	50.7
	26-35 years	102	48.8	48.8	99.5
	36 to 45 years	1	5	5	100.0
	Total	209	100.0	100.0	

Education	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Secondary education	1	5	5	5
Tertiary education	160	76.6	76.6	77
Postgraduate education	48	23	23	100
Total	209	100.0	100.0	

Employment	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Student	113	54.1	54.1	54.1
Employed (Full-time /Part-time)	72	34.4	34.4	88.5
Self-employed	24	11.5	11.5	100.0
Total	209	100.0	100.0	

Church membership duration	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Less than 1 year	70	33.5	33.5	33.5
1 to 5 years	114	54.5	54.5	88.0
6 to 10 years	20	9.6	9.6	97.6
10 years and above	5	2.4	2.4	100.0
Total	209	100.0	100.0	

Highest Eductional Qualification
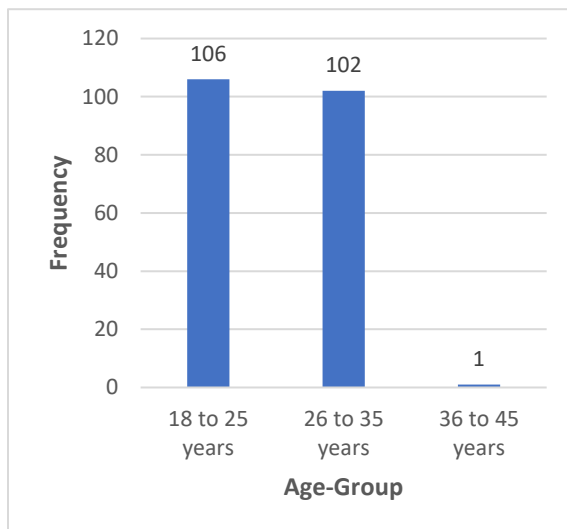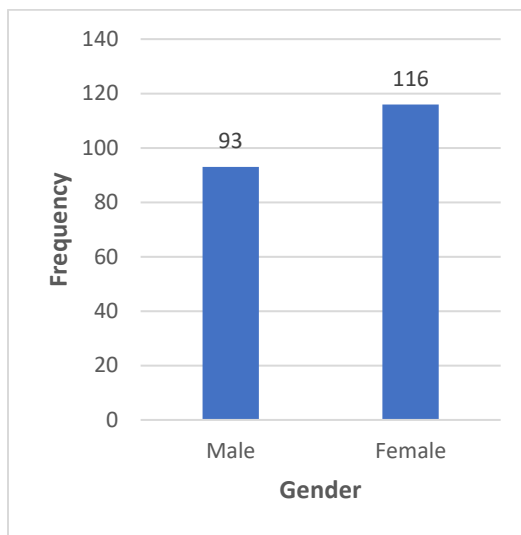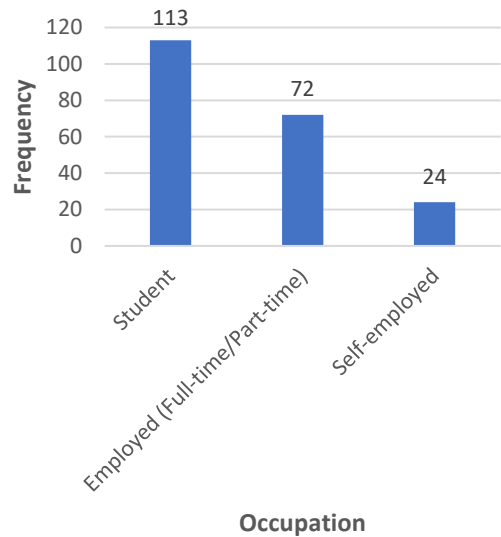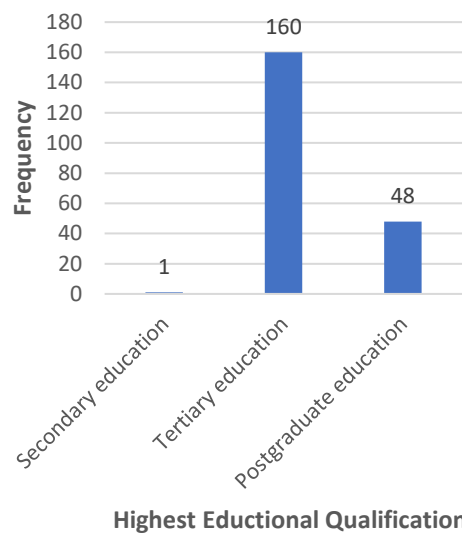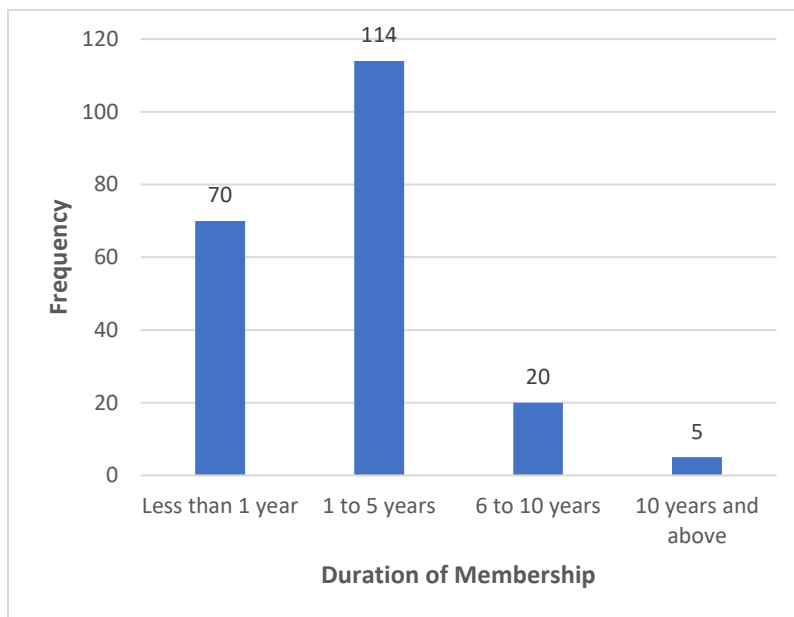
Occupation

*Figure 4.**Error! Main Document Only.**: Bar chart distribution of socio-demographic information, namely: gender (top-left), age-group (top-right), highest educational qualification (central-left), occupation (central-right), and duration of membership (bottom-left).*

Figure 4.1 shows the distribution of the socio-demographic information that was collected from the respondents considered in this study. The results of the distribution of the gender, age-group, educational qualification, occupation, and duration of membership were presented based on their frequency and proportion (in percentages). The results of the distribution of the gender revealed that a majority of 55.5% were female, while 44.5% were male. The results of the age-group revealed that a majority of 50.7% were aged 18 to 25 years, followed by 48.8% who were aged 26 to 35 years, and 5.0% who were aged 36 to 45 years. The results of the distribution of the highest educational qualification of the respondents revealed that a majority of 76.6% had a first degree, followed by 23.0% who had a postgraduate degree, and 5.0% who had secondary education. The results of the distribution of the occupation revealed that a majority of 54.1% were students, followed by 34.4% who were employed and 11.5% who were self-employed. The results of the distribution of the duration of membership revealed that a majority of 54.5% are members between 1 to 5 years, followed by 33.5% who belonged for less than a year, and 9.6% who belonged for 6 to 10 years.

4.2   Results of the Perception of Media Engagement in Church Activities

This section presents the results of the examination of the perception of media engagement in church activities. Various media that are used to engage in church activities were identified, such as satellite/cable television (e.g., DSTV, GoTV, etc.), radio/internet radio, social media, website, church bulletin, and church mobile application. The distribution of the respondents who are aware of the use of these media for church activities was assessed using frequency distribution tables and bar charts. Table 4.2 and Figure 4.2 show the distribution of the prevalence of media using a frequency distribution table and bar chart, respectively.

*Table 4.**Error! Main Document Only.**: Distribution of the prevalence of media for church activities.*

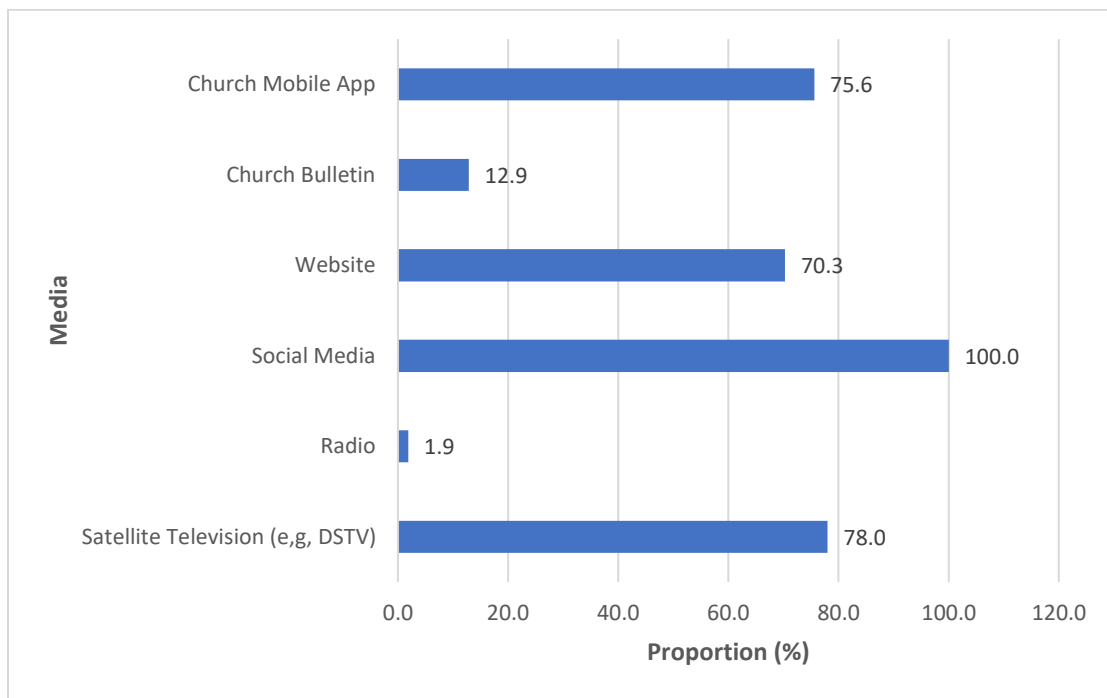| Media	Frequency	Proportion (%)
Satellite/Cable Television (e.g. DSTV, GoTV, etc.)	163	78.0
Radio	4	1.9
Social media	209	100.0
Website	147	70.3
Church Bulletin	27	12.9
Church Mobile App	158	75.6

Figure 4.2: Bar chart distribution of the prevalence of media for church activities.

Discussion of findings: Increased Church participation

The results of the distribution of the perception of media concerning the proportion of the total population are presented as follows. The results for the most popular media used among members for the church services were social media with a proportion of 100.0%, followed by satellite/cable television, church mobile application, and church website with proportions of 78.0%, 75.6%, and 70.3%, respectively. The media that was least adopted for church services is the radio, with a proportion of 1.9%, followed by the church bulletin with a proportion of 12.9%. Therefore, it will be good for the church to look for ways of encouraging the use of other media channels since some people may not be able to afford the use of social media, as this channel is the most subscribed among her members.

Figure 4.3 shows the distribution of the responses of the respondents regarding the frequency of the engagement of media for church services among the respondents. The results revealed that majority of the respondents accessed media weekly with a proportion of 88.5% followed by 9.6% who rarely accessed media for church services and 1.9% who accessed media for church services daily.
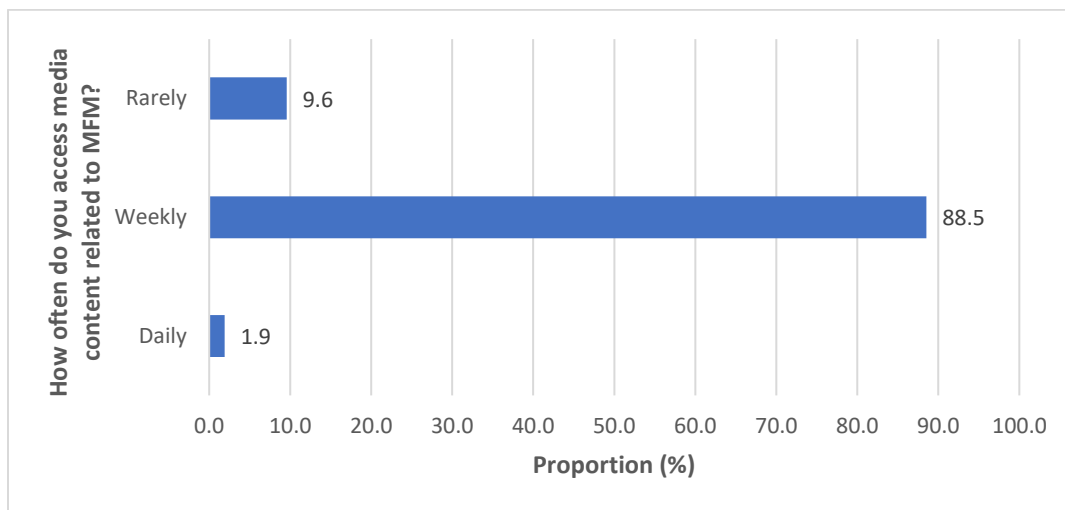
Figure 4.3: Distribution of the frequency of media engagement during church activities.

Discussion of Findings: **Membership Retention**

It is noticeable that many of the church members access the media content of the church more often. This shows that there is a need for the church to intensify efforts and strategies of retaining these members who are online service worshippers because many of them could also form potential members of other denominations, since they could be in the comfort of their homes and at the same time attending multiple online services from other denominations. More so, this may be due to the level of church commitment of these members then it is probably likely that many of these membership commitments may not be true.

Figure 4.4 shows the distribution of the responses of the respondents regarding the media platforms that are most effectively adopted for the exchange of information during church activities.

The results revealed that majority of the respondents suggested that social media was most effective in the dissemination of information with a proportion of 67.9%, followed by church website which was suggested by 21.5% and satellite/cable television which was suggested by 10.0%.
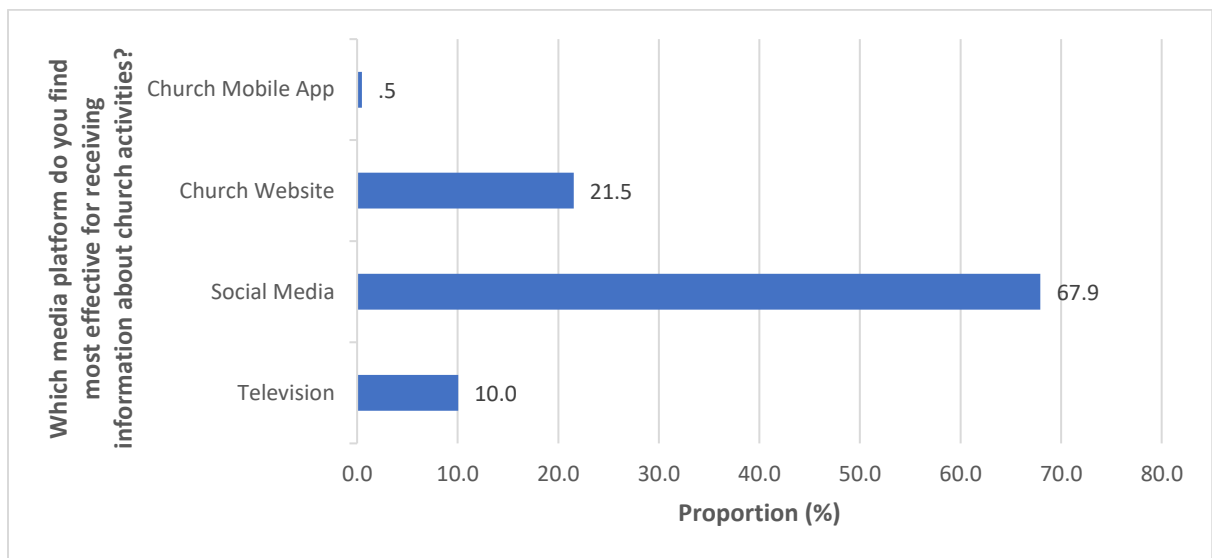
Figure 4.4: Distribution of the most effective media for information exchange during church activities

Discussion of Findings: The media they find most effective in receiving information is Social media, with 67.9% of the respondents attesting to this. This may be as a result of the availability of live video streaming services that have become available across many social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc. The church has an account on all her social media platforms through which messages and church services, and other important information are channelled. Some of the social media platforms frequently used by the church include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube, to mention a few. With the prevalence of the use of social media as having the highest subscribed viewers among the church members, this also shows some level of commitment of the members to church activities and programmes. In emphasising Romans 10:17, "So then, faith cometh by hearing, and hearing the word of God". This verse suggests a reason why members still make efforts to listen to sermons online even when they are not physically present in the church.

4.3   Results of the Perception of the Quality of Media Content

This section presents the results of the distribution of the responses that were provided by the respondents for examining the quality of media content adopted during church activities. The results were assessed using bar charts, which were used to plot the distribution of the proportion of the response relative to the sample size. Figure 4.5 shows the distribution of the responses regarding the quality of media content. The results revealed that the majority suggested that media quality was excellent, considering the proportion of 67.5%, followed by 19.1% who suggested media quality was fair and 13.4% who suggested media quality was good. It is observed from the results in this study that the majority of the respondents enjoy the media content provided, especially via social media channels, compared to other types of media.
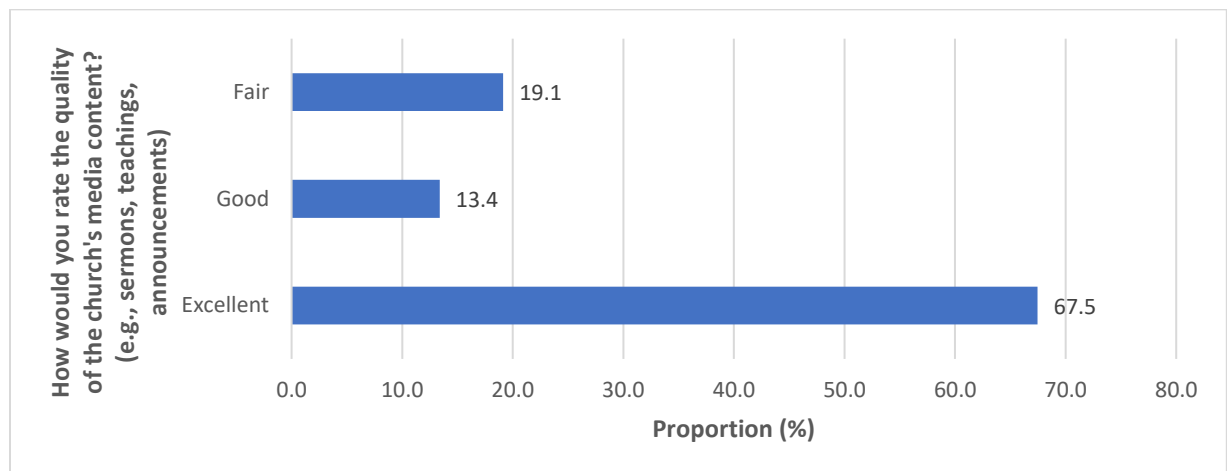

Figure 4.5: Distribution of the perception of the quality of media content.

Discussion of findings: **Economic gain and Promotion of the Church's image**

The result emphasised that the media quality of MFM is of high quality or extremely good. The quality of the media equipment, such as cameras, video recorders and sound systems used by the church has greatly impacted more commitment and participation from the members, as anyone would prefer to connect to church services online. Indirectly, this has increased the numbers of subscribers to various social media platforms thereby providing job opportunity for some people working with the media team and also helps to boast the revenue of

telecommunication as the viewers needs the subscription of data on their phones or mobile devices to be able to connect to these church programmes and services. More importantly, with the effectiveness and quality of the media technology of the church, this has helped to manage crowds who may have wished to travel to church from a far distance to only be connected online, irrespective of their location.

Figure 4.6 shows the distribution of the responses of the respondents regarding the most valuable contents for which media content is made available. The results revealed that the majority of the respondents suggested announcements and news with a proportion of 100.0%, followed by inspirational messages (made available as audio-visual media and print media), testimonies, and sermons and teachings, each with a proportion of 99.5%. Therefore, most of the respondents suggest that most of the media content is valuable for improving their spiritual activities and service offerings during programs.
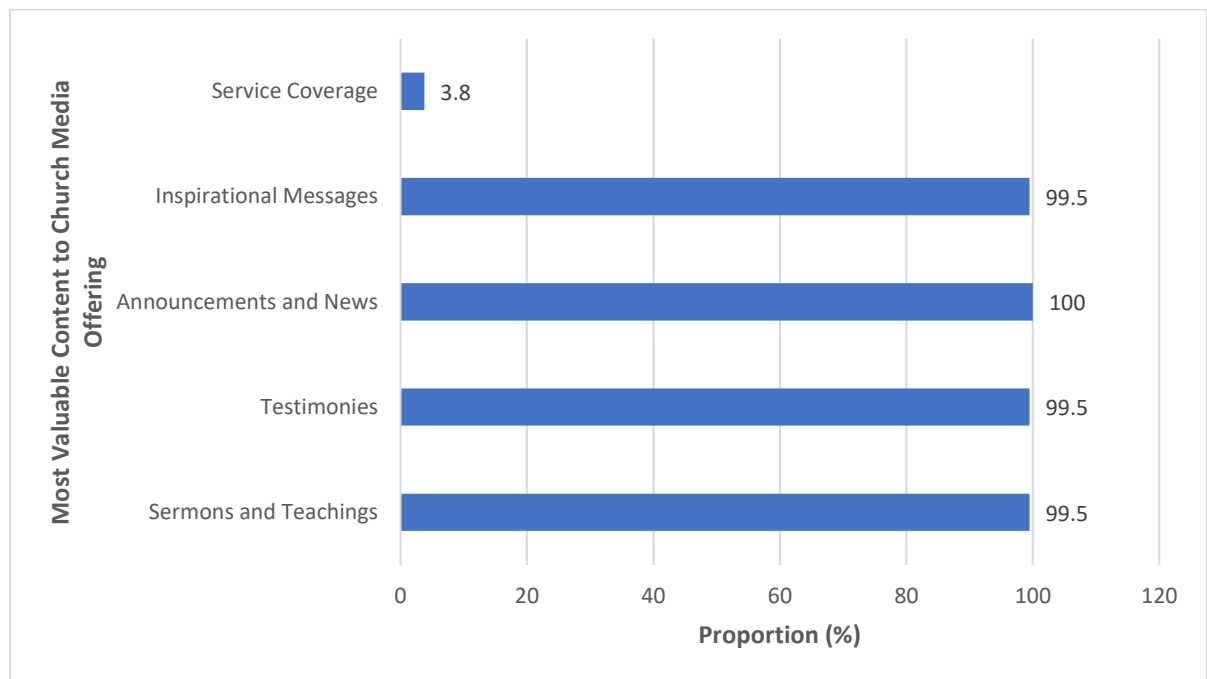

Figure 4.6: Distribution of the most valuable content for which media is offered.

The members have always been inspired by the sermons, testimonies and teachings which have helped in shaping their morality.

4.4   Results of the Distribution of the Perception of Media and Community Engagement

This section presents the results of the responses regarding the distribution of the responses of the respondents regarding the perception of media and community engagement. This was done by examining the influence of church media contents on sense of community within the church. In addition, the influence of church media content on promoting charitable activities and community services by the church was examined.

Discussion of findings: Increased community Engagement and Social Integration

Figure 4.7 shows the distribution of the responses of the respondents to the influence of church media content in fostering a sense of community within the church. The results show that the majority, with a proportion of 85.6%, indicated that media content moderately enhances the sense of community, while 14.4% suggest that it fosters a sense of community.
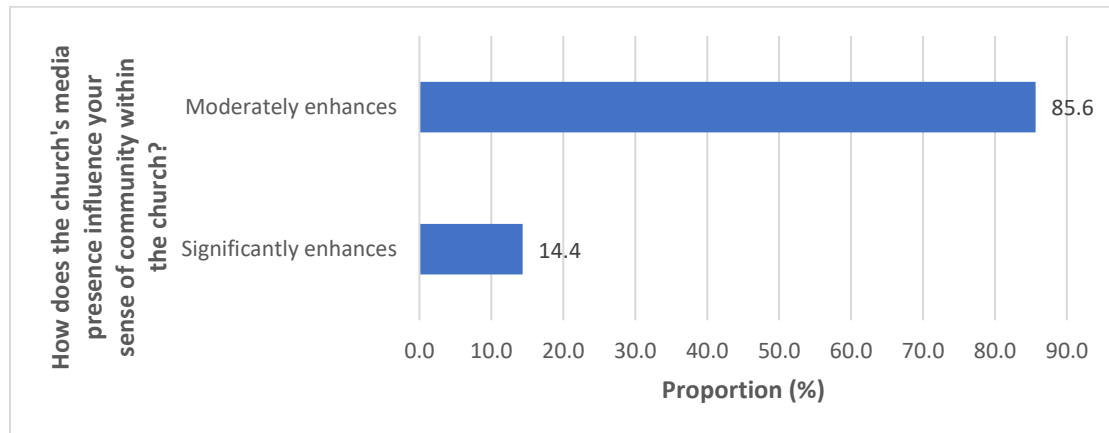

Figure 4.7: Distribution of the responses to the influence of church media content in fostering a sense of community within the church.

Figure 4.8 shows the distribution of the responses of the respondents to church media content promotion of charitable activities and community services. The results revealed that the majority, with a proportion of 86.6%, agree, 12.9% strongly agree, and 0.5% strongly disagree. Therefore, it was revealed that the majority of

the respondents agree that media content delivery creates a sense of belonging among members and enhances their level of community engagement among members thereby promoting charitable activities.
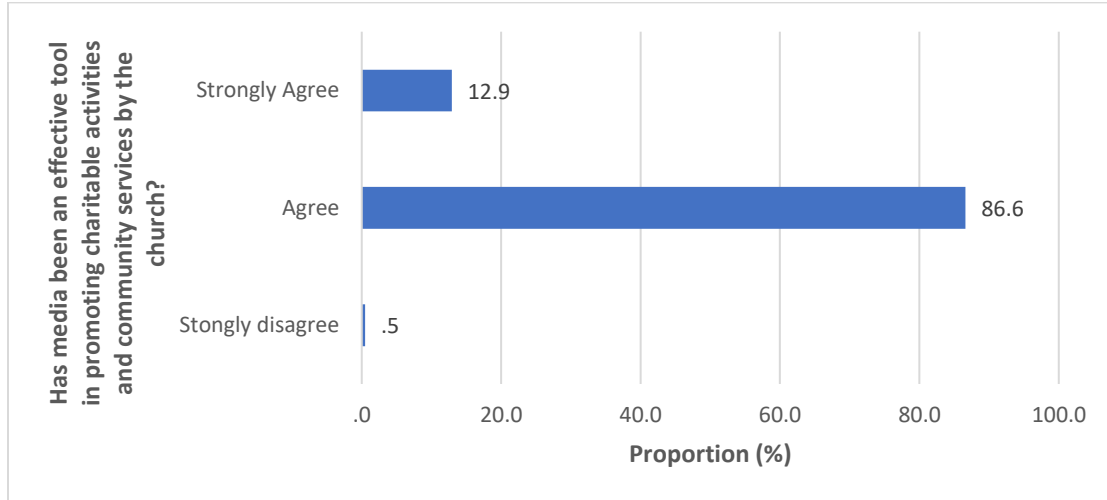

Figure 4.8: Distribution of the responses to church media content promotion of charitable activities and community service.

4.5   Results of the Distribution of the Effectiveness of Media to Church Growth

This section presents the results of the responses of the respondents to their perception of the influence of media on church growth. This was examined with the use of bar charts which shows the relative distribution of the responses of the respondents with respective to the sample size. Figure 4.9 sows the distribution of the responses to their perception of the role of media in attracting new members to the church.
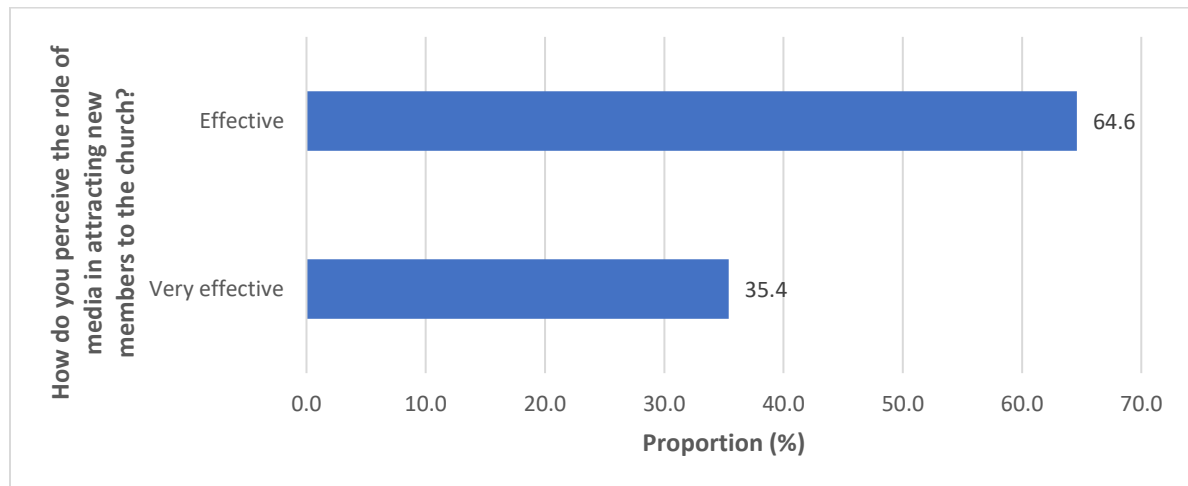

Figure 4.9: Distribution of perception of the role of media in attracting new members to the church.

Discussion of Findings:

The results revealed that the majority of the respondents, with a proportion of 64.6%, reported that media content was effective, while 35.4% reported that media was very effective at attracting new members to the church. Figure 4.10 shows the distribution of the agreement of the respondents to how media content exposure had strengthened the faith and spiritual growth of members. The results revealed that the majority of the respondents, with a proportion of 67.5%, agreed, while 32.1% strongly agreed with the influence of media on their faith and spiritual growth.
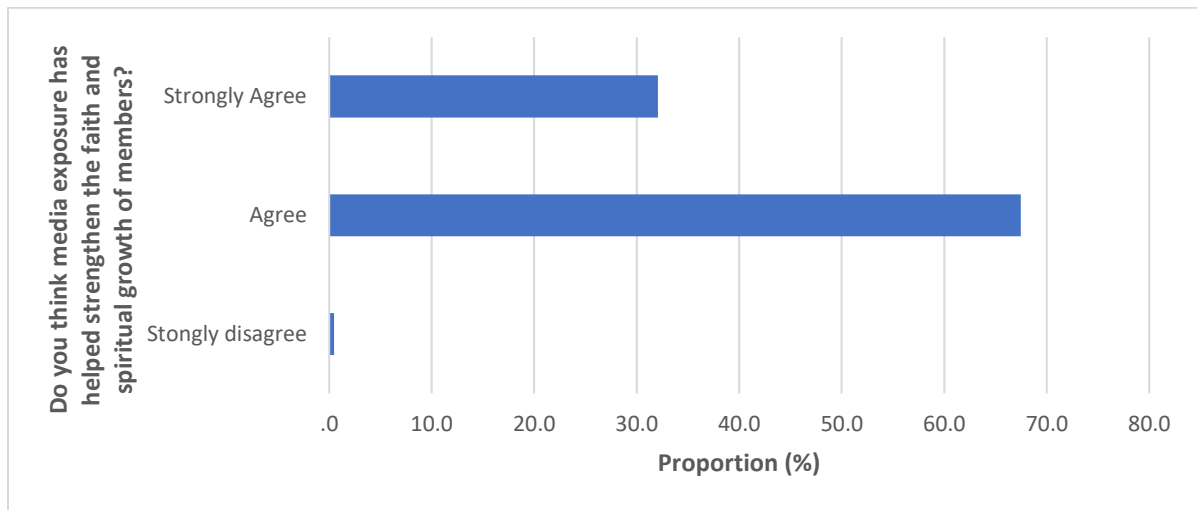
Figure 4.10: Distribution of responses to the influence of media content on spiritual growth.

Figure 4.11 shows the distribution of the responses of the respondents to the influence of media content on their decision to participate in church activities. The results revealed that the majority of the respondents, with a proportion of 67.5%, agreed, while 32.1% of the respondents strongly agreed. Figure 4.12 shows the distribution of the responses of the respondents to the overall impact of church media content on church growth. The results revealed that the majority of the respondents, with a proportion of 66.5%, suggested that it has a positive influence, while 33.5% suggested that it had a very positive influence on church growth. Therefore, the majority of the respondents agree that church media has a very positive influence on their spiritual growth and faith.
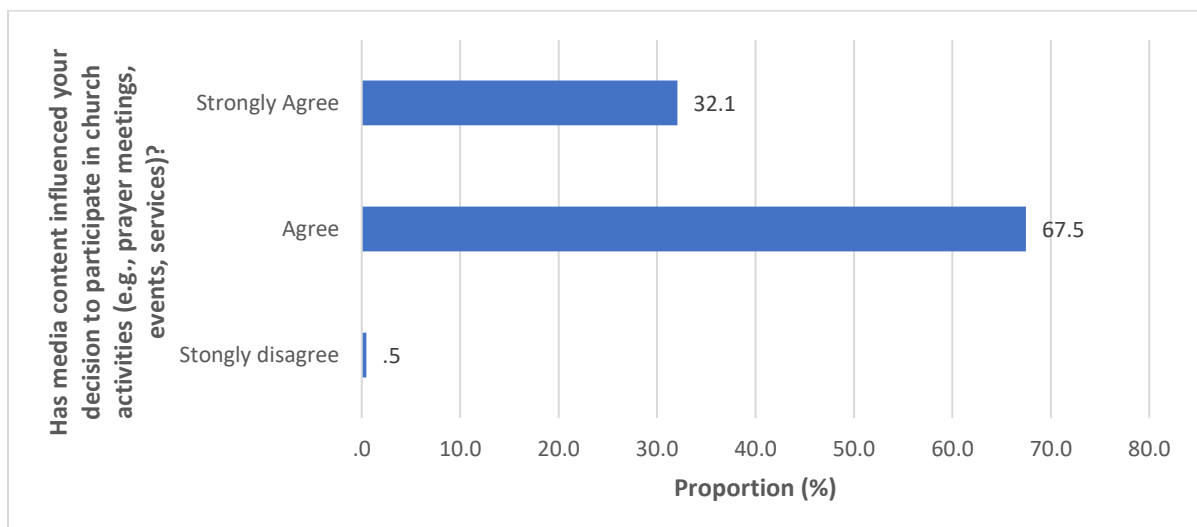
Figure 4.11: Distribution of the responses to the influence of church media on the decision to participate in church activities.
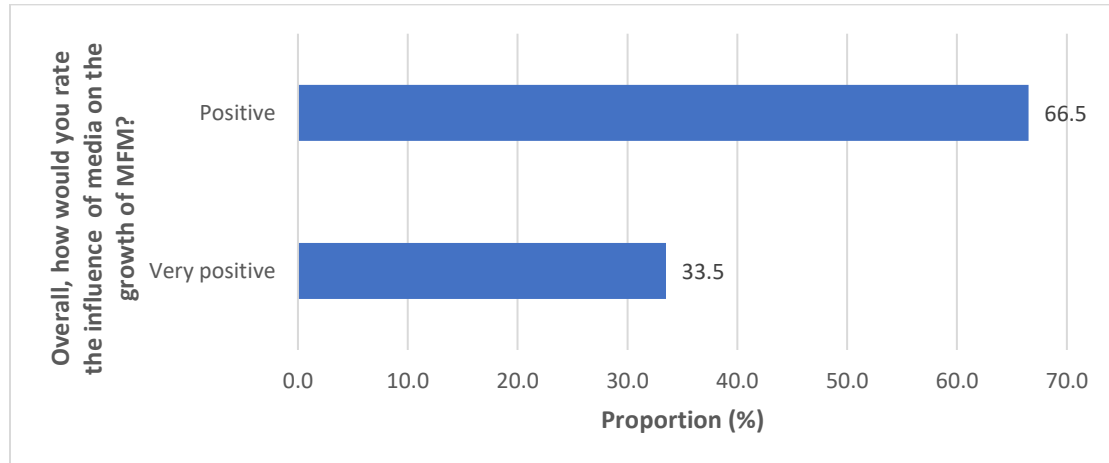

Figure 4.12: Distribution of responses to the overall influence of media on church growth.

The respondents have rated the use of media by the church to be an effective strategy in enhancing the growth of the church and also the increase of religious commitment.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the findings of this paper on the perception of the sociological exploration of the media and Church growth, this research recommends the following measures to remedy the lapses and also to strengthen some of the activities in the use of media in the church. The recommendations given could be used as templates for other branches of the Church and also by other religious denominations outside MFM. They include the following:

Need for intensive follow-up and discipleship: There is a need for the church to intensify and empower the follow-up and visitation committees to know their members in person and also identify their challenges. From this study, it was observed that more members have spent less than one year when compared to members who have spent up to 6-10 years in the church. This shows that members

who are not up to a year are there by invitation or for deliverance, and as soon as they get their problems solved and prayers answered, they disappear to other denominations. Therefore, discipleship and discipling of new members and converts should be intensified as early as possible so that their membership can be retained[xxxv]. In addition, follow-up and discipleship should also be intensified with the online or digital church members so that their membership can be retained.

Re-evaluation of messages and sermons: Messages and sermon contents should be evaluated by the church from time to time to check for repetitions, deviations and possible heretical teachings, which may be a reason for the decrease in the church's membership. From this research, it was discovered that only a few persons are members of the church between 6-10 years, which shows that there is a lapse, which may be from the sermon contents and the nature of church activities. Consequently, the message and worship contents should be critically looked into since these are one basic characteristic that is unique in religious gatherings when compared to other social meetings.

Need to reinstate emphasis on social inclusivism: With the prevalence and increase in the use of social media, it has affected the low subscription to other media platforms, such as the use of radio and print media. Even though the use of social media is quite effective and cost efficient, it is a notable truth that there are some church members who, for one reason or another other may not have a smartphone, needless to say an Android or non-smart phone to connect to live streaming of church programmes. On this account, the radio and paper printing of sermons and church programmes should still be encouraged and given the same recognition and importance as social media so that everyone is carried along and no one sees him/herself as being inferior to others.

6. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that the most popularly adopted media were social media, satellite/cable television, church mobile applications and church websites. The popularity of this media content may have been influenced mainly by the popularity

of mobile devices. These devices have increased access to information from remote locations, thereby fostering an environment that promotes effective information dissemination channels for its members. The study concluded that the use of mobile devices necessitated weekly accessibility to media content by members, especially via social media platforms. It was concluded that the use of media content improved the engagement of members of the church, thereby influencing their decision to attend church activities and their desire to join charitable efforts in the church. The study concluded that media content had a positive impact on the faith and spiritual growth of the members of MFM Prayer City.