

## University Students' Perception of WhatsApp-Based Religious Messages

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### **Abstract**

WhatsApp has been widely used to disseminate religious information but there is scant literature on users' reaction to religious messages on WhatsApp. This study therefore investigated how university students perceive WhatsApp-based religious messages (WBRM). The study was driven by the Uses and Gratifications theory and the Perception theory. It adopted a mixed-method research design to gather relevant data. Through stratification and purposive sampling techniques, 350 students of the University of Ibadan were selected to participate in the survey while 24 students were selected to participate in four different sessions of focus group discussion (FGD). Results showed that most of the students (71%) paid little or no attention to these messages as they did not feel comfortable with long, threatening, instructive religious messages. Nonetheless, findings implied that university students had a favourable disposition towards the use of WhatsApp for religious purposes. A majority perceived the messages as educative, informative, persuasive and useful. The study also found that students' perception of WhatsApp-based religious messages and benefits derived from WBRM have a strong positive and

significant influence on each other. Producers of WhatsApp-based religious messages, targeting young people, should keep the messages short, ensure that the messages are authentic and avoid fear appeal.

**Keywords:** WhatsApp, religious information, university students, perception, social media

## **Introduction**

WhatsApp is one of the social media platforms used by many people, across all races, sexes and religions. The name WhatsApp is a pun on the phrase What's Up. WhatsApp, a mobile instant messaging (MIM) application, was founded in 2009 by Jan Koum and Brian Acton, former employees of Yahoo. WhatsApp joined Facebook in 2014, but operates as a separate app with a laser focus on building a messaging service that works fast and reliably anywhere in the world. WhatsApp supports sending and receiving information using a variety of media such as texts, photos, videos, documents, and location, as well as voice calls ([www.whatsapp.com/about](http://www.whatsapp.com/about)). An end-to-end encryption is built into the app to secure users' conversations.

WhatsApp Messenger is popular in many parts of the world. More than 2 billion people in over 180 countries use WhatsApp to communicate anytime and anywhere ([www.whatsapp.com/about](http://www.whatsapp.com/about)). WhatsApp is reported to be the third most-used social platform globally, the most popular messaging app in the world, and the most-used social media platform in Nigeria (Digital, 2020). With WhatsApp messenger, communication through mobile phones has become easier, faster and cheaper (Yeboah & Ewur, 2014). WhatsApp is popular because it promotes information and knowledge sharing; information is exchanged instantly and rapidly (Mistar & Embi, 2016; Onampally & Martin, 2018). The application is often used for socialisation, educational, business, health, political and religious purposes among others.

WhatsApp provides a digital platform for spiritual opportunities, evangelism and discipleship. Religious messages on

WhatsApp may be text-based, audio based, picture-based, or multimedia-based. The messages can be shared through chats, status updates, profile pictures, and broadcasts. Forms of religious messages that are often exchanged/shared among individuals or groups include holy scriptures, sermons, prayers, music, and inspirational words/images.

Globally, the issue of religion is a very sensitive one and the improper communication of religion can lead to religious crisis. While research has revealed the positive impact of social media on religious belief and practice (White, Tella & Ampofo, 2016), scholars have also affirmed the contribution of social media to religious intolerance and conflicts (Kalliny, Kalliny & Saran, 2019). This study has therefore become necessary in view of the growing concern over religious intolerance and religious issues often expressed via social media (Atwell, 2018).

Many individuals and religious groups freely share religious messages on WhatsApp both with people who share their religious beliefs and with people who do not share them. This may cause communication and relationship breakdown among people due to differences in the perception of such messages by individuals. Thus, the main thrust of this study is to investigate how people especially students feel when they receive religious posts on WhatsApp. This is with a view to exploring how to effectively propagate religious faith on WhatsApp without causing communication or relationship breakdown among users.

There is a vast body of research on the use of WhatsApp in the non religious sector. Such studies have investigated the versatility of WhatsApp and its edge over traditional short message service (SMS) (Church & Oliveira, 2013), its relationship building capacity as a social networking platform (O'Hara, Massimi, Harper, Rubens & Morris, 2014), its effectiveness as a platform for viral marketing of consumer goods (Shashikala & Mahapatro, 2015; Yu & Kamarulzaman, 2016; Priyono, 2016) and its use among students as an educational platform (Musa, Azmi & Ismail, 2015; Nurman & Setianas, 2017). The few existing studies on religion and the social media have not paid much attention to the use of WhatsApp. They have focused on the Internet, Facebook

and Twitter, and most of the works are not situated in the Nigerian context. Such studies include Kale and Kamineni (2003); Chiluwa (2008); Hvass (2011); White, et al. (2016); Hatab (2016) and Faimau and Behrens (2016).

Moreover, studies have indicated that WhatsApp is popular among university students (Ahad & Lim 2014; Devi & Tevera, 2014; Yeboah & Ewur, 2014; Shashikala & Mahapatro (2015); Gasaymeh, 2017; Laninhun & Amadi, 2019). Students have attributed their heavy use of WhatsApp to its ease of use/access, speed, real-time messaging, simple text format, capacity for unlimited number of messages, and low data cost (Ahad & Lim, 2014; Laninhun & Amadi, 2019). Although literature is replete with studies on students' use and perception of WhatsApp as a learning tool not much research has been done on the use of WhatsApp for religious purposes among students. This study therefore fills a gap in the social media and religion literature by investigating university students' perception of WhatsApp based religious messages.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do university students respond to WhatsApp based religious messages?
2. How do university students perceive WhatsApp based religious messages?
3. What benefits do university students derive from WhatsApp based religious messages?
4. Is there any association between university students' perception of WhatsApp-based religious messages and benefits derived from the messages?

### **WhatsApp: Its Perception and Usage**

Quite a number of studies have investigated the use of WhatsApp and how it is perceived. For instance, Gasaymeh (2017) carried out a cross-sectional study to investigate the use of WhatsApp for personal and educational purposes among first year students of a university in Jordan. The study also examined their perceptions of the formal integration of WhatsApp into their education. The

results showed that the use of WhatsApp was common among participants. Students use WhatsApp for personal and social purposes on a daily basis. The participants perceived the integration of WhatsApp into their education to be easy, fun, and useful. They had positive feelings and intentions about the possible use of WhatsApp in their formal learning. Similar findings on students' perceptions of the use of WhatsApp in the educational process have been reported in different parts of the world such as South Africa (Bere, 2013); Malaysia (Malecela, 2016; Mistar & Embi, 2016); Hong Kong (So, 2016); Nigeria (Akintola, Bello & Daramola, 2016); India (Kant, 2018) and Indonesia (Warman, 2018). Results suggested that students' perception of WhatsApp as a learning tool and students' behaviour towards this application were all at the high level.

Pang and Woo (2020) did a systematic review of empirical research on WhatsApp studies published between 2009 and 2019 with a view to determining the role of WhatsApp in civic and political engagement. Analysis revealed that WhatsApp is used to participate in collective actions that directly contribute to the visibility of a movement. Some of such frontline engagement involves creating online content for the cause or movement, as well as spreading and participating in reciprocal conversations that emerge from the content. WhatsApp is also used in passive facilitation which refers to actions that support movements indirectly. This includes sharing and forwarding through WhatsApp, content created by others. WhatsApp is also used in a relational sense; it is used as a platform to foster a sense of collective identity, togetherness and eventually, shaping individual's identification with the issue and movement. On the whole, the review showed that across empirical studies, WhatsApp is used for mobilisation, advocacy, coordination of activities, as well as for informal and 'de-politicised' conversations.

Ahad and Lim's (2014) online survey examined the domestication of WhatsApp among undergraduates of Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Results showed how students perceive WhatsApp as a 'convenient' communication application in their everyday lives. The study found that WhatsApp use benefits the

undergraduates in terms of discussing and sharing information related to study matters, apart from their everyday communications with families, friends and relatives. It also highlighted the challenges of WhatsApp use by young people. Some of the critical issues arising from the frequent use of WhatsApp included addictive-like behaviours such as distractions and exposure to unregulated messages or information.

Church and Oliveria (2013) explored motives and perceptions of WhatsApp usage and how messaging practices differ between WhatsApp and traditional SMS. Data were gathered in Spain through interviews and online survey. WhatsApp was perceived to be more immediate and “supports more social, natural interactions thus leading to higher frequencies of chatting, planning/coordination and group communication when compared to SMS” (p.360).

Although the general perception of WhatsApp was a very positive one, participants identified some problems with WhatsApp, closely tied to certain additional information WhatsApp provides to users. For example, WhatsApp provides status information like when a user is online and when a user last accessed the application. Revealing one’s last access time was seen as the biggest privacy concern. SMS was seen as more privacy preserving, more formal and generally more reliable. Some participants also expressed concerns over having to deal with too many messages in WhatsApp.

The usage and effect of WhatsApp were investigated by Kumar and Sharma (2016). The online survey assessed the demographics of users, use of WhatsApp options, intensity of use, and its impact on the social and private lives of users in northern India. The majority of the respondents believed that WhatsApp improved their relationship with friends, and that WhatsApp is not harmful to them. Also, gender did not affect its use. The study submitted that WhatsApp is becoming a popular tool for marketing communications among business owners and politicians in India.

Moreover, Shashikala and Mahapatro (2015) examined the effectiveness of viral marketing in the era of mobile messenger apps with special reference to WhatsApp. The survey conducted

among undergraduate and postgraduate students (age 20- 30) in Bangalore, India revealed that WhatsApp is the largest used social messenger with 94% of respondents using it, and more than 75% of the students using it daily. Further, frequency of use of WhatsApp was found to be strongly associated with age whereas no such association was found with gender. Buying behaviour was also strongly and positively associated with frequency of use of WhatsApp.

Aravindh and Baratwaj (2016) also conducted a study on the use of WhatsApp in the Coimbatore District of India. The study revealed that users of ages 17 to 20 are in the majority (about 53%) while users between ages 21 and 24 are in the next majority. It also revealed that there are more male users (54%) than female users (46%) of WhatsApp. The study concluded that dominant WhatsApp users are young people between the ages of 16 and 20 years.

This review is a reflection of the existing body of literature on WhatsApp. There is dearth of literature on WhatsApp and religion. Most of the works on WhatsApp have been situated in the non-religious sector and have focused largely on WhatsApp usage and its perception among the youth, students in particular; not much attention has been paid to the use of WhatsApp for religious purposes, and this is the gap in knowledge that this study sought to fill.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on two theories: the Uses and Gratifications theory and the Perception theory.

### **The Uses and Gratifications Theory**

Uses and gratifications theory is an old communication theory that has found new uses in the study of social media (Musa, Azmi & Ismail, 2015). It is a user/audience-centred theory expanded by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch in 1974. Quan-Haase (2012) discussed three central tenets of the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) approach that distinguishes it from other approaches in mass communication and journalism and makes it relevant to the study of social media. They are as follows:

1. Conceptualization of the audience: Instead of viewing the mass audience as passive and neutral, it is conceived of as actively participating in its own media choices and engaged in content selection, evaluation, and dissemination. The U&G approach distinguishes between media preferences by specific social groups, such as infants, kids, youths, and seniors.
2. Focus on what people do: The focus is on what people do with the media and how the media become relevant in their everyday life, instead of assuming that all consumers engage with the media in the same manner (citing Lazarsfeld, 1964).
3. Media gratifications sought and obtained: The term “media gratifications” refers to the personal needs that a medium can fulfil. Key is the distinction between those gratifications sought prior to employing the medium for the first time and those that are obtained after having adopted the medium (citing Haas, 1973).

The U & G theory can therefore be used to explain the use of new media from the perspective of the individual user, rather than a structural perspective of medium effects. At the core of the theory is the element of motivation, as motivations inform the ways users participate as well as their expectations from the process of participation (Rubin, 2009 cited by Pang & Woo, 2020). People use social media to meet specific needs. The platforms can be used for gratifying social and religious communication needs (Ruggiero, 2000 cited by Onampally & Martin, 2018). It is therefore assumed that users would seek and obtain gratification through WhatsApp. The U & G theory is considered suitable for this research as the study investigates students’ perceived usefulness of WhatsApp based religious messages. It also explores the motivations for utilising religious messages posted or shared through WhatsApp.

### **The Perception Theory**

Perception theory is one of the “minimally powerful media” theories that are concerned with how people make sense out of media information. The theory was propounded by Berelson and Steiner (1964). Perception is a complex cognitive process by which people select, organise and interpret sensory stimulation into a

meaningful picture of the world (Folarin, 1998; Jobber, 2004). It is how we gather and interpret information from the world around us (Perreault & McCarthy, 2005).

Perception is highly individualistic. It is formed by an individual as a result of the information one chooses to expose oneself to, the way one chooses to interpret them, and for how long one chooses to retain them, all depending on one's past history and previous exposure to similar information. The individualistic tendency of perception makes it difficult to predict the ability of another person to interpret one's message the way one intends it as the same situation/stimuli may produce very different reactions and behaviours (Amodu, 2006). Perception is influenced by a wide range of individual factors such as experience, emotionality, expectations, personal preferences as well as by current status and current physiological processes. Perception can be influenced in either a positive or negative direction (Démuth, 2013).

Although people are constantly bombarded by stimuli such as religious posts on WhatsApp, yet they may not make sense out of them. They tend to be selective in what they see and hear. In other words, individuals perceive what they need or expect to perceive (Amodu, 2006). This occurs because people apply the selective process which according to Folarin (1998) consists of selective exposure, selective attention, selective perception, and selective retention.

Selective exposure is concerned with the way humans deliberately expose themselves to selective media information that “caters to their own interests, confirms their beliefs, and boosts their ego, while avoiding those that are contrary to their own predispositions and attack their self-image” (Folarin, 1998, p.63). The selective attention process is concerned with the relative concentration that the human brain deploys to diverse impulses from the sensory organs at a given moment. Since the rate of transmission of the information from the sensory organs is much faster than the brain can interpret at the same time, the brain selects which information to attend to at any given moment in order to avoid disorderliness.

Selective perception is concerned with the meaning an individual makes out of the attention given to a media message that he or she is exposed to. People tend to screen out or modify ideas, messages and information that conflict with previously learned attitudes and beliefs.

The selective retention process deals with the process of storing media messages in the brain for recall, use or reuse at a later time. People tend to remember only what they choose or want to remember.

Perception is very important because it affects how consumers receive and process messages and how they make decisions based on the messages received (Laninhun and Olajide, 2014). Based on the perception theory, this study examines how university students attend to and perceive religious messages posted on WhatsApp.

## **Method**

The study adopted the mixed method research design. It employed the survey and focus group discussion (FGD) methods of research in gathering quantitative and qualitative data from undergraduate and postgraduate students of the University of Ibadan.

The students of the university are from diverse - socio economic and ethnø religious backgrounds. In the University of Ibadan, each student practises his or her religious faith freely on campus (<http://ui.edu.ng/History>). This is line with Section 38(1) of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution which provides that every person shall beentitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief.

The stratified and purposive sampling techniques were adopted in selecting 350 students for the survey. The students were first stratified based on their halls of residence. Afterwards, respondents were selected from each stratum (hall of residence) using purposive sampling technique. Only active WhatsApp users who were exposed to religious posts were selected for the survey. The sample which was drawn from all the 13 halls of residence on the main campus of the university consisted of 250 undergraduate students (25 chosen from each of the ten undergraduate halls) and

100 postgraduate students (fifty students selected from the largest postgraduate hall and twenty-five students selected from each of the other two postgraduate halls).

Twenty-four male and female students were purposively selected to participate in the focus group discussions (FGD). There were four focus groups: the first group comprised six undergraduate Christians; the second group was made up of six undergraduate Muslims; the third comprised six postgraduate Muslims, while the fourth had six postgraduate Christians. Only students who exposed themselves to religious posts on WhatsApp were selected for the FGD.

A questionnaire and focus group discussion guide were the major instruments used in data gathering. The reliability of the questionnaire was determined by using the Cronbach Alpha method. The reliability coefficient of 0.74 was realised indicating that the instrument was reliable.

Out of the 350 copies of the questionnaire that were distributed in the halls of residence, 333 copies were returned and 315 (90%) were found useable for the study. Four sessions of the FGD were held at different locations in the academic area of the campus after the questionnaire administration. The discussions were recorded and transcribed for ease of analysis. While the quantitative data were analysed using frequency count and percentages, Spearman's correlation as well as Mann-Whitney U test, qualitative data were analysed using the explanation-building method.

### **Ethical Consideration**

The consent of each student was sought before participation because of the sensitive nature of the study as not everyone is favourably disposed to baring personal views on religious matters.

### **Results and Discussion**

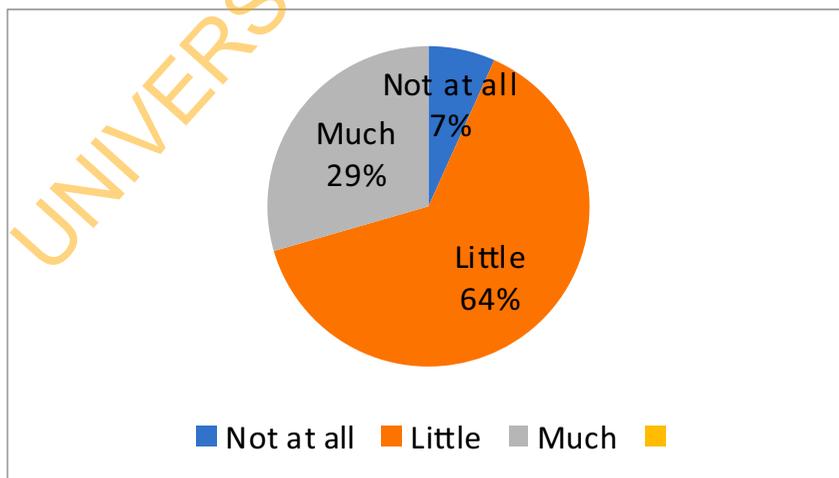
#### **Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

Demographic analysis indicates that more male views are represented in the survey as a majority of the students were male

208(66%) and the remaining were female 107(34%). Also, a majority of the respondents 253 (80.3%) were Christians while 55 (17.5%) were Muslims, and 7 (2.2%) professed to be African traditional religion practitioners, freethinkers or atheists. Some of the respondents 76 (24.1%) did not belong to any religious group on WhatsApp while a majority 231(73.3%) were members of religious groups on WhatsApp. As expected, most of the respondents were young people below 26 years of age 247(78.4%); only four (1.3%) were above 35 years. Many of the studies on WhatsApp usage have also focused on young people under the age of 30 years (Shashikala & Mahapatro, 2015; Kumar & Sharma, 2016; Batra, 2016; and Aravindh & Baratwaj, 2016).

**RQ 1: How do university students respond to WhatsApp-based religious messages?**

Respondents were first asked to state how often they received WhatsApp-based religious messages (WBRM) and how much attention they pay to WBRM before exploring their reaction to these messages. A majority of the students 262 (83.1%) said that they received WBRM quite often, 36 (11.4%) received sometimes; only 17 (5.4%) rarely received WBRM. Results further show that although students received WBRM regularly, most of them (71%) pay little or no attention to these messages; only 29% pay much attention to religious posts on WhatsApp (Figure 1).



**Fig.1: How much attention students pay to WhatsApp-based religious messages**

Findings on university students' response to WBRM are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: How students respond to WhatsApp-based Religious Messages**

Response	N=315				
	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
Ignore them	73 (23.2)	59 (18.7)	115 (36.5)	38 (12.1)	15 (4.8)
Delete them	28 (8.9)	20 (6.3)	54 (17.1)	105 (33.3)	87 (27.6)
Forward them	16 (5.1)	32 (10.2)	92 (29.2)	105 (33.3)	55 (17.5)
Read them	33 (10.5)	94 (29.8)	145 (46.0)	23 (7.3)	13 (4.1)
Listen to them	24 (7.6)	47 (14.9)	135 (42.9)	69 (21.9)	24 (7.6)
View the picture	45 (14.3)	87 (27.6)	111 (35.2)	42 (13.3)	15 (4.8)
Watch the video	33 (10.5)	52 (16.5)	101 (32.1)	82 (26.0)	32 (10.2)

Table 1 shows the actions taken by the respondents when they receive religious messages on WhatsApp. A majority of the students do expose themselves to religious posts by reading them (86.3%); viewing the pictures (77.1%); listening to audios (65.4%); and watching the videos (59.1%). However, most of them (78.4%) usually ignore the posts; they do not act on them and more than half (50.8%) do not usually forward them. Nevertheless, only a few (15.2 %) often delete them.

Findings from the Focus Group Discussions also buttress the findings from the survey. Largely, the students pay little attention to religious posts on WhatsApp. This, according to one of the participants, is because “They are stereotyped, erroneous and too long; the introductions are not catchy, and they are received at times when one is busy”. Participants also explained that audio messages are ignored if they do not have captions to tell the subject of the contents to the students. This perhaps is because students do not want to take the risk of losing their data on irrelevant downloads. It was also discovered that the Muslim students’ reactions to religious messages on WhatsApp are determined largely by the sources of the messages. They seemed to be more influenced by the personality of the sender of the message and the perceived credibility of the source than the Christian students. One of the Muslim undergraduates said, “I try to check for the source...” and another Muslim postgraduate student noted that, “Personality matters. I trust messages when they come from certain persons whom I know to be good and upright”.

Moreover, the inclusion of fear appeal in a religious message makes students ignore such message or delete it, and this reaction cuts across both Christian and Muslim undergraduate and postgraduate students. Fear appeal is counterproductive; it irritates the students. For instance, a Muslim postgraduate student remarked, “I glance through, then I ignore if it contains instruction telling me to share it or face certain consequences”. Similarly, a Christian postgraduate student said, “If it has fear factor, I don’t attend to it”.

The study further investigated university students’ frequency of forwarding WBRM. When asked how often students forward WBRM, a majority of the students 118 (37.5%) indicated that they rarely forwarded WBRM; 60 (19%) never forwarded them, 91 (28.9%) forwarded them sometimes, while only 37 (11.8%) forwarded them often.

Moreover, a majority of the students who have forwarded WBRM claimed they did so to correct and counsel people (182;

57.8%), to show that they care (134; 42.6%). Also, many of the students considered forwarding WBRM as a safe (142; 45.1%), cheap (109; 34.6%), or trendy way to share their faith with others (97; 30.7%). Only a few forwarded WBRM because the sender instructed them to do so (39; 19.7%), to attract the blessings attached to doing it (62; 19.7%) or to avoid curses attached to not doing it (39; 12.3%).

The likelihood that a message will be forwarded is slim if the sender instructs the recipient to send it, or if he attaches a consequent “curse or blessing” to doing so. This was the position of all the students who participated in the FGD. “Such attached conditions are not in line with the teachings of the Bible or the Quran”, they opined. Also, for the Muslim students, caution is exercised in forwarding religious posts whose messages they could not defend. In the words of one of them (a postgraduate male student), “I do not forward religious posts, especially to those who are more knowledgeable than me so they will not query my source”. He considered himself not very knowledgeable in religious matters and thus disqualified himself from sending religious posts. This was not so among the Christian students. “Spiritual knowledge/competence” was not considered a prerequisite for gaining competence to forward religious posts.

Nonetheless, findings suggest that the level of students’ commitment to their religion seemed to influence their response to WBRM as some students considered sharing of religious messages as a spiritual obligation. For instance, one of the Muslim female participants remarked, “I feel like I am not doing my duty if I receive an authenticated message and I do not forward it”.

Furthermore, findings revealed the rate at which students produce WBRM. A majority of the survey respondents 126 (40%) said they have never produced WBRM, some 95 (30.2%) have rarely produced them and 63 (20%) have sometimes produced them; only 21 (6.6%) produced them often. Similarly, a majority of the FGD participants seldom produced religious messages.

Ahad and Lim’s (2014) study also revealed students’ information sharing behaviour on WhatsApp. Findings showed that a majority of the undergraduates (67.54%) do tend to disseminate

information only if they believed it to be useful, relevant or true. Some of the respondents (21%) do not disseminate the information at all. Reasons as to why students did not want to share/forward information or media contents freely were attributed to their feeling not interested to disseminate, due to privacy concerns and most importantly, they were hesitant to share information that might be unregulated or from an untrusted source.

Findings of the present study support the postulation of the perception theory. Specifically, the findings confirmed that consumers of media messages (WhatsApp users) deliberately expose themselves and attend only to religious information that caters to their interests, confirms their beliefs, and boosts their ego, while avoiding those that are contrary to their predispositions and attack their self-image (Folarin, 1998). For instance, the students ignore religious posts that have fear appeal because they do not confirm their beliefs.

**RQ 2: How do university students perceive WhatsApp -based religious messages?**

**Table 2: How Students Perceive WhatsApp-based religious messages**

Perception	N=315				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	I can't say	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
WBRM are:	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
Annoying	36 (11.4)	41 (13.0)	83 (26.3)	103 (32.7)	37 (11.7)
Entertaining	10 (3.2)	66 (21.0)	92 (29.2)	100 (31.7)	31 (9.8)
Appealing	21 (6.7)	117 (37.1)	106 (33.7)	31 (9.8)	19 (6.0)
Disturbing	31 (9.8)	68 (21.6)	77 (24.4)	91 (28.9)	30 (9.5)
Boring	25 (7.9)	46 (14.6)	100 (31.7)	97 (30.8)	32 (10.2)
Irritating	26 (8.3)	37 (11.7)	75 (23.8)	113 (35.9)	45 (14.3)
Distracting	24 (7.6)	54 (17.1)	74 (23.5)	106 (33.7)	37 (11.7)
Provoking	30 (9.5)	60 (19.0)	67 (21.3)	98 (31.1)	40 (12.7)
Educative	40 (12.7)	158 (50.2)	72 (22.9)	17 (5.4)	13 (4.1)
Informative	53 (16.8)	160 (50.8)	65 (20.6)	14 (4.4)	14 (4.4)

Interruptive	21 (6.7)	62 (19.7)	125 (39.7)	69 (21.9)	24 (7.6)
Persuasive	35 (11.1)	137 (43.5)	71 (22.5)	48 (15.2)	9 (2.9)
Inciting	22 (7.0)	106 (33.7)	106 (33.7)	45 (14.3)	16 (5.1)

Table 2 indicates that a majority of the students perceived WBRM as informative 213 (67.6%), educative 198 (62.9%), persuasive/inspiring 172 (54.6%) and appealing 138 (43.8%). Many did not consider them irritating 158 (50.2%), distracting (143; 45.4%), provoking (138; 45.5%), annoying (140; 44.4%), or boring (129; 41%). However, many see them as inciting 128 (40.7%) and only a few do not consider them disturbing (38.4%) or interruptive (29.5%). The fact that many of the students could not decide on how they specifically perceive WBRM as reflected in Table 2 is an indication of indifference as many of them (64%) had claimed not to pay much attention to religious posts on WhatsApp (Figure 1). Findings reported by Ahad and Lim (2014) are inconsistent with these results as only some of the undergraduates in their study agreed that WhatsApp was somewhat disruptive to their study (31.61%). A majority of the respondents disagreed that the use of WhatsApp was disruptive to their social and physical activities.

Findings from the FGD further revealed that the perceptions of the students were sometimes affected by their mood, and again, for the Muslim students, the source of the message mattered much. In the words of a Muslim undergraduate, “My impression depends on the sender of the message”. While some of the participants perceive religious posts as a show-off, many see them as evangelistic, advantageous, helpful, beneficial, funny and welcoming. A Muslim participant remarked, “I welcome all religious posts sent to me on Fridays”. It seems that with the pervasiveness of the religious messages, many students are no longer bothered about their dislikes in them. One of the postgraduate students remarked, “They (religious messages) were annoying at some point, but I am not worried about them anymore”.

Mann-Whitney test was further applied to determine if there was any difference between postgraduate and undergraduate students’ perception of WBRM. Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Mann-Whitney Test to compare perception of WhatsApp-based religious messages between postgraduate and undergraduate students

<b>Ranks</b>				
	Level of Education	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Perception of WBRM	Postgraduate	78	162.19	12650.50
	Undergraduate	231	152.57	35244.50
	Total	309		

The table of ranks above shows mean ranks of perception of WBRM of postgraduates (mean rank = 162.19) and undergraduates (mean rank = 152.57). There appeared to be a difference in mean rank and this was further tested statistically to determine significance.

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	Perception of WBRM
Mann-Whitney U	8448.500
Wilcoxon W	35244.500
Z	-.853
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.394

a. Grouping Variable:  
Level of Education

**Median**

Level of Education	Perception of WBRM
Postgraduate	3.00
Undergraduate	3.00
Total	3.00

Distributions of perception of WBRM for postgraduates and undergraduates were similar, as assessed by visual inspection of the population pyramid generated for these variables. Results indicate

that perception of WBRM was not statistically significantly different between postgraduates ( $Mdn = 3.00$ ) and undergraduates ( $Mdn = 3.00$ ):  $U = 8448.500$ ,  $z = -.853$ ,  $p = .394$ . Since the value of  $p$  calculated (i.e.  $p = 0.394$ ) is greater than the acceptable value of  $p$  (i.e.  $0.05$ ), it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between postgraduate and undergraduate students' perception of WhatsApp-based religious messages.

Results thus suggest that the level of education of the students does not affect their perception of WBRM; both undergraduate and postgraduate students have similar perception of WBRM. This result could be attributed to the closeness of the ages of the majority of the students in each group. A majority of the undergraduate students (125; 53.6%) are between ages 16 and 21 years while majority of the postgraduate students (32; 41%) are between the ages of 21 and 25 years. The worldview of young people within this age group (16-25) is likely to be similar, and this perhaps explains why they perceive WhatsApp-based religious messages the same way.

Findings of the FGD were also quite revealing. Participants who were members of religious groups on WhatsApp were found to be more positively disposed to the religious messages than non members. Members considered the groups as sacred as the offline groups, and messages from them were treasured. For instance, a Muslim postgraduate student said she belonged to "Holy Matrimony Group" on WhatsApp where religious messages to help build happy homes are shared. Also, many of the Christian students said their churches and fellowships (on campus) have WhatsApp groups to which they were added and from which they received God's word to improve their lives. It can therefore be deduced from the findings that most of the university students are favourably disposed towards religious posts on WhatsApp.

**RQ 3: What benefits do university students derive from WhatsApp-based religious messages?**

Respondents were first asked to indicate the extent to which they consider WBRM useful. Majority of the students, 194 (61.6%), considered them useful to a large extent while 89 (28.3%) considered them useful to a little extent. Only 24 (7.6%) considered them of no use at all. Students who belonged to religious groups on WhatsApp considered the messages more useful than non-members.

In order to determine the specific benefits that university students derive from WBRM, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements which sought to investigate their perceived usefulness of the messages. Findings are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Respondents' perceived usefulness of WhatsApp based religious messages**

STATEMENTS	N=315				
	SA	A	CS	D	SD
Usefulness of WBRM:	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
They increase my knowledge of my religion.	51 (16.2)	130 (41.3)	53 (16.8)	49 (15.6)	20 (6.3)
They increase my knowledge of other people's religion.	25 (7.9)	110 (34.9)	83 (26.3)	57 (18.1)	25 (7.9)
They give me insight on how to solve life's problems.	38 (12.1)	117 (37.1)	72 (22.9)	50 (15.9)	23 (7.3)
They make me feel good and blessed.	29 (9.2)	135 (42.9)	71 (22.5)	42 (13.3)	17 (5.4)
I receive miracles through them.	21 (6.7)	48 (15.2)	90 (28.6)	89 (28.3)	43 (13.7)
They entertain me.	10 (3.2)	82 (26.0)	76 (24.1)	96 (30.5)	30 (9.5)
They strengthen my religious beliefs.	45 (14.3)	128 (40.6)	56 (17.8)	47 (14.9)	24 (7.6)
They influence my perception of my religious faith.	46 (14.6)	127 (40.3)	58 (18.4)	46 (14.6)	23 (7.3)
They change my religious attitude/behaviour.	23 (7.3)	90 (28.6)	92 (29.2)	63 (20.0)	31 (9.8)
They make me feel loved/cared for by others.	24 (7.6)	89 (28.3)	96 (30.5)	67 (21.3)	22 (7.0)
They teach me a new religious faith or practice	19 (6.0)	89 (28.3)	81 (25.7)	79 (25.1)	29 (9.2)

of my religion.					
They teach me a new faith or practice of other people's religion.	20 (6.3)	63 (20.0)	81 (25.7)	101 (32.1)	34 (10.8)

Findings revealed specific ways in which respondents have benefited from WhatsApp based religious messages. From many of the students, WBRM have increased their knowledge of their religion (181; 57.5%) and their knowledge of other people's religion (135; 42.8%); strengthened their religious beliefs (173; 54.9%), influenced how they perceive their faith (173; 54.9%), and given them insight on how to solve their life's problems (155; 49.2%). Some said WBRM have helped change their religious attitudes/behaviour (173; 35.9%), and made them feel loved and cared for (113; 35.9%). However, most of the students did not consider WBRM as a source of miracle (132; 42%), as a source of entertainment (126; 39.5%), or as a platform to teach them a new practice or faith of other religions (135; 42.9%).

The FGD findings on students' perceived usefulness of WBRM also corroborated the findings from the survey. FGD participants considered WBRM as useful, howbeit, the extent of their usefulness varied from one individual to another. It was observed that the undergraduates seemed to find religious posts more beneficial and exciting to them than did the postgraduates, and the Muslim students seemed to find it more beneficial than their Christian counterparts, especially when the source was considered credible. Moreover, students who are members of religious groups on WhatsApp seemed to have greater need of the messages than students who are not members. So, they considered WBRM more beneficial than the non-members. According to the participants, they consume the religious messages to edify their souls and to edify the souls of others who are members of the groups, and those who are not. Thus, when they receive religious messages on WhatsApp, they find them useful, either for themselves or to be forwarded to others.

Findings from this research agree with the assumptions of the uses and gratifications theory. They buttress the assumption

that the audience is active and its media use is goal-oriented (West & Turner, 2010)). The findings revealed that the audience of WhatsApp-based religious messages use the messages to achieve specific purposes (increase their knowledge of their religion, solve problems, change their religious attitudes, feel loved and cared for, and many other purposes). This implies that the audience (students) use the WhatsApp platform in a goal-oriented manner. They actively participate in their own media choices and engage in content selection, evaluation, and dissemination (Quan Haase, 2012).

**RQ4: Is there any association between university students' perception of WhatsApp-based religious messages and benefits derived from the messages?**

A Spearman's correlation test was run to assess the association between university students' perception of WBRM and the benefits derived from the messages. Table 5 presents the results.

**Table 5: Spearman's correlation between university students' perception of WBRM and usefulness of WBRM**

			Perception of WBRM	Usefulness of WBRM
Spearman's rho	Perception of WBRM	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.706**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	309	301
	Usefulness of WBRM	Correlation Coefficient	.706**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	301	307

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 shows there was a statistically significant relationship between university students' perception of WBRM and the usefulness of WBRM ( $p < .001$ ). There was a strong positive correlation between perception of WBRM and usefulness of WBRM:  $r_s(299) = .706, p < .001$ . This implies that the students' perception of WhatsApp based religious messages and benefits derived from WBRM have a strong positive and significant influence on each other. In other words, the more positive the

perception of WBRM, the more benefits derived from the messages or vice versa.

It can be deduced from the results that university students have a favourable disposition towards the use of WhatsApp for religious purposes. Findings thus lend credence to previous works on the use of WhatsApp for educational purposes. Studies have showed that university students had positive perceptions of its use to support teaching and learning in higher education. They perceive WhatsApp as a useful learning tool and convenient communication application in their everyday lives (Ahad and Lim, 2014; Mistar and Embi, 2016; So, 2016; Gasaymeh, 2017; Dweikat, 2018; and Warman, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

This study has showed that university students actively choose the religious content that satisfies their needs. Findings have revealed that although university students frequently receive religious messages on WhatsApp, most of them do not attend to these messages and they seldom forward, share or produce them. Many of them do not feel comfortable with long, threatening, instructive religious messages. They also seem to be cautious of dubious sources. Nonetheless, a majority perceive the messages as educative, informative and useful. Many claimed to have benefited from these messages. Benefits derived include increased knowledge of one's religion and other people's religion; insights on how to solve life's problems; strengthening of religious beliefs; and improved perception of one's faith. Also, the social needs of students are met as the messages sometimes make them feel loved and cared for.

There was no significant difference in the perception of undergraduate and postgraduate students. Expectedly, membership of religious group on WhatsApp seemed to have played a role in shaping the perception of the respondents as those who belonged to WhatsApp religious groups were more favourably disposed towards religious posts and found them more beneficial than non members. The study further affirmed that there is an association between perception of WBRM and gratifications obtained from

religious messages posted on WhatsApp. Findings thus uphold the tenets of the uses and gratifications approach as well as the perception theory.

In order to disseminate religious information more effectively on WhatsApp, it is recommended that producers of WhatsApp religious messages should avoid posts which are lengthy and messages which employ the fear appeal. There is also the need to include captions/titles of audio messages when necessary and disclose or identify sources of messages. Respondents claimed they would only appreciate, share or forward messages with credible sources. Moreover, this study was carried out among students of the University of Ibadan, a public institution in south west Nigeria. It can be replicated in faith-based universities across the country. This will throw more light on how students in higher institutions perceive WhatsApp based religious messages. Also, it is possible that the level of spirituality/religiosity of students would influence their perception of WhatsApp based religious messages. For instance, a highly religious person may have a different opinion from a 'nominal' Christian or Muslim about religious messages on WhatsApp. This factor may be explored further in future studies.

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