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# AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF CHRISTIAN INTERNET RADIO STATIONS IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF RHEMA EXPRESS RADIO

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## ABSTRACT

*The development of the internet has threatened radio's dominance. This has prompted the development of internet broadcasting as a way for radio stations to increase listenership. The aim of this study was to find out the audience perception of Christian Internet Radio Stations in Nigeria; using Rhema Express Radio as a basis for the study. The survey method was adopted to conduct the research using purposive sampling method. E-questionnaire was used as the instrument for gathering data for the research. The survey was open to anyone on Rhema Express Radio Facebookfanpage who wanted to participate, however only 186 people participated out of a sample size of 212 representing a response rate of 87.74%. The findings of the study showed that majority of the respondents are indifferent with the position that they could easily relate to programmes aired on Rhema Express Radio. Also, findings indicated that most respondents disagreed with the statement that programmes presented on Rhema Express Radio are presented with professionalism. The result of the data analysis revealed that respondents are neutral on the timing of programmes aired on Rhema Express Radio. However, the result showed that respondents were indifferent on the clarity of audio signal from the internet radio station. Hence, the study recommends that internet radio stations, especially those with the Christian genre, give more attention to audience research, as a way of self evaluation to improve on its effectiveness in order to provide necessary healthy competition, capable of propelling higher level of effectiveness in internet radio broadcasting.*

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**Keywords: Audience, Radio, Internet Broadcasting, Nigeria, Christian, Rhema Express Radio.**

## Introduction

Radio has since Guglielmo Marconi's invention of the wireless telegraph in 1901, developed into a powerful medium for information dissemination and entertainment. Radio plays an integral role in providing its listener with news, music and other programmes, while also acting as a voice that represents them as well as the society at large (Mogambi, 2016). Radio is one of the most effective and cheapest means of communication especially in developing and under-developed countries, with almost every household owing or having access to radio either through a radio set or through mobile phones (Myers, 2009). However, in the last two decades, as newer forms of media such as internet, social media amongst others have emerged; they have challenged radio's once-dominant position as a widely used medium that reaches large and heterogeneous audiences (Sherwood, 2015).

Radio has, in turn, adapted to this challenge by embracing these newer forms of media to reach and engage with its audiences (Oliveira, Stachyra& Starkey, 2014). Sherwood (2015) affirms that radio today is an evolving medium that is adapting to new media and communication technologies to spread its signals farther and more efficiently to a larger audience. As a result, Internet radio emerged in 1993 when Carl Malamud launched "Internet Talk Radio" (Wikipedia, 2022). Access to the internet is the power house of an internet radio. It determines the signal strength, how many listeners an internet radio can have, the quality of audio and speed of transmission.

Another trend that has emerged as part of the evolution of radio broadcasting is 'Narrowcasting'. Narrowcasting is a type of broadcasting targeting a narrowly defined area or audience. The aim most times is to establish relevance to a well defined sub-set of a population. The organisation under review for this study is Rhema Express radio and it narrowcasts to the youths in the Christian community worldwide. Rhema Express radio was a Christian internet radio station established on the 28th of September, 2013. It was born out of a desire to create a highly interesting and entertaining radio station promoting godly values and expressions based on the Christian faith for the youths (Rhema Express Radio, 2014).
Though a plethora of studies have investigated audience perception of terrestrial and digital radio, scant attention has been paid to investigating the audience perception of niche internet radio stations. Hence, this study set out to investigate audience perception of Christian internet radio stations in Nigeria using Rhema Express Radio as a basis of the study, to find out what the audience of Rhema Express Radio think of radio Christian broadcasting via the internet, what their disposition is to the content being broadcast, the signal strength of the broadcast, and the accessibility of the station.

## Objectives of Study

1. To investigate the audience perception of programmes aired on Rhema Express Radio
2. To find out audience perception of programs presentation on Rhema Express Radio
3. To evaluate the audience perception of the programming of Rhema Express Radio
4. To determine the audience perception of the signal reception of Rhema Express Radio

**Media Audiences**

Every message is targeted at people, and those who receive such media messages or content are known as the audience. Audience according to McQuail (2005), can be defined in different and overlapping ways; by people (as when a medium is characterised by an appeal to certain age group, gender, political belief, or income category); by a particular type of medium or channel involved (technology and organisation combined); by the content of its messages (genres, subject matter, styles); and time (as when one speaks of daytime or primetime audience, or an audience that is fleeting and short term compared with one that endures). McQuail (2005) defined audience as all those reached by particular media content or media channels. The audience can also exist as an imagined target or intended group of receivers.

However, new media technologies are creating changes in audiences' nature and the way older media are being used. It has resulted in the growing interactivity found in media. The one-way transmission model has become a two-way or even multiple-way model (Aganbi, 2014; Ahmad, 2016;Berry, 2014; Ranjendran and Thesinghraja, 2014; Martinez, 2016; Sherwood, 2015). The user of the media now has more control and can generate content as well. This change is going in the opposite direction of what one used to witness in the history of media audiences. It seems that there is equilibrium in the sender-receiver power relationship.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the Uses and Gratification Theory, which is useful to help examine how media audiences actively seek specific media to satisfy specific needs. The theory was proposed by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in 1974 (Anaeto, Onabajo,&Osifeso; 2008). A core assumption of the uses and gratification theory is that media users are goal-oriented and play an active role in selecting and using the media to best fulfill their individual needs (Mogambi, 2016). The uses and gratification theory assumes that the media users have various choices to satisfy their needs, and each medium can have different functions. It looks at how people use the media to gratify a range of needs – including the need for information, education, personal identity, integration, social interaction, entertainment, and escapism (Wikipedia, 2020). It also shifts the emphasis of media studies from a media effects perspective to an audience perspective. It is built on a user/audience-centered approach.

According to Redmond (2000), the approach emphasizes the audience's choice by assessing their reasons for using a particular media while disregarding others and the various gratifications obtained from the media, based on individual, social and psychological requirements. It provides the framework for understanding the processes by which media participants seek information or content selectively to commensurate with their needs or to satisfy their interests. The theory provides a basis for analysing underlying perspectives in the appropriation of various mass media and how they enhance mass communication and influence what people do with them.

The Uses and Gratification theory assumes that the media users have various choices to satisfy their needs, and each medium can have different functions. It looks at how people use the media to gratify a range of needs – including the need for information, education, personal identity, integration, social interaction, entertainment, and escapism. This theory fits into this

study to explain how the audience listen and use the information they get on Rhema Express Radio and how their perception of the station influences their listenership.

**Empirical Review**

Salem Communications conducted a study titled "Christian Teaching and Talk Listeners revealed" in 2014. The study surveyed 350 Salem Teach and Talk listeners of Christian formatted talk stations owned by Salem Communications and others. The aim of the study was to determine who the audiences were, their reason for listening and how they listened. The study employed qualitative research design. Findings revealed that majority of listeners of Christian teaching and talk stations were under the age of 55. The study also revealed that the younger listeners of Christian teaching and talk stations listen as long as the older listeners. The study also revealed that while internet broadcasting continues to grow, it does not diminish the value of conventional radio. Findings showed that majority of listeners, listen an average of 6.2 hours to conventional radio, which is double of the 3.2 hours spent listening on a desktop or laptop computer. Listeners also report listening less than an hour on a tablet device, and less than an hour on a Smartphone.

In another study, the Britain Office of Communications (Ofcom), conducted a research on the audience perception of religious programmes and how it should be regulated. The 2005 study, employed the survey method to determine the perceptions of Christian and non-Christian listeners on religious programmes. The study showed that respondents had little interest in religious broadcasting, criticizing the traditional programming such as 'Songs of Praise' as insular and uninformative (Ofcom, 2005). Findings also attributed the poor scheduling of religious broadcasts as a critical factor affecting their overall performance. Also, findings indicated that religious broadcasts were critiqued for not being sufficiently entertaining which was largely linked to lack of resources and talents.

**Methodology**

***Study Group***

186 Facebook fans of Rhema Express Radio participated in this study. The respondents comprised of 54.03% (n=101) male and 45.7% (n=85) female. Further breakdown of respondents based on location showed that, 90.86% (n=169) of respondents were from Nigeria, 2.15% (n=4)of respondents were from Ghana, 3.76% (n=7)of respondents were from the U.S.A, 2.15% (n=4)of respondents were from the U.K, while 1.08% (n=2)of respondents were from Canada. As at the time this study, the total number of Facebook fans of Rhema Express Radio was 451.

***Study Design***

Descriptive survey was conducted using Facebook fans of Rhema Express Radio purposively selected by the researchers. Also, e-questionnaires were distributed electronically using Survey Monkey.

***Instrument of data gathering***

The researchers adopted e-questionnaire structured using close-ended questions to elicit the various opinions of the respondents on the subject matter. To ensure validity of instrument, the face validity was done by submitting a drafted copy of the research instrument to a senior academic in mass communication that went through it and vetted the contents. She

confirmed that the instrument was valid enough to measure the opinions that would correctly answer the research questions for the study.

***Administration of instrument***

Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants. The e-questionnaire was distributed via Rhema Express Radio Facebook page. Participants filled the e-questionnaire after which the researchers received their response automatically at the back-end of the platform used.

***Sample***

To select the sample size, Taro Yamane formula was used. The calculation is presented below:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:
n = sample size
N = population size
e = sampling error
^ = raised to the power of

$$n = \frac{451}{1 + 451\ (0.05)^2}$$

Therefore n (Sample size) = 211.98 ~ 212

Thus, the sample size for the study is 212.
However, 186 e-questionnaires were filled, representing a response rate of 87.7%.

***Method of Analysis***

Data elicited based on research questions are presented using the Likert scale and analyzed using the SPSS statistical tool. Responses are either accepted or rejected based on the value of the weighted mean for each response. A mean of 3.51 and above is accepted, a mean of 3.50to 2.50 is indifferent, while a mean of 2.49 and below is rejected.

**Presentation of Data**

The age range of the respondents was between 13 – 65+ years and above. Only 6.9% made up the population of respondents that fall within the age bracket of 13-17 years of age (*n*=13), majority of the respondents were from the age bracket of 18-24 (*n*= 129), while 17.20% made up the number of respondents that fall within the age bracket of 25-34 (*n*= 32), 1.61% made up the number of respondents that fall within the age bracket of 35-44 (*n*=3), 3.76% made up the number of respondents that fall within the age bracket of 45-54 (*n*=7), 0.54% made up the number of respondents that fall within the age bracket of 55-64 (*n*=1) and the age range of 65+ (*n*=1, 0.54%).

Table 1: Audience perception of Rhema Express Radio

| Statements | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Mean | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I can easily relate to programmes aired on Rhema Express Radio | 114 | 80 | 4 | 2.72 | Indifferent |
| The programmes aired on Rhema Express Radio are presented with professionalism | 93 | 80 | 13 | 2.43 | Disagreed |
| The programmes aired on Rhema Express Radio are aired at the appropriate time | 102 | 78 | 6 | 2.51 | Indifferent |
| Rhema Express Radio has clear broadcast signal | 105 | 70 | 13 | 2.51 | Indifferent |

Source: Researchers' Field Survey

Table 1 showed that 114 respondents agreed with the statement that they could easily relate with the pogrammes aired on Rhema Express Radio, 80were neutral, and only 4disagreed. The mean of 2.72implies that majority of the respondents were indifferent with the statement. Also, 93 respondents agreed that programmes aired on Rhema Express Radio were presented with professionalism, 80 were neutral, and 13 disagreed. The mean of 2.43implies that majority of the respondents rejected the statement that programmes aired on Rhema Express Radio were presented with professionalism.

Findings indicated that 102 respondents agreed with the statement that programmes aired on Rhema Express Radio are aired at the appropriate time, 78 were neutral, and 6 disagree. The mean of 2.51implies that majority of the respondents were indifferent with the statement that programmes aired on Rhema Express Radio are aired at the appropriate time.

The result showed that 105 respondents agreed with the statement that Rhema Express Radio has clear broadcast signal, 70 were neutral, and 13 disagreed with the statement. The mean of 2.51implies that majority of the respondents rejected the statement that that Rhema Express Radio has clear broadcast signal.

**Discussion of Findings**

The results of this study contradict those of Salem Communications (2014), which concluded that the majority of audiences for Christian-format programs consisted of older listeners. Instead, the majority of Rhema Express Radio's audience was made up of younger listeners between the ages of 18 and 24.

The result of analysis indicated that majority of the respondents are indifferent with the position that they could easily relate to programmesaired on Rhema Express Radio. Also, findings indicated that most respondents disagreed with the statement that programmes presented on Rhema Express Radio are presented with professionalism.

The result of the data analysis revealed that respondents are neutral on the timing of programmes aired on Rhema Express Radio.However, the result showed that respondents were indifferent on the clarity of audio signal from the internet radio station.

With these result therefore, it is obvious that the audience perception of Rhema Express Radio is not positive and internet radio station founders need to embrace audience perception surveys so as to improve their broadcast performance and evade the risk of losing a sizeable number of audience who require better broadcast performance to become loyal listeners. The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of Ofcom (2005) which found that respondents had little interest in religious broadcasting.

**Conclusion**

The various results from this study established that audience perception of Rhema Express Radio is mostly neutral. Neutral responses may also form perception depending on the questions asked. If the question asked is positive and the response is neutral it could mean the respondent does not feel positively about the station but they are 'not that bad' or the respondent has no perception at all because they are not too exposed to the medium. This may explain the high percentage of neutral responses in the data presented.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made;

1. Christian Internet radio stations should give more attention to audience research as the need is rife in order to constantly feel the pulse of the audience, as this feedback mechanism is the salient thing needed to evaluate performance and improve effectiveness.
2. Since programmes are conceived, planed and presented to the audiences, the quality of such programmes and their technological output should be an aim to be attainted even by internet radio stations.
3. Also this study has its limitations as the study was conducted on one out of the numerous Christian internet radio stations that exist, hence, more research is recommended to be conducted, this time using two or more Christian internet radio broadcasting.

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