


Chapter 7

Technological Growth in Religious Organisations: Exploring Social Media Through System Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Membership growth is an important aspect in religious organisations. Yet, the manner in which several religious organisations attract their membership has changed due to the adoption and use of social media. This study explores how technological factors influence the growth of religious organisations during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. Using the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (SDA) membership data, the research employed system dynamics. The findings from the quantitative data showed that the commitment of church members, good computer skills, age, and availability of resources contributed to the successful use of social media towards church membership growth. In addition, the qualitative data reveals that online evangelism is key to the growth of religious organisations. The results of the findings conclude that the growth of religious organisations can be improved by intensifying the level of online evangelism, improving commitment from members and utilisation of multichannel social media.

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INTRODUCTION

Church membership growth is important in religious organisations as they execute the great commission of evangelising to the whole world. Due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the operations of religious organisations were affected as members could not physically gather to share the word of God, as before. However, the increase in the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has resulted in several technologies being deployed in different social and economic areas to assist in accomplishing various tasks. This usage of ICTs has benefitted users of religious organisations such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA) (Bolu, 2012; Matobobo & Bankole, 2020). It seems that the use of technology in religious organisations has changed the way leaders and members evangelise, thereby growing the organisation. Some models, such as the conversion model, have been developed to classify the growth of religious organisations (Hayward, 2002; Wilson, 2017). Many of these models focus on the group called enthusiasts, which are believed to be active for some time in the recruitment of new members, and then become inactive after a while. It has been noted that in many cases, churches recruit through friendship networks and personal contacts (Lie, 2018; Fred, 2015; Činčala, 2016). Due to the successful adoption and use of technologies, the recruitment of new members is no longer dependent on enthusiasts but also on ICTs such as social media (White et al., 2016). Prior research on social media in religious organisations has mainly focussed on the role of social media in church growth (Magezi, 2015; Kgatle, 2018; White et al., 2016). However, not many pieces of research have been done to explore holistically how technological growth variables (i.e., processes, issues, factors) in religious organisations influence one another. Therefore, this study explores how technological variables influence the growth of religious organisations using the SDA churches through the lens of system dynamics. The findings of this study will contribute to the existing literature by providing an insight into the influence of technological variables on the membership growth of religious organisations. Furthermore, the study anticipated to assist religious leaders in developing policies that contribute towards the utilisations of technologies toward church growth.

In this article, we briefly review the literature. Next, we discuss the research methodology. Then, we present the findings of the study. We subsequently discuss research findings; and then discuss some future directions for future work. Finally, we conclude the paper.

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