International Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research (IJAMR)
ISSN: 2643-9670
Vol. 8 Issue 11 November - 2024, Pages: 386-390

The influence of Social Media on Religions in Uganda

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ABSTRACT: *There is a decline in religion and religious beliefs especially with the rapid changes in technology and social media in particular. Whereas statistics show that the declines are evident in the developed countries, there is limited academic evidence about how social media makes individuals makes people discredit their religion. The binary and multinomial logistic regressions that follow test whether involvement and time spent on social media affect their religious beliefs and attitudes. From the above results, it was revealed that social media has two effects on religion and these effects are not perceived as positive by religious fanatics and those born and particularly raised before the advent of social media. With social media, it was revealed that the users are more likely to adopt multiple religions with a view of getting the 'feel' of the other religion for comparative purposes. Secondly, social media has led to a scenario where every aspect about religion (built on secrecy and metaphorical assertions) is analyzed by individuals with a view of either sinking users deep into religion or otherwise and in this case, the latter prevails especially amongst the female urban youths.*

Keywords: Social Media, Religions, Uganda

INTRODUCTION

Religion began to drastically diminish in the 20th century. Between 1970 and 2020, the number of religious people fell by 33% globally. The drop is more pronounced in the West. Between 1970 and 2018, the numbers fell by 71% in the U.S. and by 59% in Europe (Inglehart, 2021) though no such study has been carried out in Uganda. Since seeing this fall, theologians, historians, sociologists, and religious people themselves have been analyzing the data and coming up with a multitude of explanations to explain it.

Globally, religion was rapidly expanding at the start of the twenty-first century. The 9/11 attacks highlighted the influence of radical Islam, fundamentalism was a growing political force in the US, and the fall of communism had created a psychological void that was being filled by resurgent religion. There were rumors of a religious revival all around the world.

Although most high-income nations were becoming less religious, a research of spiritual trends in 49 countries with 60% of the world's population from 1981 to 2007 revealed that individuals had gotten more in 33 of the 49 countries (Norris and Inglehart, 2011). This analysis did not identify a worldwide comeback of religion. However, things have changed surprisingly quickly since 2007. The large bulk of these nations (43 out of 49) saw a decline in religious beliefs between 2007 and 2020. Although it is noticeable throughout the majority of the world, this drop in belief is especially pronounced in high-income nations (Inglehart, 2021).

People today have unheard-of access to novel concepts, viewpoints, and behaviors because to social media's explosive growth. Social media establishes a marketplace of ideas that promotes and makes knowledge sharing and exchange easier. Despite the fact that teenagers and young adults use social media the most, the numbers show that the difference in usage is only around 15%, or 87% for the first group and 72% for the second.

These new technologies might have unexpected consequences despite their popularity and usefulness. Other studies have revealed that Internet use may underlie deviant traits for teenagers (Wang et al. 2012) and that social media is cited as a contributing factor in divorce proceedings (Jansen et al., 2010), despite studies showing that recent technological advancements have accelerated the growth of the gambling and pornography industries. Numerous studies indicate that social media diverts people from certain religious or moral precepts, leading many of them to question religious views.

The present study aims to fill this research gap the created by the paucity of academic proof supporting this claim, particularly in the instance of Uganda. The following research questions were formulated in light of the aforementioned information.

Research Question 1: Does using social media affect users' choice for multiple religions?

Research Question 2: Does using social media make users to choose religious beliefs that run contrary to what their religious tradition dictates?

Whereas the latter the research question gauges respondents' varying levels of devotion to the conventional doctrines and practices of their respective faiths, the first research question, for analytical reasons, examines if social media users are

more likely to be religious pluralists and believe that all religions are essentially equal.

Theories explaining how technology influences Religious beliefs and practices

Even while religion still plays a big part in the lives of many emerging people, researchers have shown that their affiliation patterns and beliefs have changed significantly from those of past generations (Wuthnow, 2010). This has led to a discussion regarding the reasons behind the ongoing fall in religiosity in recent years.

Support for religious plurality is a significant component of these shifting trends. As a result, Wuthnow (2010) contends that in addition to being exposed to a wider variety of faiths, individuals are now more likely to be "spiritual tinkerers," combining elements of many different religions to create their own unique spirituality. Pearce and Lundquist (2011) also support this claim.

Applying the theory of Berger and Kellner (1974) and Berger and Luckmann (1967) can assist explain the earlier discoveries in light of the evolving religious and technical environments. In his more recent theory of pluralism, Berger (2014) contends that different perspectives on religion are a product of modernity. Berger (2014) asserts that the fundamental tenet of modernity is the constant expansion and multiplicity of human options, which in turn modify our perception of the world. According to him, "The human situation undergoes a tremendous transition from fate to choice as a result of modernization" (Berger 2014:5).

According to this viewpoint, the existence of several faiths does not inevitably result in a more competitive and powerful religious marketplace or a secular global order (Stark and Finke 2000). Instead, we anticipate and accept people's freedom of choice in a society that is becoming more and more pluralistic. This contemporary expectation allows for a religious mindset that is appropriately referred to be syncretistic as it enables individuals to select whatever religious rituals and beliefs they follow, while acknowledging the significance of any one religious tradition. To put it another way, the notion that a single religious tradition should control what its followers think or do is rejected. Rather, the contemporary culture supports the consumer's freedom to experiment with many religious doctrines and practices to determine which, if any, are effective over a certain time frame.

Few people would contest Berger's claim that the modernist enterprise promotes human autonomy and choice. However, how does technology contribute to the development of the contemporary mindset? According to Berger et al. (1974), technical changes are social processes that serve as modernization's catalysts and carriers. As such, the values ingrained in the technology we use are subjectively absorbed.

Humans therefore acquire "a problem-solving and fundamentally technical mindset which may carry over into the manner in which the person looks at politics, the teaching of his children, or the management of whatever psychological disorders he may be suffering with," according to Berger and his coauthors (Berger et al. 1974:30).

Of course, though, for technology to have these speculative consequences, human involvement is necessary. Technology by itself cannot support societal or religious transformations as an autonomous agent. As a result, there is a dialectical interaction between technology and its users, and it has been shown that technology affects customs and conventions.

Social scientists have only recently started to investigate the potential links between religion and technology, despite the fact that there has long been the possibility of applying these theories. According to Campbell (2010), despite the fact that many individuals use the Internet and religion on a daily basis, not many scholars have looked at the relationships between the two. However, the research that is available points to equivocal relationships between technology and religion. For example, Bobkowski (2008) discovered that Facebook users preferred offline environments to declare their religious identification and were reluctant to do so online.

The question at hand is whether social media truly introduces users to fresh viewpoints and ideas or if it isolates people and strengthens their preconceived notions. According to Wellman (2001), the Internet is the best way for people to expand their current social networks and fortify their bonds with one another. According to Wellman, social media's explosive expansion creates social capital and communication channels in ways that were before unthinkable. Although the precise extent of the impact has not been fully recorded, particularly in Uganda, it appears more plausible that social media has widespread detrimental impacts on religion given the tone and implications of the literature.

Data and Methods

This study makes use of panel data from three groups of people who were chosen from various locations: teenagers, adults from rural regions, and youths and adults from metropolitan areas. 384 children and 384 adults made up the first two groups, while 216 children and 271 adults made up the following two groups.

This methodology, which employs a deductive approach, asks respondents about their relative receptivity to different religions using three specific characteristics. While the second variable assesses if social media users can utilize the

information they get to embrace activities that go against their religion's established beliefs and practices, the first variable looks at whether social media users are more inclined to accept numerous religions. Social media users ought to be more accepting of different religions than non-users if Berger et al. (1974) are right when they say that technology is a pluralizing tool.

This article investigates if social media users are more likely to embrace pluralistic and contracting behaviors to their conventionally accepted religious practices by integrating these findings about technology and religion. The study used a binary and multinomial logistic regression to accomplish the specified goals.

The next binary and multinomial logistic regressions examine whether social media use and time spent have an impact on participants' religious attitudes and beliefs. Respondents are asked to choose the statement that most accurately reflects their stance on religious truth as the first dependent variable in this study.

Results

There are certain parallels and distinctions between social media users and non-users that should be noted. Across all waves, those who refrain from social media use often attend religious services on a somewhat regular basis. Upon examining the regression models, several noteworthy discoveries become apparent. Age and place of residence are not consistently statistically significant across models, as the data demonstrate. One's comprehension of religious truth claims is also significantly impacted by marital status, as

Table 1 Social Media and Religious pluralism

	Youth Urban	Adult Urban	Youth Rural	Urban Rural
Independent Variables	OR	OR	OR	OR
Age	0.738	0.769	0.712	0.745
Female	1.699**	1.688**	1.716**	1.691**
Education	0.924	0.936	0.932	0.941
Reported income	1.399	1.371	1.136	1.294
Married	0.577***	0.616***	0.587***	0.611***
Muslim	0.488***	0.622**	0.474***	0.627**
Catholic	0.611*	0.762	0.618*	0.779
Protestant	0.397***	0.599	0.344***	0.584
Social Media involvement	1.366*	1.424	—	—
Social Media time	—	—	1.026	0.996
N	384	384	216	271
Pseudo max-rescaled R^2	.422	.516	.471	.624

From the table above, it is evident that at s 5% SL, female users of social media (irrespective of age and residence) were more likely to adopt multiple religions as compared to the male users which was the same with married women (at a 1% SL). For Catholic users of social media, though differences are only significant at 10% SL, youths (both rural and urban) were likely to adopt two or more religions as compared to the adults yet these differences were more profound for Protestants at a 1% significance level.

Table 2 Social Media and discrediting religion

	Youth Urban	Adult Urban	Youth Rural	Urban Rural
Independent Variables	OR	OR	OR	OR
Age	1.325**	1.429**	1.811**	1.424**
Male	1.961**	1.364**	1.929**	1.028
Education	0.532**	0.338**	0.319**	0.311**
Reported income	0.211	0.067	0.088	0.018
Unmarried	0.622***	0.668***	0.620***	0.651***
Muslim	0.744**	0.017	0.161	0.051
Catholic	0.583**	0.198	0.411*	0.016

Protestant	0.944***	0.341*	0.591**	0.012
N	384	384	216	271
Pseudo max-rescaled R^2	.422	.516	.471	.624

Regarding discretization of religion, it was revealed that age (irrespective of the residence) was more likely to negatively affect religious beliefs and practices as catalyzed by social media usage. Secondly, it was revealed that males (except the rural adult males) were most likely to discredit their religions as a result of social media use and this was significant at a 5% significance level. Third, the unmarried individuals were most likely to be affected by social media use to discredit their traditional religious beliefs and practices. However, urban youths for all religions were most likely to discredit some of their traditional religious beliefs after getting addicted to social media.

Discussion and Conclusion

From the above results, it was revealed that social media has two effects on religion and these effects are not perceived as positive by religious fanatics and those born and particularly raised before the advent of social media. With social media, it was revealed that the users are more likely to adopt multiple religions with a view of getting the 'feel' of the other religion for comparative purposes and this would be consistent with the scholarly assertions of Berger et al., (1974) whose theory points to the fact that technology has the power to aid critical thinking and the desire to seek new adventures and religion is no exception. Secondly, social media has led to a scenario where every aspect about religion (built on secrecy and metaphorical assertions) is analyzed by individuals with a view of either sinking users deep into religion or otherwise and in this case, the latter prevails especially amongst the female urban youths. Though Inglehart (2021) study provides vague analyses of what this could be caused by, he hints that the decline in religion is all explained by changes in usage of social media by the different categories of the population, exactly what the current study investigated.

A number of challenges, like as misunderstandings, harassment, privacy concerns, and inaccurate information, make social media dangerous for religious practices and beliefs especially for female youths in urban areas. Misunderstandings and inefficient information flow are possible. The nuances of face-to-face interactions are absent from social media platforms, which makes it easier for messages to be misunderstood by members of a religious grouping. Inaccurate interpretations cause miscommunications within the community or misrepresent the beliefs and values of the religious institution for outsiders.

The possibility of cyberbullying and harassment is another problem. Whether from members of the religious community or other organizations, social media can occasionally act as breeding grounds for the spread of negative habits. It creates a hostile environment and negatively affects the mental health of those who participate, especially younger members of the congregation.

There is also the danger of false information spreading. Disinformation spreads quickly thanks to social media's quick information dissemination. Even inadvertently disseminating or being associated with the information seriously harms the religious institution's standing and trustworthiness in the neighborhood.

A more subtle but no less significant concern is an over-reliance on digital engagement. If online interactions take the place of in-person community development and physical presence, it dilutes the communal relationships that are essential to many religious organization encounters. The close relationship and sense of belonging that are fostered by in-person religious institution activities may be threatened by the dependence on social media.

It was also revealed that social media may endanger religious institution operations by encouraging their commercialization and materialistic focus. The religious institution's primary goal of promoting spiritual growth and serving the community was overshadowed by the emphasis on winning acceptance and disseminating material.

Seizures and other forms of control are impossible, but religious flows have no effect on the development of interfaith discourse on social media, which is essentially what these interactions are meant to be. Based on the work of Campbell (2003), it is important to note that disagreement is the primary justification for interfaith discussions in social media religious forums; once a dispute arises from a discussion of views, contact will stop. This is why the communication's goal is to introduce ourselves on the one hand and raise awareness of opposing views on the other, rather than to alter opinions and beliefs.

Thus, it is evident that religious communication not only does not diminish a person's religious fidelity but also fosters a certain level of religious awareness and lays the foundation for what Dr. Larijani refers to as "obtaining the lean and non-cultural religion" by posing issues that they may not have previously encountered and attempting to come up with a rational response.

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