

Measures to Enhance Use of Social Media Platforms among SDA Churches in Rachuonyo North Sub-County, Homa-Bay County, Kenya

Edward Odhiambo Omollo*, Regina Kinuthia, Martin Erixon Wamalwa

School of Social Sciences, Mount Kenya University, Thika, Kenya

Email: *omolloedwards@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The use of social media platforms has increasingly become a major platform for communication in the contemporary society including in enhancing worship among Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) churches. However, not all church members have access to the technologies. For these technologies to serve everyone equally, it is expected that all members should have the gadgets and knowhow of using them. It is not documented which measures could be put in place to enhance worship in SDA churches especially in remote areas like Rachuonyo North Sub-County, Homa-Bay County, Kenya. This study aimed at proposing appropriate measures to enhance worship in SDA churches using social media platforms in Rachuonyo North Sub-County, Homa Bay County, Kenya. The researcher used descriptive research design to obtain data from selected church members. The objective of the study was to assess the appropriate measures that would help enhance worship via social media platforms among SDA churches. Five SDA churches with a study population of 933 were randomly sampled. A sample of 200 respondents were issued with questionnaires, 60 participated in focus group discussions, and 20 church leaders were engaged in in-depth interviews resulting into a sample size of 280. Of the 200 questionnaires issued, 82% (n = 164) were received back, all invited participants to in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were present. Descriptive statistics were derived from quantitative data using SPSS version 24 and presented in pie-charts and bar charts while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic and content analysis. Organization of seminars, invitation of experts, subsidy on data costs, and installation of solar panels were identified as appropriate measures to enhance worship via social media platforms. The study recommends the church to act on enlightening members on use of social media platforms for worship through seminars, invitation of experts and taking lead while scientific community should investigate

effectiveness of the proposed measures in enhancing worship among SDA churches.

Keywords

Online Evangelism, Social Media Platforms, Transformation of Worship, SDA Church

1. Introduction

Since its inception in 1863, Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church currently has global membership of 21,912,161 (Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2022). There has been evidenced the use of social media platforms in the church over time (Bocala-Wiedemann, 2022; Matobobo & Bankole, 2021). These social media platforms have been shown to contribute largely during worship through various aspects like preaching and singing (Matobobo & Bankole, 2020; Williams-Smith & McMillan, 2022). Examples include the use of social media platforms in Poland and the UK, not only for religious purposes such as worship in SDA churches but also to disseminate information that assisted members in becoming aware of and reducing the transmission of COVID-19 (Kołodziejska, 2022b).

Several investigations have been carried out in Romania regarding the utilization of social media by SDA pastors, and the findings indicate an increasing demand and utilization of various platforms (Tudor & Herteliu, 2016). The SDA has also adopted the utilization of social media platforms as a means of implementing its companies for its establishments such as healthcare facilities, educational institutions, churches, food industries, and media centers (Halvorsen, 2021). With the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, the use of social media platforms to enhance worship in SDA churches has been also reported in Ukraine (Balaklytskyi, 2021). The widespread use of social media platforms in religious contexts around the world has proven to be extremely valuable in ensuring uninterrupted worship, despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, thereby emphasizing the importance and usefulness of such platforms (Kołodziejska, 2022a).

The use of social media platforms in worship has also been evidenced in the context of Africa including university setting in Nigeria (Chukwudi *et al.*, 2016) among other settings. On the other hand, there are claims that the platforms have not been fully utilized for worship in Nigeria among the SDA church setting; hence there is need and potential room for inclusion and exploitation (Amanze & Wogu, 2015). In addition to the above, there have been calls to enhance communication among SDA churches within Nigeria especially by leveraging digital platforms such as e-mails, websites and related social media platforms (Onuwah, 2013).

SDA church leaders in Ghana, a neighboring country in West Africa, have been urged to adopt social media platforms as a means of encouraging active

participation from congregants in church services and related events (Andor, 2016; Gyasi, 2020). However, this has not been without some criticism, as illustrated by a study conducted in Ghana which highlighted how certain traditionalists have taken to social media to expose Christian pastors as fraudulent (Kallinen, 2019). This is the perspective of individuals who are not interested in promoting Christianity, but rather in critiquing certain aspects of worship within certain churches in Ghana through their use of social media.

The contribution of social media platforms has also been acknowledged in a study on counseling of youths in churches in Malawi (Mkhutche, 2010). The detrimental effects of media on young people are often attributed to its usage, as the same media can also provide benefits to youths (Mkhutche, 2010).

Eastern Africa has observed the usage of social media platforms to carry out various church services within the SDA community. During the COVID-19 lockdown in Uganda, social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube were utilized to host various church programs (Mbivnjo *et al.*, 2021). The research demonstrated that church members were advised to conserve their internet data bundles for use during significant church events. Additionally, they were prompted to submit their tithes and offerings through mobile banking and money transfer systems, underscoring the improved integration of social media platforms and other internet-based technologies in conducting church activities.

In Tanzania, a study has revealed negative sides of using social media especially by the youths within SDA churches (Mlozi, 2018). The investigation indicated that some young people might share details about infidelity and arrange their weddings without parental involvement. Both studies demonstrate that utilizing social media platforms in the church context has both favorable and unfavorable consequences. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how church leaders perceive these platforms in terms of worship.

A recent study conducted in Nairobi County, Kenya, among young people in four SDA churches, revealed that they have widely adopted the utilization of social media platforms (Rwanda, 2018). Nonetheless, the study indicated that aside from social interactions among young people, there is limited exploitation of these platforms to generate income. Consequently, the report recommended that the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology utilize social media platforms to provide entrepreneurial training to young people. Comparable results were documented in a study analyzing the utilization of social media platforms to market church-related services like schools, healthcare facilities, and training institutes (Muchuki, 2017). The study findings have shown that the social media platforms have transcended the use in worship to other aspects of the church.

In Kisii County, a study showed that the use of a number of social media platforms within the cyberspace by SDA churches helped conduct various church related services (Nyakwara & Ichuloi, 2022). The services included discussing church matters, preaching, sharing information, and publicizing church activi-

ties to reach wider audience.

The use of social media platforms for worship has not gone without some challenges (Nyakina et al., 2018). As an illustration, social media platforms have undermined the long-held norms and modesty upheld in the church, as some female churchgoers post partially nude images on these platforms to lure potential partners (Nyakina et al., 2018). This highlights the need to monitor the utilization of social media platforms in the church context and establish regulations to govern the extent to which church members can use these platforms. This is particularly relevant when considering those designated for church purposes.

Considering the benefits of using social media platforms for enhancing worship in the church, this study assesses the measures that the church should put in place in order to enhance worship among SDA churches in Rachuonyo North Sub-County, Homa-Bay County, Kenya. To do so, the study uses both qualitative and quantitative research techniques to assess the measures that the church can use to enhance worship via social media platforms. The findings would help the church to identify appropriate measures to enhance worship via the platforms.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Area

This study was conducted among five SDA churches in Rachuonyo North Sub-County in Homa-Bay County located in Western Kenya (Figure 1). Majority of the residents of Rachuonyo North Sub-County are members of SDA

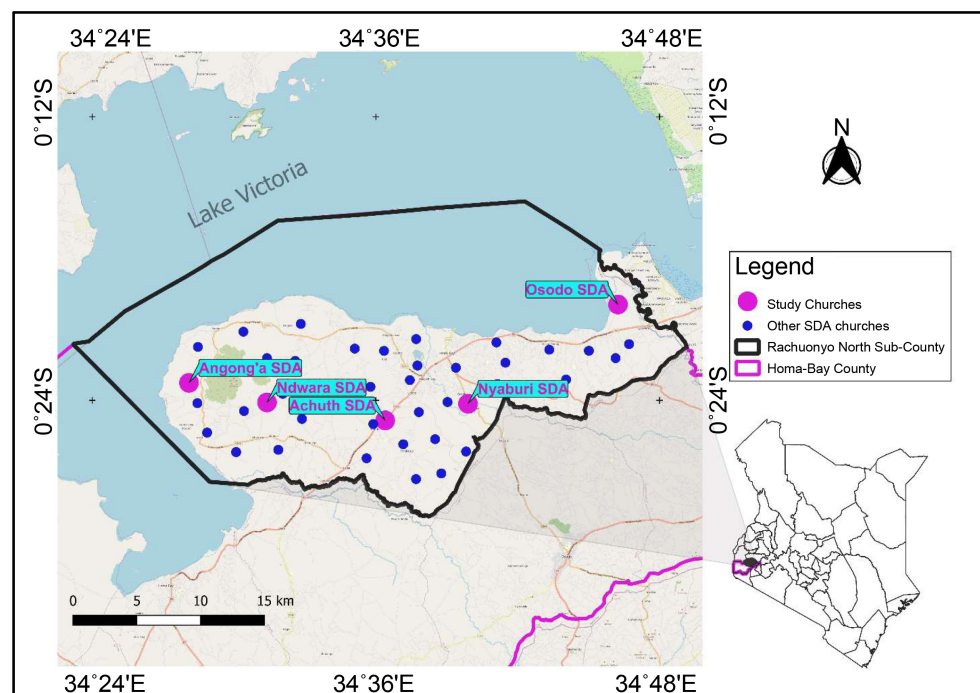


Figure 1. Study area map showing the distribution of all main churches and the selected five study SDA churches in Rachuonyo North Sub-County, Homa-Bay County, Kenya.

church. The first SDA church in Kenya was established in Gendia Mission Station which is located within the study area. The required sample size for the study was therefore obtainable for the SDA churches. The aim of the study was to investigate the measures to enhance use of social media platforms among SDA churches in Rachuonyo North Sub-County, Homa-Bay County, Kenya.

2.2. Research Design

The study used descriptive research design (Olsen & St George, 2004) to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data for analysis. This was an appropriate design for conducting research since both independent and dependent variables were already manifested in the population of the study. Subjects in the study, who were the church members and leaders, were already available in the field and the use of social media platforms in relaying church services has been evidenced among SDA churches (Nyakwara & Ichuloi, 2022).

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The five selected churches (Osodo, Nyaburi, Angong'a, Ndwaru, and Achuth) had a total population of 933 that was the study population. Out of this, 280 individuals were sampled for the study. Questionnaires were distributed to 40 members (10 male (above 35 years), 10 female (above 35 years), 10 male (below 35 years), and 10 female (below 35 years)) per church totaling to 200 questionnaires. On the other hand, 12 church group leaders (3 male (above 35 years), 3 female (above 35 years), 3 male (below 35 years), and 3 female (below 35 years)) per church were purposively sampled to participate in Focus Group Discussions. Lastly, four church leaders (two pastors, first elder, and treasurer) were purposively selected for in-depth interviews per church.

Quantitative data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics and results presented in pie charts, bar graphs and tables. Qualitative data, on the other hand, were analyzed thematically and presented in texts as quotations to corroborate the quantitative findings from questionnaires.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Response Rate

From the 200 questionnaires given out to the respondents, 82% ($n = 164$) were received back fully filled questionnaires and analyzed in this study. In addition to the 164 respondents in the questionnaires, there were also 20 participants engaged in five in-depth interviews and 60 church group leaders participated in five FGDs. The distribution of response rates per church is indicated in **Table 1**. Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) suggest that a response rate of 50% is sufficient for analysis and reporting, while a response rate of 60% is considered good and a response rate of 70% or higher is considered very good. Hence, the response rate for this study was classified as very good, as it reached 82% for questionnaires and 100% for both in-depth interviews and FGDs.

Table 1. Response rate per church for in-depth-interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires.

Church	Interview	FGD	Questionnaires		
			Issued	Received	Response
Angong'a	4	12	40	34	85.0%
Osodo	4	12	40	30	75.0%
Kanyamfwa	4	12	40	33	82.5%
Achuth	4	12	40	31	77.5%
Nyaburi	4	12	40	36	90.0%
Total	20	60	200	164	82.0%

3.2. Demographic Information

Out of the 164 respondents, 57.9% (n = 95) were female while 42.1% (n = 69) were male. On the other hand, 44.5% (n = 73) were over 35 years old and the rest 55.5% (n = 91) were below the age of 35 years. In terms of education, majority of the participants in the study had secondary education level 47.6% (n = 78), followed by primary education 37.2% (n = 61), college 10.4% (n = 17), and the minority had university education 4.9% (n = 8). These statistics suggested that the population was quite representative of typical church setting in the study area and captured both genders as well as age brackets and education cadres adequately.

3.3. Measures to Enhance Worship Using Social Media for Worship

The participants in the study were also asked to suggest some of the possible measures that could be used to mitigate the challenges that they faced in worship using social media platforms. The results of their findings are shown in **Figure 2**.

As depicted in **Figure 2**, majority 57.9% (n = 95) of the respondents were of the opinion that the church should hold more seminars in which to train church members on the appropriate use of the social media platforms for worship. That was followed by those who called for subsidization of data bundle costs 21.3% (n = 35). The researcher also sought opinion of the church leaders on the matter of possible mitigation measures against the challenges being faced in the use of social media platforms for worship. A church leader stated *“People should be sensitized via seminars on the use of social media platforms. Efforts should also be made to enhance network coverage in the region by service providers”*. On the other hand, another church leader suggested *“When the price of data bundles is lowered and power sources like solar panels installed then more people will be able to follow worship and other activities online”*.

When discussed by the church members during FGDs, a number of opinions were put forward. For instance, a participant highlighted that *“If the church can afford to set up Wi-Fi so that when we are within the church premises we can*

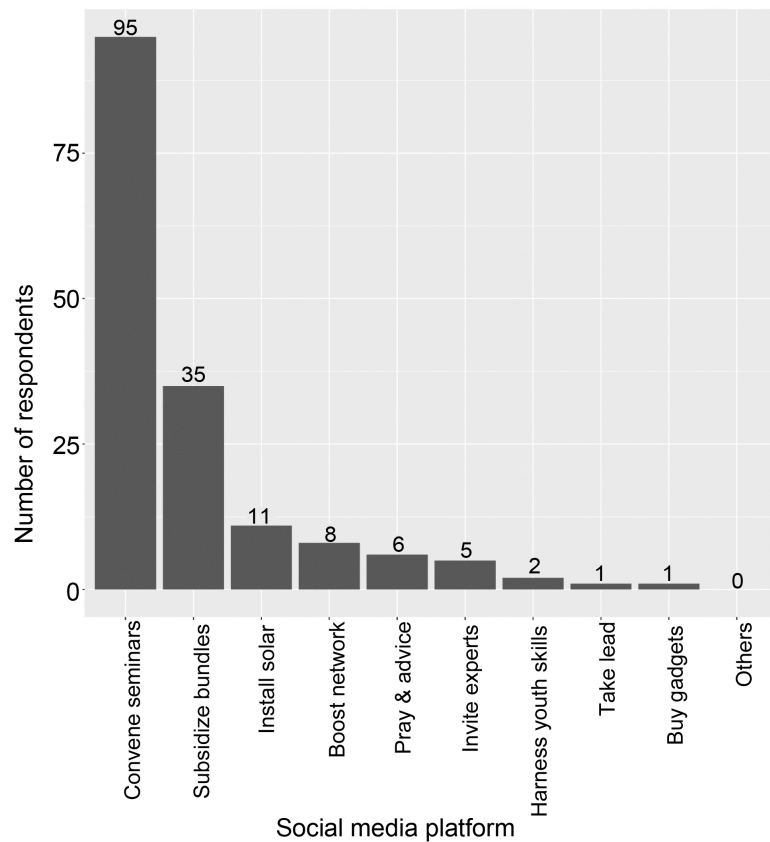


Figure 2. Measures to enhance worship via social media platforms.

access internet unabated. Otherwise, this bundle challenge is a big stumbling block and so each one of us has just to dig deeper into their pockets to buy bundles for anything they need online like training or meetings because this is service to God'. Another participant saw it that "Here electricity is quite unreliable especially during the rainy season. There can be power outage for even one week. So to me I would prefer that we have some stable power source like big solar panels installed in our church. This will help a great deal to have power in the phones so that we can access online information. We will only be worrying about bundles, that may also be resolved via church Wi-Fi". Based on these, the church members are calling upon the church to host a number of seminars in which to train them on the right use of social media platforms for worship. Additionally, the service providers in terms of data bundles, network coverage, and electricity should also boost their coverage in the region for better online presence by the church members for worship.

3.4. Important Themes from Discussions

Based on the discussions the researcher had with the church leaders, important thematic areas emerged including the theme of digital transformation, evangelism and outreach, cultural exchange and understanding, and rural development. These emerged from iterative analysis of the statements obtained from both

church group leaders who participated in the focus group discussions and the leaders engaged in the in-depth interviews. Here is a deeper exposition on each of these themes.

3.4.1. Digital Transformation

It emerged from the textual discussions with the leaders that there is real need for digital transformation. This means ensuring that the church membership understand and embrace the new digital platforms in order to effectively use them in spreading worship and other church related activities. This was shown by a church leader who mentioned that “I think we need to ensure that all our members are informed well about the technologies and guide them in embracing the technologies so that worship can be enhanced through such approaches” PI03. In addition to this, there was also a group leader who reiterated that there is dire need for the youths to be guided on the positive side of using the social media platforms for the benefit of worship enhancement and the church in general. The leader said “Our youths need some help with how best they can use the social media platforms to enhance worship and not engage in ungodly activities” PF18. These statements support the need for informed digital transformation that will ensure that the church is utilizing the social media platforms in a positive manner for the benefit of worship enhancement.

3.4.2. Evangelism and Outreach

Participants in the FGDs and in-depth interviews were also of the opinion that enhancement of worship in the church can be achieved through evangelism and outreach in which case they get to know better how to use the digital platforms to boost worship. A scenario was given by a member that when seminars are held and most of the activities are digitalized in social media platforms, evangelism and outreach get enhanced. The participant said that “When we hold seminars to enhance worship via social media platforms, many people follow and even watch later the proceedings. This is helpful in realizing better evangelism and outreach different to old days when if you miss a session, there is no chance or retrieving it” PF13. It is therefore noteworthy that the church is calling upon hosting of seminars as a way of enhancing worship and making both evangelism and outreach more efficient and effective via social media platforms. The platforms are therefore playing an important role in that regard. Via these seminars, the church members not only learn more about God but also gain global connections when digital platforms are used. For example, when a church session is broadcasted live from Bangladesh, someone in Madagascar will be able to follow the same provided they are tuned to the same channel or social media platform.

3.4.3. Cultural Exchange and Understanding

In order to enhance worship via social media platforms, it is important to ensure that every church member is made aware of cultural differences across communities so that when they are online, they get to know that there diverse universe of people on the platforms. They should also understand and appreciate

the differences and pitch their messages in a manner that do not negatively affect other users of the platforms. A church leader stated that “There are so many different opinions that people post on social media platforms. Now, one must be conscious enough of the diverging opinions embrace and appreciate them so that there is minimal friction and enhancement of worship is attained” PI07.

3.4.4. Rural Development

The researchers also noted that there is clear theme of rural development in terms of electricity and internet coverage needs. These emerged as important ingredients in ensuring that worship via social media platforms is enhanced. For the church members to use social media platforms effectively, they need to be connected to good internet and network as well as have adequate power in their digital gadgets. These normally come with growth in rural development hence the theme. As noted by one of the participants, “We are located in very remote parts of this country and some of the basic things like electricity and internet as well as network coverage are still very poorly distributed. These rural areas therefore need to be opened up in terms of infrastructure in order to support the church in embracing social media platforms for enhancement of worship” PI14. This kind of statement is therefore calling for the development agenda by the government and concerned institutions to ensure smooth running of worship via social media platforms.

The need to realize enhancement of worship via social media platforms in the SDA church is therefore pegged on a number of important themes. The items that are stated from the questionnaires such as holding of seminars, installation of electricity, reducing internet costs among others revolve around the key thematic areas such as digital transformation, evangelism and outreach, cultural exchange and understanding, and rural development. By bringing the key stakeholders on board such as the church and concerned ministries in the government, there could be better realization of enhanced use of social media platforms to enhance worship in the SDA churches within the study area.

4. Conclusion

To enhance worship by using social media platforms, SDA church members suggested that the church should hold seminars to sensitize them on the benefits of using the social media platforms. They also mentioned that the church should invite experts to train them on the appropriate use of the platforms. Further, they called for service providers to enhance coverage like network and power/electricity. On the other hand, the researchers managed to extract important themes from the discussions held with the church leaders which included digital transformation, evangelism and outreach, cultural exchange and understanding, and rural development. It would be important for further research to investigate which of the proposed mitigation measures would enhance the use of the social media platforms for worship among SDA churches in the study area and comparable settings.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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