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Evaluating eWOM in Social Media: Religious Leaders vs Religious Organizations: Functionality Approach

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Abstract

Social media have become considerable avenues for electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communication in religious organizations. Religious leaders use social media to share, interact and advertise church programs. The study seeks to evaluate the usage of social media, in particular, eWOM using the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA) as a case study. The researchers first interviewed 12 church leaders to evaluate the usage of social media among religious leaders. The researchers further collected data from various SDA church social media websites (e.g., Facebook). The results from religious leaders' data showed a high level of social media usage and sentiments in the area of advertising, promotion of church programs, communication and evangelism. Social media enabled religious leaders to create online closed communities for leaders, such as communities of elders, departmental leaders, the church board executive and district church communities where conversations and decision-making took place. There were challenges of circulation of improper content, diverting the purpose of the groups, irreverent use social media platforms and flooding of the groups with media content unrelated to the groups.

Keywords: eWOM, Social Media, Religious organizations, Religious Leaders, Sentiment Data Science and Analytics

1 Introduction

The advent of social media has enabled people to connect, develop, produce, and share media content at an increasing rate. Social media properties have helped in transforming consumers of media content into active participants by getting them involved in electronic word of mouth (eWOM) activities (Delafrooz, Rahmati and Abdi, 2019). eWOM is "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). eWOM has been extensively used in the marketing arena by consumers to search for information posted by previous customers, to make themselves comfortable before purchasing products or services (Erkan and Evans, 2016). Although the use of eWOM has proved to be beneficial in the marketing of goods and/or services, especially in profit-making organizations (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), very few research studies have studied eWOM in social media in the context of religious organizations such as churches. Some religious organizations use social media to reach their members and non-members (Kgatle, 2018). The use of eWOM could assist people seeking to join

religious organizations, as they can go through sentiments posted on church social media pages and get an idea of the church. A study conducted by Pew Research Center showed that about half of American adults have looked for a new religious congregation at some point in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2016). The research further showed that 83% of these Americans considered the quality of preaching when choosing a congregation (Pew Research Center, 2016). This shows that most people do not simply join congregations without assessing their services. Social media have features that could assist people to assess a church and its services by going through the comments posted on their social media platforms.

The use of social media, especially by religious leaders, has received little attention in academic research (Sircar and Rowley, 2020). Much social media research in religious organizations focuses on usage by members (Lee, 2018, Sircar and Rowley, 2020); few researchers have focused on religious leaders. Little is known about the level of social media usage by religious leaders and how religious leaders share practice and learn to hone and target their social media activities (Sircar and Rowley, 2020). This research seeks to encourage the usage of social media by leaders, as not using it may limit feedback from followers, delay decision-making processes, and lead to poor coordination of activities, a poor response rate among leaders and members and a decrease in church membership. This may cause situations that are not favorable for the religious community, as it is difficult to manage church operations and to serve members effectively, leading some members to backslide (Nyagwoka, 2016).

The current research evaluates eWOM in social media using data from religious leaders and various Facebook pages of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) churches. The research employed a qualitative approach and the SDA was used as the case study.

The rest of the article is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses the literature reviewed, Section 3 describes the research methodology, Section 4 presents the research findings, Section 5 discusses the findings, and finally, Section 6 concludes the paper.

2   Literature Review

2.1 Electronic Word of Mouth in Social Media

Wang and Rodgers (2010) classified eWOM sources into two: 1) sites that provide customers with review forums and feedback pages, and 2) social media sites. This current research study focuses on social media sites. Research has shown that social media sites are considered appropriate platforms for eWOM (Erkan and Evans, 2016; Farzin and Fattahi, 2018). Social media are a "group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media encompass (a) social networking sites, such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter, (b) media-sharing sites, such as YouTube, Tumblr and Flickr, (c) creation and publishing tools, such as wikis and blogs, (d) aggregation and republishing through Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, and (e) remixing of content and republishing tools (Greenhow, 2011). The use of social media is gaining momentum globally, as one in three people use social media platforms (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Social media allow people to create personal profiles and enable them to interact with a community of friends (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). With social media people can interact online by sharing information, ideas, personal messages and other content about each other and their lives (Drahoova and Balco, 2016; Yeboah and Ewur, 2014). This in a way facilitates the dissemination of eWOM content, as people interact at different levels.

Social media have been used across various sectors of the economy, in both profit-making and non-profit-making sectors such as churches, healthcare, politics, tourism, natural disaster control, religious organizations, parenting and dating (Perrin, 2015) (Barczyk and Duncan, 2011). This reflects that social media have affected people's personal lives, social lives and the business arena. eWOM information in social media can assist individuals and institutions in making decisions. Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011) developed a honeycomb framework with seven functional building blocks of social media, namely, identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups, as shown in Figure 1. These building blocks allow organizations to understand the different levels of social media's functionality and usage. Few researchers have examined the level of social media

usage by religious leaders. There is a need for more detailed studies on the level of use and uses of social media by church leaders and by church groups with specific responsibilities (Sircar and Rowley, 2020).
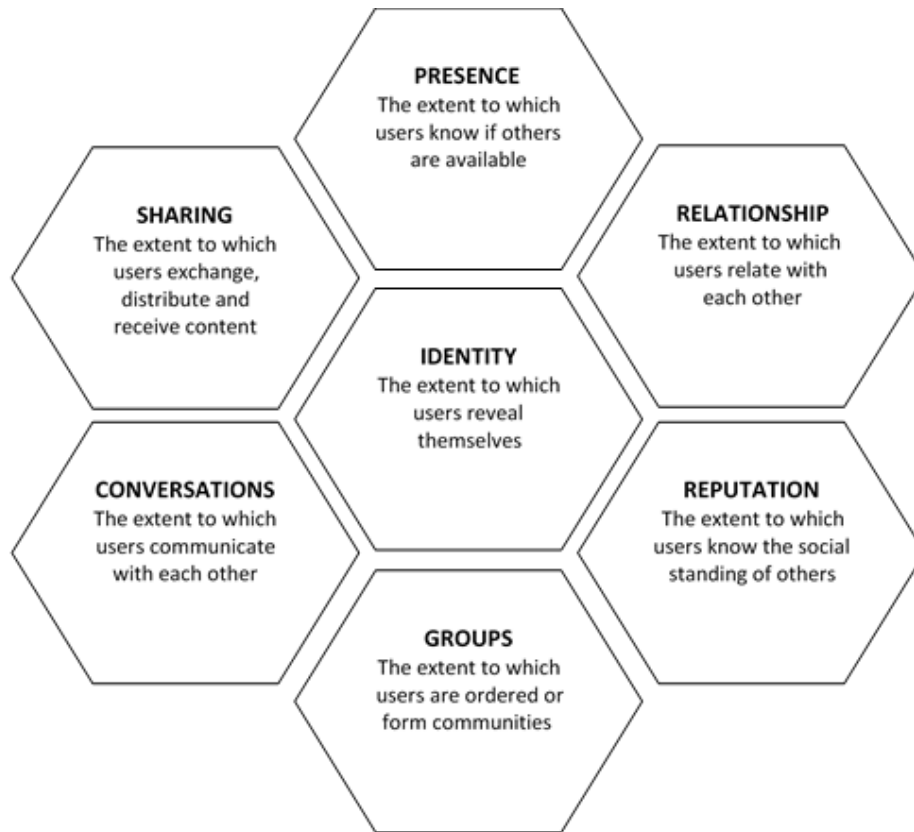
PRESENCE
The extent to which users know if others are available

SHARING
The extent to which users exchange, distribute and receive content

RELATIONSHIP
The extent to which users relate with each other

IDENTITY
The extent to which users reveal themselves

CONVERSATIONS
The extent to which users communicate with each other

REPUTATION
The extent to which users know the social standing of others

GROUPS
The extent to which users are ordered or form communities

Figure 1. **Social media functionality framework (Kietzmann et al., 2011)**

2.2 Social Media Electronic Word of Mouth and Religious Organizations

Social media play a crucial role in religious organizations; for example, Kgatle (2018) investigated the role of Facebook in prophetic churches located in Southern Africa. The research revealed that Facebook was mainly used for broadcasting services and advertising events. Research by Chukwudi, Izang, Ogu and Monday (2016) evaluated the use of social media as an evangelism tool in the SDA church. The authors noted an increase of over 500 000 views on the Babcock University's social networking sites and over 2 000 online members all over the world (Chukwudi et al., 2016). Through social media, churches can reach large audiences, as most people are on social media (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). The availability of internet access in most parts of South Africa has improved the means of sharing information globally, making it easy for religious organizations to share information with many people in different parts of the world through various social media platforms. It is important for churches

surviving in the 21st century to find new, flexible and appropriate ways of preaching the gospel, especially to those who do not relate to traditional ways (White, Tella and Ampofo, 2016; Matobobo and Bankole, 2020). The traditional ways of operation pose challenges (Sambo and Bankole, 2016), especially in this current period of the global pandemic (Covid-19) where there are lock-down restrictions and social distancing regulations in most of the affected countries. Social media enable religious organizations to operate even under lock-down restrictions by enabling people to receive spiritual messages and content on social media platforms. Research shows that most people spend most of their time on social media platforms performing various activities such as socializing (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Most social media research that has been conducted focuses on church members; few researchers have targeted church leaders. There is a need to develop an understanding of how churches share practice and learn to hone and target their social media activities (Sircar and Rowley, 2020).

On the other hand, eWOM in social media may pose challenges to religious organizations. The fact that most platforms such as Facebook do not authenticate users poses a challenge, as users can open and operate an account without using their real names (Kgatle, 2018). This may lead to users creating multiple accounts with malicious intentions, such as to spread misleading messages, attack church leaders and tarnish the image of the church. Users can potentially take advantage of the fact that they are not known and hence spread misleading information to church members and the public at large. This eWOM content can spread and hinder the growth of a religious organization.

Publishing data on social media puts people's privacy at risk, as the data may contain individuals' sensitive and private information (Beigi et al., 2018). Publishing complete and intact social media data could even result in interfering with sensitive information that users do not explicitly disclose, such as age and location (Beretta et al., 2015). This poses serious security threats to individuals, as their sensitive data are exposed to unintended recipients who could cause them harm. For example, it becomes easy to locate an individual.

3   Research Method

The research study adopted a qualitative research approach to evaluate the usage of social media among religious leaders and a quantitative approach to evaluate eWOM in the SDA church. It adopted an interpretivist philosophical paradigm to explore the realities being investigated, using a single case study. Interpretivist research "is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It is subjective. A case study design was used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex situation in its real-life context (Crowe et al., 2011).

Qualitative data were collected from 12 religious' leaders (three elders, three treasurers and six pastors) using semi-structured interviews. The research study used a purposive sampling of leaders with experience in church leadership and a mixture of those with low and high experience in information and communication technology (ICT) usage, for instance, social media, in ministry. This was done to gain a balanced understanding of the usage and challenges of social media in religious organizations. The participants were identified from various church websites and emails were sent to them requesting their participation. The researchers were granted permission to conduct the study. Participants were given an information sheet and consent forms before participating in the study. Participation was voluntary.

Interview transcripts were loaded into Atlas-ti 8 software for coding. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The researchers followed the following six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): step 1: become familiar with the data, step 2: generate initial codes, step 3: search for themes, step 4: review themes, step 5: define themes, step 6: prepare a report.

To ensure that the research findings from qualitative data met the criteria for trustworthiness, the prolonged engagement strategy was used (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). The prolonged engagement strategy enabled the researchers to follow up on questions and enabled participants to support their statements with evidence such as examples. To achieve member checking, all transcribed interview scripts were shared with the participants to provide their feedback on what had been captured.

The researchers also used data from Facebook pages of the various SDA churches located in South Africa. The researchers used Facebook because its usage among religious organizations is growing fast (Brubaker and Haigh, 2017; Kgatle, 2018). The amount of social media data is huge and it is strenuous working on the entire dataset. To work with a manageable dataset, the researchers downloaded data samples from various church Facebook pages. The researchers targeted a sample of 300 Facebook comments. These were cleaned and 226 comments were analyzed. These comments were manually classified into five themes, namely quality of service, promotion of events, sentiments from the organization, sentiments on the organizational structure and operating procedures and finally the quality of the medium. Data were analyzed using the sentiment analysis technique. Sentiment analysis is the field of study that analyzes people's opinions, sentiments, evaluations, appraisals, attitudes, and emotions concerning entities such as products, services, organizations, individuals, issues, events, topics, and their attributes (Liu, 2012). Sentiment analysis was used because it is easy to classify comments as positive, negative or neutral. Sentiment analysis was performed in Microsoft Excel using Azure Machine Learning because it has a well-developed and trained model for sentiment classification.

4   Research Findings

4.1 Findings from the Qualitative Data

The article first evaluated the uses of social media by religious leaders. The results are presented in Table 1. The researchers grouped codes to form themes.

Themes	Codes
Advertisement and Promotion of Church Programs	The motivation of Advertisements and Promotions
	Channels of Advertising and Promotion
	Ways of Advertising
Communication	Type of Program
	Forms of Communication
	Channels of Communication
	Levels of Communication
	Criteria for Channel Selection
Evangelism	Channels of Evangelism
	Motivation for Social Media Evangelism
	Devices
	Forms of Evangelism
	Target

Table 1. Usage of Social Media in Religious Organizations

Advertisement and Promotion of Church Programs

Participants used social media in advertising and promotion of church programs to members and non-members. The research findings presented the motivations behind advertising and promotions, social media channels used, ways used to advertise and types of programs being advertised.

Motivations for Advertisements and Promotions

Participants indicated that they were motivated to use social media to advertise and promote church programs because most people are on social media platforms. Advertising motivated attendance and created friendship evangelism.

Most people on social media platforms:

… almost everyone is on social media these days so churches are supposed to promote programs that will be coming to the following Sabbath. P01

Promote church attendance:

WhatsApp allows us to communicate effectively and better with our church members and with one another about the coming programs to promote attendance. P10

And some people who come, come as a result of seeing those advertisements. P12

Create friendship evangelism:

Like I have highlighted already that some people became part of our structure just by joining our closing function social networks and then from there, we became close friends. P12

Channels for Advertising and Promotion

Participants indicated that they mainly used WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram to advertise and promote church programs, as indicated:

When we advertise things we use WhatsApp and Facebook. P03

... we promote on WhatsApp, Facebook and other social media platforms. P10

We also have a Facebook account, we have got WhatsApp channels and groups. Our WhatsApp group has one hundred and something members and we advertise a lot there and also invite people for church activities. P12

We also have an Instagram account, when we have an event we post on Instagram to promote the event and afterward. P12

Ways of Advertising

Participants indicated that they advertised and promoted programs in the form of posters, pictures, videos and text messages. The advertisements were posted in social media groups and on pages that were accessible to the public.

Use of posters and pictures:

We create posters and then we send them to various platforms to advertise our different programs so we use them actively. P03

So they take pictures and post them to our social groups. One can always know what is happening at our structure just by visiting our Instagram and Facebook pages. P12

Types of Programs

Participants used social media to advertise and promote evangelistic activities such as crusades, weeks of prayer, music days, closing functions and any other church programs.

... through social media like Facebook where we promote events such as crusades. P10

When we do our crusades, our weeks of prayers, our music day, our closing function and any events, we promote by sending posters on all social network platforms. P12

Communication

Participants indicated that social media played a crucial role in how religious leaders communicate among themselves, with higher structures, members, the community and non-members. Communication is discussed under the following codes: forms of communication, channels of communication, levels of communication and criteria for channel selection.

Forms of Communication

Participants communicated in various forms, such as posting pictures and messages in social media groups and on pages, sending documents via emails and social media groups and conducting meetings on social platforms.

Visual pictures:

So they take pictures and post them to our social groups. One can always know what is happening at our structure just by visiting our Instagram and Facebook pages. P12

And also use the same platforms to give feedback on the events like photos sharing the slides. P10

Virtual meetings:

We can do virtual meetings. We can cite important things via WhatsApp, we can share information on email and as well as just communicating. P04

I also do some meetings on WhatsApp with my members. P11

Documents:

They just do the report and send a pdf via WhatsApp or email. P12

Before the meeting, we send the agenda through WhatsApp, typed one so that they can see what is on the agenda for the church board, the business and the district. P8

Posting of announcements and messages:

… actually, we are very dependent on them to make our announcements and for any urgent communication and when we want to do functions. P12

… if any Voice of Prophecy student is having challenges with their lessons they just send a message on WhatsApp. P01

Channels of Communication

Participants pointed out the main channels that they used to communicate at different levels. These channels included WhatsApp, emails, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

I communicate with people via emails and WhatsApp. P04

We mainly use WhatsApp and email. WhatsApp has taken the lead lately. P02

We do have Facebook pages for our churches. P07

One can always know what is happening at our structure just by visiting our Instagram and Facebook pages. P12

Levels of Communication

Social media channels enabled leaders to communicate at different levels from one-on-one to group communication such as at the departmental or church level.

Local church level:

I use them every day to communicate with the Elders, the WhatsApp groups that we have with the Elders … P10

We have a WhatsApp group where all departments are there, where announcements and important discussions are held so this keeps everybody in the loop. P01

… at one of the churches here we centralized our Cell groups, they have a WhatsApp group where they convey information or the church board meetings. P7

Our WhatsApp group has one hundred and something church members. P12

District level:

Let me start with WhatsApp because we normally use it for local and district communication. P08

There is a zonal WhatsApp group also where they communicate the meetings for Elders and so on. And there is another WhatsApp for the district which is used in preparation for the camp meeting and so on, it`s very easy to communicate. P08

Criteria for Channel Selection

Participants presented criteria that they had used in selecting communication channels at different levels. The criteria included the speed of the channels, response time expected, the urgency of the message, accessibility of the channel to the recipient, efficiency and control mechanism of the channels.

Speed, expected response time and urgency of the message:

It is generally agreed among leaders that WhatsApp is the fastest communication channel so that is the one that we use. P01

We used to use emails but people rarely check their emails but people are always on WhatsApp with their phones so I think that is the main reason why the criteria changed to WhatsApp. P2

When a matter is urgent we can quickly run it through at different levels. We can use WhatsApp when communicating as Elders or the church board so it makes things very effective. P10

Accessibility of the channel to the recipient:

You would find that some want me to call, those with emails I do emails and those with WhatsApp I do WhatsApp. P09

Efficiency and control mechanism:

They know the importance of how WhatsApp allows us to communicate effectively and better with our church members. P10

... for me, WhatsApp tends to be more practical and has a wider reach than all other social media platforms which are also not controllable like Facebook. Facebook is a bit more difficult to control. P06

WhatsApp is now developed that when you create a group whereby the admin can always be the one who is posting, so because we mainly use WhatsApp those are the challenges that we face as well. P02

Evangelism

Participants pointed out the role social media platforms have played in church evangelism activities. This theme will be discussed under the following codes: channels of evangelism, motivation for social media evangelism, forms of evangelism and target.

Channels of Evangelism

Participants presented various social media channels that they had used to perform evangelistic activities. The findings reflected that leaders mainly used social networking/messaging and media sharing sites to evangelize. There was little usage of other categories of social media such as wiki, blogs and RSS.

Social networking sites/instant messaging:

... I try by all means to maximize WhatsApp as much as possible, I do this by forwarding, creating or generating spiritually oriented messages. P01

You can just take a sermon in your church and spread it out to those people via email, Skype, Facebook. P04

But I am aware of fellow Pastors and colleagues that utilize Twitter very well for evangelistic purposes. P06

We have what we call WhatsApp ministry, sermons get recorded on WhatsApp and they know if say it's a revival week, we would be having 7 messages that are recorded that are WhatsApp friendly then we listen to them on WhatsApp. P09

Media-sharing sites:

Many churches have YouTube accounts hey. I am aware also of the communication desk at the TOC that travels around a lot, sometimes with the President and sometimes with the elected officers to capture sermons and those sermons are uploaded on YouTube. P06

And as I said, every time I stand to preach when I am invited somewhere there is usually someone who is recording and 9 out 10 times those messages end up on YouTube. P06

I do recordings for HOPE channels and Life Destiny TV, I have a YouTube Channel, I also have a Facebook Channel where I share my sermons. P07

We have a YouTube Account, some of the videos have got 1000 views already. P12

Motivation for Social Media Evangelism

Support

Social media evangelism enables leaders to support members, as pointed out by participant P01 who said, *"if any Voice of Prophecy student is having challenges with their lessons they just send a message on WhatsApp."*

Large Audience

Participants pointed out that social media evangelism covers a large audience, as messages can reach people at the same time, there is real-time access to messages, messages can be shared on multiple channels and social media have the potential of reaching non-church-goers on social media platforms.

Real-time access and reaching a large number of people simultaneously:

... you can reach many people at the same time for instance if people are in a group. P02

So my point is people who could not make it to Church X, everyone had real-time access to the sermon. To me, that was very good. P01

When a church is not using ICT they might lose their broader audience such as your potential members who can become part of the church, for example, the community might not know who are we, so that is negative if we do not use it. P10

Multi-channel access and potential of reaching non-members:

Yes, they are following up on YouTube though the greater number of them follow me on Facebook. I have used Facebook more for even counseling, a lot of people, even those who are non-Adventist they come there and we end up talking outside the platform. P07

If we only rely on hard copies of posters that we put around campus, we have limited our reach to only people on campus and to only people who pay attention to notice boards. But when we go ahead and share, for example, on our Facebook it means that everyone else who is following the VUT Facebook account will also be able to see those things. P12

I must confess that you later realize that many people will not come to your church no matter how much you preach but if you use social media and have some small evangelism nuggets, you can impact them where they are. P06

Efficiency

Participants indicated that social media are efficient in terms of the scope of content that can be shared, audiences that can be reached and speed of transmission of messages.

Scope of content shared:

… it has changed the whole efficiency in terms of sending bulk and large files. P04

Large audience:

For me as a Pastor it brings efficiency, you can reach a broader audience like your evangelism. P10

I use WhatsApp. I use Facebook especially, I put updates there. For example, whenever I am in church for a certain program I do live coverage on Facebook. P04

Quick decision-making:

… now we take decisions on WhatsApp chat groups let's say on a board meeting group decisions can be made quickly. P02

If we do not use or encourage the use of social media what will happen is that we will have to rely on traditional methods which sometimes are time-consuming for example to wait for a church board that will take time to deal with a matter while can just

quickly table it and get people`s opinion and vote on the matter using the WhatsApp groups. P10

But right now what happens at my church within five minutes everyone else around the world knows in terms of information sharing movement and so forth. So it`s now easy to just share the gospel, it`s no longer like gathering a lot of people in a field and just talk to them about the Bible. P04

Accessibility of Data and Devices

Participants indicated that they use social media evangelism to target people who have access to data and devices such as smartphones.

Data:

We have got a large portion of people who at work have access to vast amounts of data and are looking for sermons online. Some of these people may not go to your tent or buy your DVD but the moment you record and upload your DVD on YouTube channel, some of these people at work can put on headphones and download that message. Effectively they become a part of your crusade when they were physically not present. P06

Device:

We can use our phones for sharing information on different platforms either Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, people use all those things for in-reach and out-reach as well. P02

… as soon as you have your phone in your hand, there is always a message that is passing through either on WhatsApp, Instagram or Facebook there is always a message that talks about God. P01

Forms of Evangelism

Participants indicated that they evangelized through various forms such as sending spiritual messages, sharing pictures and recordings on social media platforms.

Messages:

Facebook but I try by all means on the little time that I get to send messages that are spiritually oriented to try and spread the gospel of Christ. P01

Pictures and recordings:

I share all my pictures and recordings I take pictures each time there is a church program. P04

… they are following up on YouTube though the greater number of them follow me on Facebook. P07

When I was still on Facebook I utilized it heavily to capture events like crusades and give information and pictures. P04

... have some small evangelism nuggets, you can impact them where they are.

Target

The research findings showed that participants' social media evangelism targets youths, any person with access to social media platforms, people who do not go to church and those who are living in areas where it is difficult to reach them, like those who are living in closed-up areas.

Young generation:

In the SDA church, I can say that if we look at the younger generation they use social media a lot while the older folks do no use it much but some because of the nature of their jobs they are forced to use it. P03

Non-members and those difficult to reach:

A good number of people who follow us on these platforms are not Adventists. For example, when we go for our closing function have a lot of people who are not Adventists but just friends they also join to see how we do things. P12

I must confess that you later realize that many people will not come to your church no matter how much you preach but if you use social media and have some small evangelism nuggets, you can impact them where they are. P06

It helps because an area like area X is a closed-up area. There are different races in the area and it`s difficult to go and knock on people`s doors so that you can study with them so we have employed social media channels to reach these people ... It makes more impact than sticking the posters on the road. Nowadays fewer people look at those things but if you work online, that is where they spend their time. They spend their time on Facebook and WhatsApp. P07

Challenges of social media

Despite the benefits that come with social media, participants pointed also challenges that discourage leaders from using social media platforms such as circulation of content improper content, diverting the purpose of the groups, irreverent use of social media platforms and flooding the groups with media content.

Circulation of improper content and diverting its purpose:

People just circulate other funny things but for us, we just want to look at the positive side of things I think ICT has enabled the gospel to go forward. P01

The major challenges, in general, is misuse and abuse because if you are talking of WhatsApp channels that can be used for instance we can create a group that is strictly meant for communication purposes but you find that it ends up being used for different purposes even though sometimes. P02

... we are trying to use it as a platform to share evangelism, then you see political things and jokes are also being shared so those are the challenges we face. P04

Irreverent use and Flooding media content:

Sometimes I see people on social media during services. What is pathetic is that this is not only done by youth but by elderly people alike. It is so surprising that people have such audacity to be chatting with other people during service. It is very irreverent and it is disturbing both to the person using their phone and to those around them. P05

There is another platform that I used to be on where people were complaining about space in their phones where things like pictures and videos are posted. P02

4.2 Findings from Facebook Data

Figure 2 shows the overall average score of all sentiments that were processed. The results show a positive average of 79% of all the sentiments and a negative average score of 28%. Neutral sentiments had an average of 54%. The results show a high positive average score, meaning users are making positive comments on the church's Facebook pages.
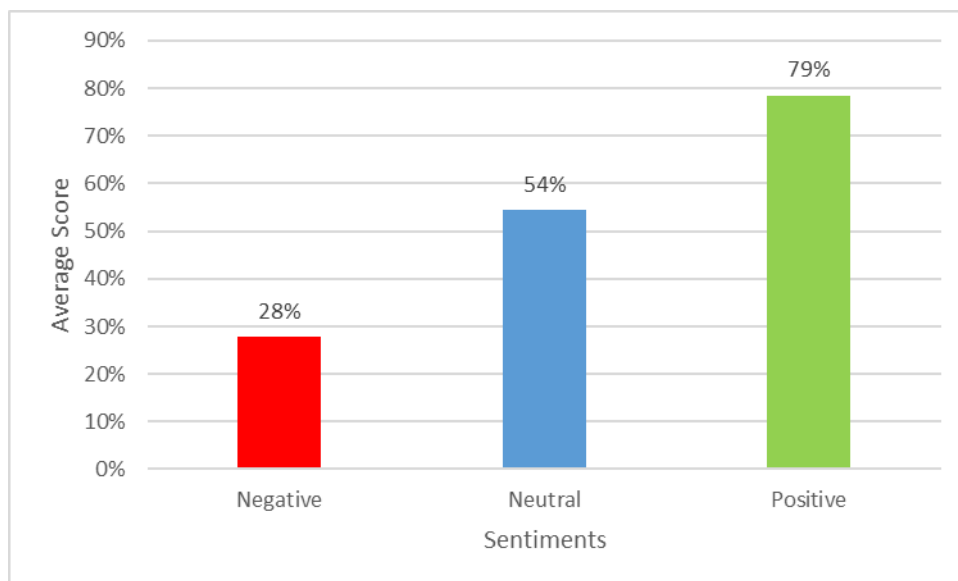

Figure 2. **Overall Sentiments on the SDAs**

Sentiments were categorized into five categories, namely quality of service, promotion of events, sentiments from the organization, sentiments on the organization structure and operating procedures and finally quality of the medium. The categories are presented in Table 2.

Category	Sample of Comments
Quality of service	God is using His pastors to interpret His word.
	Thank you baruti for blessing us very informative session.
Promotion of events	I look forward to this great event.
	I missed it ... Oooh.
Sentiments from the organization	We would like to apologize for the connection problems we just experienced. We are happy that it has been fixed. Thank you for your patience.
	Thank you for joining us tonight.
Sentiments on the organizational structure and operating procedures	TOC is truly my home.
	Just not sure why we're not making use of the female speakers?
Quality of medium	The audio is terrible don't know whether other Pastors are talking
	Much better, Thank you IT

Table 2.   Categories of sentiments from the Facebook Pages of the SDA churches

Under quality of service, users commented on issues such as the quality of presentations, music and programs conducted. The category of promotion of events was made up of sentiments about promotional material posted on Facebook pages. Their sentiments were expressed by the church leadership. The category of organizational structure and operating procedures included sentiments about the organization, its structures and its operating procedures. Finally, the category of quality of the medium considered sentiments concerning the quality of the medium used to provide the service, such as the quality of the sound in presentations. The findings are presented in Figure 3. The results show a high positive average score in all categories with sentiments from the category referring to the organization having the highest average score of 91%. Sentiments from the company category had a negative average score of 0%, while other categories had negative average scores below 35%. This shows that users express more positive sentiments about the church in those five categories.
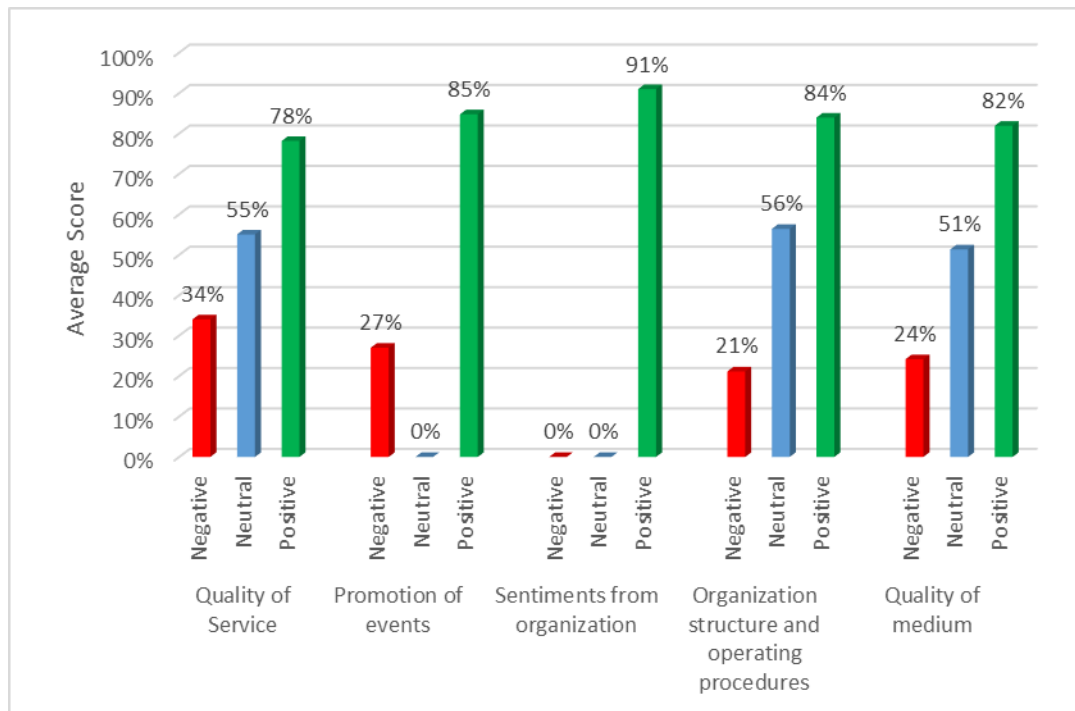
Figure 3.   **Sentiment Categories in Religious Organizations**

5   Discussions

From the functionality framework in Figure 1, the research discusses seven dimensions as these relate to social media among church leaders and religious organizations. Social media have changed the way church leaders run religious organizations. Church leaders reported using social media to form the various group in communities, such as communities of departmental leaders, elders, the church executive board, as well as church, zonal and district communities. These communities served different purposes and allowed relevant activities to take place in closed societies. Conversations within closed communities were kept confidential and restricted to these communities. There were, however, challenges in these communities, as some community members were circulating improper and irrelevant content, as well as flooding these groups with media content. Through online communities, church leaders were able to discuss and vote on issues. Participants indicated the need for an online presence during such meetings where voting takes place. Some social media platforms have features that allow users to show their online presence, such as giving a thumb up on WhatsApp. To participate in these closed communities, leaders need to reveal their identities, such as their names and the leadership positions they occupied, to the communities to which they belong. The

leaders are added to groups based on their true identity so that they can contribute to their relevant communities. This is different from visitors, who can just comment on the church's social pages as long as they have a social media account. These visitors may include those not using their real identification details. In situations like these, it will be difficult for users to know the social standing of other users. Interaction among users is not at a personal level in most instances.

Church leaders were frequently sharing content on social media, especially when advertising and promoting church programs, in general communication and when conducting evangelistic activities. These leaders were sharing content on social media at different levels, ranging from one-on-one to public members. They were sharing content mainly in the form of messages, documents, pictures and videos. The content was shared privately with individuals, with communities or with the public, depending on the nature of the content. Confidential content was shared with the relevant closed communities, while general content was shared on public platforms. On the side of visitors, research findings showed a high positive average score of sentiments regarding the quality of content being shared.

Conversations among leaders took place at an individual level, in closed communities and on public platforms such as when inviting members and non-members to a church program. Specific criteria determined the leaders' choice of a conversation channel, such as the speed of the channel, response rate, channel accessibility, efficiency and effectiveness of the channel, the urgency of the message and control mechanisms of the channel. The leaders conducted these conversations in the form of messages, posters, virtual meetings, reports and documents. There were situations where religious leaders would send comments to the consumers of their content. Results showed a high positive average score of sentiments from the church leadership. There was also a high positive average score of sentiments from the users concerning the quality of the services and quality of the medium.

The social standing of leaders was seen to be crucial in church leadership communities, as they deal with confidential and sensitive information in various groups, such as member discipline and church finance. Their social standing can also

lead to negative or positive sentiments from the users who may happen to know them. Visitors may not know the social standing of others in the interaction process.

The research findings showed that relationship was important, especially among leaders. Leaders needed to maintain relationships among themselves and with the visitors with whom they interacted. There was less interaction among visitors on the church's Facebook pages. Most comments were directed at the leaders. There were situations where visitors would interact among themselves, especially when discussing church policies and procedures.

6   Conclusion

The research findings showed a high level of usage of social networking/messaging and media-sharing sites among SDA leaders. The most frequently used social media platforms were WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube. Little use was made of other categories of social media such as wiki, blogs and RSS. Social media enabled religious leaders to create online closed communities for leaders, such as communities of elders, departmental leaders, the church board executive and district church communities where conversations and decision-making took place. Research findings showed that social media have assisted religious leaders in the areas of advertising and promotion of church programs, general communication and evangelism. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have enabled users to comment on the media content posted online by religious leaders. This provides religious leaders with feedback on the quality of services provided. The research findings showed a high positive average sentiment score in feedback from the users. The use of social media in religious organizations has benefited leaders through immediate feedback, media synchronicity, accessibility of multi-purpose channels, the ability to share messages in different formats, as well as low cost in communication, marketing and promoting church programs.

Despite these benefits of social media in religious organizations, the research findings showed that some people tend to circulate improper content, divert the purpose of the groups, irreverently use social media platforms and flood the groups with media content unrelated to the group. The research study concluded that successful

implementation and use of social media at the church management level requires trustworthy leaders, as they deal with confidential issues in various online communities, skilled people in the use of ICTs, good social media usage practice and a positive attitude to social media.

Despite the useful insights presented by this research, the research study also has some limitations that could present opportunities for future research in non-profit organizations such as churches. The main research limitations were that a small sample size of Facebook data was used, the research focused on a single church in developing countries, only text messages were analyzed, a single social media platform was used and a simple machine learning model was used. To address these limitations, the authors suggest the following future research:

- ✓ More studies can be conducted using large samples of social media eWOM data.
- ✓ Research studies can assess the effectiveness of eWOM for religious leaders and their followers or potential followers.
- ✓ Deep machine learning models can be developed and trained to analyze church social media eWOM data.

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