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Exploring the Intersection of Religiosity, Spirituality and Social Media Platforms in Developing Countries

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Exploring the Intersection of Religiosity, Spirituality and Social Media Platforms in Developing Countries

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Traditionally, the Information Systems (IS) discipline has focused on the techno-organizational aspects of information technology, often overlooking the profound influence of cultural factors generally and particularly religiosity and spirituality, on the design, implementation, and use of IS. This oversight is particularly striking because neighbouring disciplines, such as management and organizational behaviour, have extensively explored the impact of religious beliefs on business practices (Tracey, 2012; Chan-Serafin et al., 2013).

Specifically, while social media platforms have become ubiquitous globally, their impact and use patterns vary significantly across different cultural contexts, particularly in developing countries where religious beliefs often play a central role in shaping social norms and behaviours. The IS discipline has extensively studied social media adoption and use (Kapoor et al., 2018), yet there remains a notable gap in understanding how religiosity and spirituality influences these dynamics, especially in developing countries. The absence of a comprehensive research on religiosity, spirituality and social media use in particular in the IS literature in developing countries presents a significant gap that potentially limits our understanding of how cultural factors shape user behaviour, platform adoption, and social dynamics in developing countries. It is in line with these that Walsham (2017) argues that the IS field needs to engage more deeply with broader societal issues, particularly in the context of developing countries, to remain relevant and impactful. In this regard, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How do religious beliefs and practices influence the adoption, use, and perception of social media platforms in developing countries?
2. How does the interplay between religiosity and social media use contribute to or hinder social capital formation and community development in developing nations?

To address these research questions, we propose a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies, in line with the call for methodological pluralism in IS research (Venkatesh et al., 2013) supported by the need for context-sensitive research in developing countries (Avgerou, 2017). Data will be collected through in-depth interviews with social media users from diverse religious backgrounds in Ghana to explore how their beliefs influence their online behaviours and perceptions. We will also explore case studies of religious communities and organizations using social media platforms for community building and information dissemination. We anticipate the development and validation of a survey instrument to measure the impact of religiosity on social media use patterns, perceived benefits, and concerns in developing country contexts by relying on large-scale surveys across multiple regions with diverse religious demographics in Ghana.

We stand on this multi-faceted approach because it aligns with the recommendations of Osei-Bryson and Vogel (2014) for context-specific IS research in developing countries.

Our proposed research is expected to make several significant contributions to IS theory and practice. First, theoretically, by integrating concepts from religious studies, development studies, and IS, we aim to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework that explains the role of religiosity in shaping social media dynamics in developing countries. This will extend existing social media theories, such as the Social Media Engagement Framework (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016), by incorporating religious and cultural factors specific to developing country contexts. Secondly, the development and validation of instruments to measure the impact of religiosity on social media use in developing countries will provide valuable tools for future research in this area, addressing the need for context-specific measures in cross-cultural IS research (Davison & Martinsons, 2016). In terms of policy, we hope that by exploring the tensions between global platform policies and local religious sensitivities, this research will contribute to the ongoing discourse on digital governance and policy-making in developing countries (Mukherjee, 2019). Finally, the study will shed light on how the interplay between religiosity and social media use impacts social capital formation and community development in developing countries, thereby contributing to the broader discussion on ICTs and development (Walsham, 2017).

By addressing this significant gap in IS research, our study aims to enhance the field's relevance and impact in understanding the complex dynamics of social media use in developing countries. It also responds to calls for IS research to engage more deeply with societal issues in diverse global contexts (Walsham, 2017) and to consider the broader implications of technology on cultural values and social development (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016).