

Keeping the Faith! An Agenda to Investigate the Decline in Spiritually Based Communities

Karen Granger, University of Adelaide, karen.granger@student.adelaide.edu.au

Dr Cullen Habel, University of Adelaide, cullen.habel@adelaide.edu.au

Dr Roberta Veale, University of Adelaide, roberta.veale@adelaide.edu.au

Abstract

Individual's propensity towards membership and participation in Spiritually Based Communities (SBCs) has developed as a research stream. The decline of membership and participation is evidenced in several studies, examining its effect on SBCs. Despite advancement in this area, a number of questions still remain, particularly in relation to the relationships between the strength of the antecedents and level of commitment towards membership and participation. In this paper we conceptualise the antecedents of commitment of membership and participation, and briefly discuss the moderating role of members and participants characteristics. This paper proposes an agenda to address this gap in the literature by conducting an exploratory study of the relationship of the antecedents individually and in conjunction with each other and how they influence individuals' commitment towards SBCs.

Keywords: not-for profit, volunteering, spiritually based communities.

Keeping the Faith! An Agenda to Investigate the Decline in Spiritually Based Communities

Introduction

There has been a gradual decline in Spiritually Based Communities (SBCs) in recent years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 a; National Church Life Survey, 2006). Subsequently, these communities are faced with important challenges in terms of sourcing individuals willing to commit to membership and participation. The objective of this research is to investigate individuals' motivations and attitudes towards membership and participation in SBC's, and the relationships between the three identified antecedents: *religiosity* (Cornwall, 1989; Haynes, 1997), *social involvement* (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004; Koh and Kim, 2003; Kossinets and Watts, 2006; Rajulton, Ravanera and Beujot, 2007) and *contribution in society* (Bonyhady, 2008; Hankinson and Rochester, 2005; Wilson, 2000).

There are a number of explanations offered for the decline in populations of SBCs. These include an absence of younger audiences (Losyk, 1997; Montgomery, Mitchell and Bauer, 2000) leading to aging population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 a; National Church Life Survey, 2006). Moreover, it seems that church going and religion in general are losing their social influences (Hollinger, Haller and Valle-Hallinger, 2007; von Sinner, 2007) in no small part due to perceived misdemeanours in the eyes of the public (von Sinner, 2007). SBCs are also faced with ever increasing competition with other charitable communities (Clain and Zech, 1999) in terms of where and how people make commitments of membership and participation. Furthermore, secular activities and other demands placed upon people today also pose competition for SBCs (Gruber and Hungerman, 2008), in the opportunity cost factor attached which increases competition (Sawkins, Seaman and Williams, 1997).

The results of these reduced participation levels are potentially damaging to society as a whole. This is because SBCs provide enormous value and numerous benefits from social and economic perspectives as a result of their participants' contributions. These 'contributions', in terms of *good works*, encompass significant unpaid services benefiting the disadvantaged, marginalised, disabled, aged and needy (Meier and Stutzer, 2008; Thoits and Hewitt, 2001; Wilson and Musick, 1997). The orientations of membership and participation identified in this study are; giving freely of personal time (volunteering), donating money, donating expertise and advocating for causes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 b; Bonyhady, 2008; Craig-Lees, Harris and Lau, 2008; Department of Families, 2005; Wilson and Musick, 1998). Volunteering as one strategy of membership and participation has become a social phenomenon of our time (Craig-Lees, Harris and Lau, 2008; Katz and Rosenberg, 2005; Rajulton, Ravanera and Beujot, 2007). For example, in Australia in 2006, these contributions equated to more than 700 million hours in voluntary work within a diverse range of groups and communities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 b).

Hence this research offers value to those who want to ensure the future existence of SBCs and, therefore, these economic and societal benefits. It will provide insights for leaders and stakeholders of SBCs to enable better understanding and prediction of individuals' behaviour and propensity towards membership and participation within their communities and how to recruit future participants from a more diverse audience. Therefore, it will assist in developing marketing and planning strategies to address the decline in membership and participation. Lastly, this study has the potential to contribute to the existing literature, bringing new insights into the context of social behaviour in the field of Spiritually Based Communities.

Literature Review

The literature streams reviewed were initially informed by studies of SBCs, specifically Religious based communities. Common themes emerged; positive relationships of members of these communities towards social and group tendencies, and the relationship of altruistic behaviour within these communities demonstrated by individual's giving their time and money to help others. These identified antecedents to participation in SBSs are discussed specifically below.

Religion and spiritually motivated consumption

The role of religion continues to attract attention from both social sciences and the general public (Hollinger, Haller and Valle-Hallinger, 2007). Particularly in western Europe, religious institutions have lost much of their (former) influence (Hollinger, Haller and Valle-Hallinger, 2007), and the separation of state and church remains a controversial issue (Frederick, 2003). However there is contra theory that the resurgence of religion is becoming a greater political influence in current times (Haynes, 1997). Hence, it is important to investigate the importance of this attitude in relation to its potential influence on participation and commitment in this context.

Spirituality has a long history in both philosophy and religion and can include both religious and non-religious meanings (Singleton, Mason and Webber, 2004). Researchers have acknowledged that spirituality is an important factor in motivating consumption, for example sought through literature, food, art, music or relationships (Skousgaard, 2006). Furthermore, 'spirit' is considered to be a major force in human behaviour (Baumgartner, 2002; Curasi, Price and Arnould, 2004, Gould and Stinerock, 1992, Hirschman, 1985; Holbrook, 1999, 2001; Kozinets, 1997,2001; Murray, 2002; Thompson, 2004; Twitchell, 2004) as cited in (Skousgaard, 2006). Equally, individuals that feel their lives lack meaning are more inclined to chose spiritually motivated consumption experiences that offer explicit meaning within a structured context such as church or a social activist group (Skousgaard, 2006). In terms of younger audiences, there appears to be a lack of knowledge in relation to their religious and spiritual beliefs and the importance of being 'spiritual' in their lives (Montgomery, Mitchell and Bauer, 2000).

Social and community based involvement

SBCs membership and participation in part is determined by human behaviour that forms groups, social ties and community based activities. Community is characterised by the relational interactions (social ties) that draw people together; it is the involvement of human relationships without necessarily having reference to location (Koh and Kim, 2003). Communities are based on like-mindedness and shared interest, which include religious groups (Koh and Kim, 2003). Many communities can be intentionally founded and are usually ideological whether, political, economic or religious based (Hillery Jr, 1971). Social ties can also be linked to a sense of belonging, and have been found to be strongly linked with participation and membership in community environments (Rajulton, Ravanera and Beujot, 2007). Social ties in terms of social networks are also referred to as community evolving over time, initiated by shared interests and activities (Kossinets and Watts, 2006).

Virtual communities are a new era of community, posing a link to younger audiences (Blanchard, 2007). However there is little specific study in terms of younger audience's

attitudes towards social involvement, furthermore they are considered to be lower in their acceptance of others and have a commensurate reluctance to work in groups as opposed to older audiences (Yrle, Hartman and Payne, 2005). Similar to community, virtual community is also relational as their members are not in any way physically bound together, but rather a set of social relationships coming together in cyberspace through repeated contacts within a specified boundary (Fernback and Thompson, 1998) as cited in Koh and Kim (2003).

Altruism and volunteering

The literature discusses key orientations of membership and participation in terms of giving personal time (with no monetary recompense), donating money, donating expertise and advocating/campaigning for causes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 b; Bonyhady, 2008; Craig-Lees, Harris and Lau, 2008; Department of Families 2005; Wilson and Musick 1998). Volunteering as one strategy of contribution, can be defined as an activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or organisation (Wilson, 2000), it is working with others to make a meaningful contribution to better communities (Barfield, 2005).

Motivations for volunteering can be defined as altruistic, utilitarian and egoism; however, altruism is found in true volunteerism and given that the fundamental result of volunteering is helping others, then it should not come as a surprise that most of the findings from research highlight altruism as the most predominant motivating factor (Callow, 2004; Hankinson and Rochester, 2005). Interestingly, in terms of volunteering rates in Australia in 2006, 34% of the population aged over 18 years participated in voluntary work, with females more likely to volunteer than males (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 b). Hence the degree to which respondents may be motivated by altruistic attitudes to participate in SBSs will be specifically quantified in the study, in addition to the antecedents of spirituality and need for social involvement previously discussed.

Gaps in literature

Whilst previous studies have investigated and documented the influences of altruism, spirituality and need for social engagement individually on SBS participation levels and types, their respective influences have not been quantified, in conjunction, within the same study. This approach will allow for the comparison of the power of each antecedent on the likelihood of an individual to take part in a SBC. Furthermore, there are few studies investigating the degree to which the attitudes and perception of younger generations may moderate their behaviour in this context.

Relationships between Constructs and Conceptual Framework

The development of the constructs used for testing is based on the existing literature. Religion and spiritually motivated consumption has formed the basis for the construct of *Religiosity*, being religious behaviour, attitudes, feelings and belief in a higher spiritual being (Cornwall, 1989; Haynes, 1997). *Social involvement* is defined as peoples' motivations and feelings about social contact, belonging, being part of groups and communities (Koh and Kim, 2003; Kossinets and Watts, 2006; Rajulton, Ravanera and Beujot, 2007) and acceptance and identification (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004). Contributions to communities and society have informed the construct *contribution in society* (motivation of altruistic feelings), meaning how people feel and are motivated about the work of volunteering, giving of time for

no payment, donating money, advocating and providing expertise (Wilson, 2000; Hankinson and Rochester, 2005; Bonyhady, 2008). The proposed relationships between these variables and participation in SBCs, is illustrated in Figure 1.

Hence, the objective of this study into the relationships in the model is to address the gaps identified in the existing literature, and test the strength of the relationship of independent variables towards membership and participation in SBCs. The associated propositions are:

P1: There is a positive relationship between the strength of *religiosity* and the level of commitment towards SBC membership and participation.

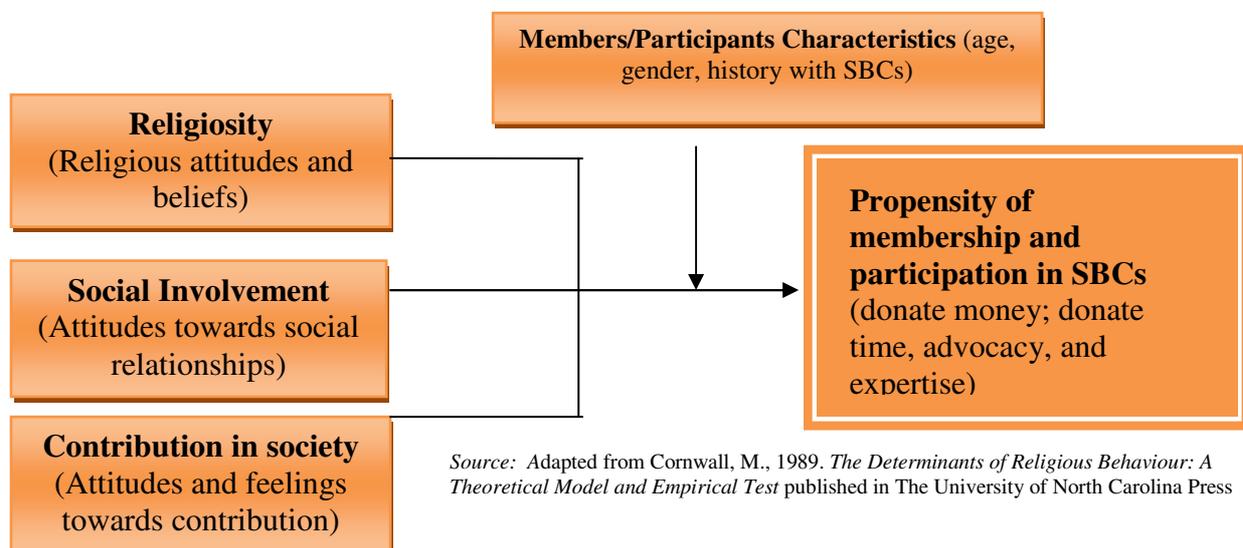
P2: There is a positive relationship between the strength of *social involvement* and the level of commitment towards SBC membership and participation.

P3: There is a positive relationship between the strength of *contribution in society* and the level of commitment towards SBC membership and participation.

P4: There is a positive relationship between the strength of the three antecedents in conjunction with each other and the level of commitment towards SBC membership and participation.

P5: The strength of each independent variable will be moderated by the individual characteristics and the level of commitment towards SBC membership and participation.

Figure 1 Motivators to consumer participation and membership in SBCs



Conclusion and Future Research Agenda

The strength of the individual constructs and the constructs in conjunction with each other, as discussed in this paper, offer a valuable tool for understanding and predicting individuals' behaviour and propensity towards membership and participation within SBC environments. A logical, theoretically derived conceptual framework has been developed for investigation into this social phenomenon. Whilst the conceptual foundation has been argued in this paper, future research would empirically validate the framework.

The managerial implications of such research would provide a valuable tool for SBCs in order to plan and develop strategies to ensure (their) future existence. It has been discussed in this paper that SBCs provide a significant contribution and benefit to society, communities and to the economy. People who orientate towards membership and participation are considered to be the *backbone* of SBCs (Haski-Leventhal and Cnaan, 2009). Furthermore managerial implications stand to benefit SBCs from studies of members and participants' orientations (consumption and giving) offering a *new way* of looking at membership and participation from a consumer behaviour perspective. Furthermore there are theoretical implications from such research; firstly it will provide links to the little existing research investigating member and participants variables, and secondly provide a benefit from new insights for social science and consumer behaviour in the field of Spiritually Based Communities.

Future research and investigations based on quantitative methodology using an e-survey in a network referral system, drawn from a general population sample, would determine the effectiveness of the constructs. In efforts to validate the constructs, some existing measurements and some to be adapted would be used.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 a. Culture and Recreation: Religious Affiliation. 1301.0.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 b. Voluntary Work, Australia. 4441.0
- Barfield, G., 2005. The Power & Value of Volunteering. *Professional Safety* **50** (5), 6-6.
- Blanchard, A., 2007. Developing a sense of virtual community measure. *CyberPsychology and Behaviour* **10** (6), 827-830.
- Bonyhady, B., 2008. The Future of Australian Philanthropy: New Uncertainties and Opportunities. Philanthropy Australia Conference Paper 2008
- Callow, M., 2004. Identifying promotional appeals for targeting potential volunteers: An exploratory study on volunteering motives among retirees. *International Journal of Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Marketing* **9**, 261-274.
- Clain, S. H., Zech, C.E., 1999. A Household Production Analysis of Religious and Charitable Activity. *American Journal of Economics & Sociology* **58**(4), 923-946.
- Cornwall, M., 1989. The Determinants of Religious Behaviour: A theoretical model and empirical test. The University of North Carolina Press **68**(2), 572-592.
- Craig-Lees, M., Harris, J., Lau, W., 2008. The Role of Dispositional, Organizational and Situational Variables in Volunteering. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, Haworth Press **19**, 1-24.
- Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2005. Giving Australia: Research on Philanthropy in Australia 1-286.
- Dholakia, U. M., Bagozzi R.P., Pearo, L.K., 2004. A social influence model of consumer participation in network and small-group-based virtual communities. *International Journal of Research in Marketing* **21**(3), 241-263.
- Frederick, G. B., 2003. Faith-based Community Organizations. *Spectrum: Journal of State Government* **76**(1), 30.
- Gruber, J., Hungerman, D.M., 2008. The Church versus the mall: What Happens when Religion Faces Increased Secular Competition? *Quarterly Journal of Economics* **123**, 831-862.
- Hankinson, P., Rochester, C., 2005. The Face and Voice of Volunteering: A Suitable Case for Branding? *International Journal of Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Marketing* **10**, 93-105.
- Haski-Leventhal, D. and R. A. Cnaan (2009). Group Processes and Volunteering: Using Groups to Enhance Volunteerism. *Administration in Social Work* **33**, 61-80.

- Haynes, J., 1997. Religion, Secularisation and Politics: A Postmodern Conspectus. *Third World Quarterly* **18**(4), 709-728.
- Hillery Jr, G. A., 1971. Freedom and Social Organization: A Comparative Analysis. *American Sociological Review* **36**, 51-65.
- Hollinger, F., Haller, M., Valle-Hallinger, A., 2007. Christian Religion, Society and the State in the Modern World. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Sciences* **20**, 133-157.
- Katz, E., Rosenberg, J., 2005. An Economic Interpretation of Institutional Volunteering. *European Journal of Political Economy* **21**: 429-443.
- Koh, J., Kim, Y.G., 2003. Sense of Virtual Community: A Conceptual Framework and Empirical Validation. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce* **8**(2), 77-93.
- Kossinets, G., Watts, D.J., 2006. Empirical Analysis of an Evolving Social Network. *Science* **311**(5757), 88-90.
- Losyk, B., 1997. Generation X. *Futurist* **31**(2), 39.
- Meier, S., Stutzer, A., 2008. Is Volunteering Rewarding in Itself? *Economica* **75**, 39-59.
- Montgomery, R. D., Mitchell, M.A., Bauer, D.L., 2000. A Changing Marketplace: Marketing Religion and Spirituality to Generation X. *Journal of Ministry Marketing & Management* **6**, 35.
- National Church Life Survey (2006). *Regional Church Life Profile* Uniting Church SA.
- Rajulton, F., Ravanera, Z.R., Beujot, R., 2007. Measuring Social Cohesion: An Experiment using the Canadian National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating. *Social Indicators Research*. **80**, 461-492.
- Sawkins, J. W., Seaman, P.T., Williams, H.C.S., 1997. Church attendance in Great Britain: An ordered logit approach. *Applied Economics* **29** (2): 125-134.
- Skousgaard, H., 2006. A Taxonomy of Spiritual Motivations for Consumption. *Advances in Consumer Research* **33**, 289 - 296.
- Singleton, A., Mason, M., Webber, R., 2004. Spirituality in Adolescence and Young Adulthood: A Method for a Qualitative Study. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* **9**(3): 247-262.
- Thoits, P. A., Hewitt, L.N., 2001. Volunteer Work and Well-Being. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* **42**(2), 115-131.
- von Sinner, R., 2007. The Churches Contribution to Citizenship in Brazil. *Journal of International Affairs* **61** (1), 171-184.
- Yrle, A. C., Hartman, S.J., Payne, D.M., 2005. Generation X: Acceptance of others and teamwork implications. *Team Performance Management* **11**, 188-199.

Wilson, J., 2000. Volunteering. *Annual Review of Sociology* **26**, 215.

Wilson, J., Musick, M.A., 1998. The Contribution of Social Resources to Volunteering. *Social Science Quarterly* **79**, 799-814.

Wilson, J., Musick, M.A., 1997. Work and Volunteering: The Long Arm of the Job. *Social Forces* **76**, 251-272.