
DISSECTING THE SYMBIOSIS OF CAPITALISM IN CHURCH INSTITUTIONS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF TECHNOLOGICAL LITERACY AND INFORMATION SYSTEM BASED ACCOUNTABILITY

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Abstract: This article presents a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) that critically examines the intersections of capitalist logic, church information systems, technological literacy, and accountability in religious institutions. Using the Scopus database, it analyzes academic research on church information systems, revealing that these systems are not neutral tools but often embody capitalist values such as administrative efficiency, managerial control, and symbolic transparency. Consequently, congregants are treated more as objects of reporting than as active participants in decision-making. The study employs theoretical frameworks from Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault: Habermas' communicative action theory advocates for dialogical, domination-free communication, while Foucault's ideas highlight how information systems function as mechanisms of control and surveillance, reinforcing church elites' authority. The review identifies common issues, including the marginalization of spiritual values, increased digital divides, and limited community involvement. Technological literacy disparities create new hierarchies within church communities. However, the article also highlights alternative approaches that integrate religious values into system design, promote digital literacy, and foster accountability based on relational and spiritual ethics. Ultimately, it calls for church information systems that are not only efficient but also socially inclusive, morally grounded, and theologically informed.

Keywords: Capitalism; Church; Accountability; Information System; Critical Theory.

INTRODUCTION:

Information technology has become the backbone of modern organizations, including religious institutions. Churches, as social and spiritual organizations, are increasingly adopting information systems (IS) for various functions such as financial management, administration, online services, and accountability reporting. However, this adoption of information technology does not occur in a vacuum. In practice, dominant capitalist values such as efficiency, bureaucratic transparency, and performance management often shape the architecture and implementation of church information systems (Trotta et al., 2024) (Hegazy, 2021). Rather than simply supporting the church's mission of service and devotion, information systems often reinforce hierarchical control and provide symbolic transparency that minimizes real participation. (Andok, 2023). While technologically advanced, these systems can exclude many congregants due to low digital literacy. Feder Cooper (Cooper et al., 2022) Note that technological infrastructure without equitable literacy will deepen social inequalities and enable the dominance of decision-making by technological elites within institutions.

This issue is further complicated in the context of the Evangelical Christian Church in Timor (GMIT), where social, spiritual, and cultural diversity collides with modern administrative demands. Previous studies, such as Masse & Galela (Masse & Galela, 2016), have primarily focused on church information systems from a technical and normative perspective. However, they tend to overlook the deeper questions of power, values, and spirituality embedded in the design and use of these systems.

This study aims to critically examine how ecclesiastical information systems are represented in scholarly literature and how the logic of capitalism and power structures shape the direction of their development. Using a critical theoretical framework, particularly Habermas's theory of communicative action and Foucault's concept of "regimes of truth," this study explores how information systems mediate authority, marginalize spiritual narratives, and shape institutional behavior. Ultimately, this research aims to offer an alternative vision of an ecclesiastical information system that is not only technically effective but also ethically rooted, participatory, and contextual to the theological and cultural realities of the local church.

METHODOLOGY SECTION

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach with a critical synthesis method, which aims not only to summarize existing literature but also to analyze it reflectively and ideologically based on a critical theory approach. This approach was chosen so that the review process is not solely oriented towards the accumulation of normative knowledge, but rather opens up space for deconstructing the dominant assumptions that shape the narrative of church information systems.

The literature search was conducted systematically through the Scopus database, chosen because it is one of the leading and most trusted scientific journal indexes. The keywords used in the search included: "church information system," "digital religion," "religious accountability," "critical theory and technology," "capitalism and religion," and "technological literacy in church." This combination of keywords was designed to encompass both the theological and technological domains of religious institutions.

The inclusion criteria in article selection are as follows:

1. Articles published between 2000–2025;
2. Written in English;
3. Discuss topics related to information systems, digital literacy, or accountability practices in the context of religious institutions or churches;
4. Indexed in the Scopus database (minimum category Q1–Q3);
5. It has thematic relevance to the logic of capitalism, technological dominance, or a critique of information practices in the church.

Of the 126 articles resulting from the combined search results, an initial screening was conducted based on title and abstract. Then, 60 articles deemed to have potential were fully read. From a further selection process and critical analysis, 3–5 key articles were selected to be the focus of the in-depth analysis.

Each selected article was analyzed thematically using open coding to identify key emerging themes, such as: administrative efficiency, power relations in information, digital literacy in the church, spirituality in technological systems, and symbolic transparency. Following the thematization process, a critical synthesis of the articles' content was conducted by comparing each perspective based on the theoretical frameworks of Habermas and Foucault, to uncover the ideologies underlying the representation of the church's information system.

Thus, this methodology not only reveals dominant patterns of thinking in academic literature but also offers alternative reflections on how information systems can be ethically and contextually redesigned based on spiritual values and social justice.

RESULTS

Capitalism and Church Information Systems

One of the key findings of this study is how church information systems are trapped within the logic of capitalism, which emphasizes efficiency, performance, and data-driven measurement. Trotta (Trotta et al., 2024) note that many church information systems are designed to resemble the corporate institutional model, with an emphasis on quantitative reports and organizational performance measures. This approach demonstrates a shift in orientation from spirituality-based ministry to institutional management with a greater emphasis on administrative professionalism.

Possamai (Hegazy, 2021) even introduced the concept of "religionizing capitalism," which refers to how religious institutions adopt market mechanisms and commodification through digital platforms. In this context, churches not only use technology as a tool but also engage in the production and distribution of value in accordance with market logic. This is reinforced by Samuelson & Yang (Appau & Yang, 2024), who show that marketing narratives are often integrated into church information systems, transforming congregations into spiritual consumers whose progress needs to be managed, targeted, and reported.

However, not all views in the literature are pessimistic about the use of technology in churches. Campbell (Campbell, 2010) introduced the idea of "community negotiation," which suggests that churches have the capacity to adapt their use of technology based on local values and the spiritual needs of the community. The social and cultural context in which a church is located influences how information systems are designed and used.

Furthermore, Conwill (Conwill et al., 2025) emphasize the importance of Catholic values such as subsidiarity, solidarity, and social justice in information system design. They emphasize that church information systems should not be separated from the church's moral and spiritual teachings. Inclusive and contextual information system design allows these values to be lived out in the daily practices of church ministry.

Thus, digital capitalism is not the sole force shaping church information systems. There is room for negotiation between faith values and technological logic, depending on the critical awareness of church communities in their design and implementation.

Technological Literacy and the Digital Divide

The digital literacy gap is a particularly prominent issue in the context of information system adoption in church settings. Equitable digital literacy encompasses more than just technical skills in using software or hardware, but also encompasses a critical understanding of how information is collected, controlled, and disseminated within church systems.

Feder Cooper (Cooper et al., 2022) and Mónica Andok (Andok, 2023) show that digital systems designed without transparency often create imbalanced power structures. In many cases, only a handful of people in church leadership truly understand how the system works and how data is managed, while the majority of congregants remain passive users. This gives rise to a new form of digital hierarchy, where power derives not only from institutional position but also from control over technology and data.

Ward Sr. (Ward, 2018) describes the phenomenon of the "electronic church" as a form of church dependence on digital media to carry out its functions. While providing a broader reach, this dependence can actually widen the gap in engagement between the church and its congregation, especially for groups that lack or have limited access to technology. A digital church that is not balanced with community empowerment strategies risks creating digital exclusion.

In response to these challenges, an empowerment approach is crucial. Green & Papp (Ganiel, 2021) underscore the urgency of digital literacy training as part of spiritual empowerment. They argue that digital understanding and skills must be developed not only for technical purposes but also as a means of strengthening ethical awareness and active participation in church life.

Atenas et al (Atenas et al., 2023) add the concept of "critical data literacy," emphasizing the need for congregations to be critically aware of how their data is used. This literacy extends beyond simply using tools and encompasses ethical questions such as: Who has access to congregational data? For what purposes is the data used? Is the data used to build a community or for control?

Thus, technological literacy in the church context is not merely an operational tool, but is the foundation of digital justice and meaningful spiritual engagement.

Accountability and Transparency in Church Information Systems

Accountability practices in the church are often reduced to financial reports prepared according to formal accounting standards. However, this narrow understanding fails to capture the complex ethical and spiritual relationships inherent in church reporting practices. In the context of information systems, accountability should be understood not merely as an administrative obligation, but as a practice of communicating faith, openness, and community responsibility.

Shadle (Shadle et al., 2020) critiques churches that adopt a corporate-style audit model as a form of accountability legitimacy. He argues that this approach results in symbolic transparency—reporting that appears technically accurate but lacks spiritual and ethical meaning. Mónica Andok (Andok, 2023) adds that information technology-based reporting tends to replace moral discourse with technocratic metrics that are alienated from the values of faith communities.

Alternatively, Robert Henry and Caroline Tait (Henry et al., 2017) introduce the concept of "relational accountability," which refers to a form of accountability built on social and spiritual relationships between community members. In this model, financial reporting is not merely an administrative document but also a space for shared dialogue and reflection that fosters the growth of faith and solidarity.

Kimion Tagwirei (Tagwirei, 2024) also emphasize that church information systems should provide space for ethical reflection and collective participation. Accountability is not simply a matter of accountability to a hierarchical structure, but rather to the faith community being served. Therefore, an inclusive information system must open up space for discussion, collaborative evaluation, and enable active intervention by the congregation.

Thus, church accountability in the context of information systems not only needs to be administratively transparent but must also reflect the spiritual, participatory, and relational values that underlie church ministry.

Digitalization of worship practices and its implications for church AIS

Several post-2020 studies have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digitalization of religious practices, from liturgical streaming to online donations, directly impacting the needs of church-based Accounting Information Systems (AIS). Empirical research confirms that this shift goes beyond new technology to transform information flows, administrative control, and congregation-church relationships (Parish, 2020) (Ganiel, 2021) (Kühle & Larsen, 2021). With the increasing use of digital platforms, church-

based AIS needs to accommodate the integration of digital transaction data, online participation recording, and reliable cross-platform reconciliation without compromising privacy and spiritual values.

Key implications: SIA must support audit trails for online donations, accommodate worship metadata (e.g., online attendance, engagement), and provide not only financial but also qualitative reporting on mission accomplishments. Case studies across countries demonstrate wide variation in technical readiness and reconciliation processes, making a modular and interoperable SIA architecture imperative (Przywara et al., 2021)(Roso, 2023).

Technological literacy gaps and the risks of digital hierarchies

Cross-contextual research highlights that digital literacy within church communities is highly heterogeneous: while some leaders are technologically savvy, many congregants (including vulnerable groups) lag. This gap creates a new “digital hierarchy” of institutional power based not only on ritual positions but also on control of data and platforms (Andok, 2023) (Cooper et al., 2022) (Atenas et al., 2023). Critical data literacy is needed for congregants to understand who accesses their data, for what purposes, and how to demand accountability.

Practical implications: A values-based digital literacy training program (Ganiel, 2021) and a simple UI/UX design for SIA (Moon, 2021) will reduce exclusion and strengthen participation. Empirical evaluations also show that congregational engagement increases when the system includes a participatory interface and ethical explanations for data use (Jacobi et al., 2022).

Accountability: from corporate audit to relational accountability

Critical literature challenges the adoption of mechanistic corporate auditing as the sole framework for ecclesial accountability. Selected studies propose relational accountability, fostered through dialogue, shared reflection, and theological context, as an alternative more aligned with pastoral goals (Henry et al., 2017)(Shadle et al., 2020)(Tagwirei, 2023). Formal financial reporting remains essential, but without participatory spaces and mission narratives, reporting tends to become “symbolic transparency” that asserts administrative legitimacy without spiritual meaning.

SIA design recommendations: in addition to standard financial reports, provide narrative/qualitative reporting modules (service stories, testimonials), mission dashboards (attendance indicators, social programs), and internal public dialogue/comment features to increase community engagement (Conwill et al., 2025)(Richards, 2024).

Data governance, ethics, and regulation

With the increasing volume of data collected by churches, from attendance data to donor information, ethical questions about data ownership, access, and retention become crucial. Several studies have highlighted the need for internal policies (data protection, retention policies) and role-based access control mechanisms to prevent misuse (Trotta et al., 2024)(Ignatowski et al., 2024). Furthermore, an ethical framework informed by church traditions (subsidiarity, solidarity) can help formulate principles for data use that align with faith values (Conwill et al., 2025).

Best practices: integrate a communicative (not just legal) privacy policy, transaction encryption/security, and regular independent audits for sensitive SIA modules (e.g., donor database).

Leadership, human resources, and organizational adaptation

Recent literature suggests that digital transformation requires role transfer (e.g., administrative manager → data analyst), ongoing training, and recognition of pastoral capacity as part of information governance (Coe & Inanoglu, 2025)(Schlag et al., 2025). Hybrid leadership that understands both technology and pastoral values is key to the successful ethical adoption of AIS.

Intervention suggestions: design an SIA competency development program for church leaders; form cross-functional teams (technology, finance, ministry) to maintain a balance of values and efficiency.

AI, automation, and theological boundaries

Several early studies (2024–2025) began to examine the potential and risks of AI in church contexts, from administrative automation to pastoral care (Ignatowski et al., 2024)(Nord & Schleier, 2025)(Isetti et al., 2025). While AI can accelerate reporting and analytics processes, concerns remain about bias, the dehumanization of ministry, and the ethical implications of AI taking on pastoral roles.

Recommended policy: use AI for administrative tasks (recon, summary reporting), not for theological or pastoral decision-making; apply the principles of algorithmic transparency and human review before output is published.

Contextual differences and culturally sensitive design

Cross-national research confirms that SIA adoption is influenced by cultural factors, local regulations, and church traditions (Tagwirei, 2023) (Kołodziejska et al., 2024). Therefore, a successful SIA is modular, adaptable to African, European, or Asian contexts, and allows for customization of reporting processes and internal approval flows to suit local traditions.

Non-financial measurements as part of mission reporting

Various authors highlight the importance of non-financial indicators (congregational engagement, social-program impact, relationship roles) as part of reports reflecting pastoral goals (Benjamins, 2025)(Thesnaar, 2024). Modern ecclesiastical SIA needs to include both qualitative and quantitative metrics to holistically depict mission success.

Critical Theory as an Analytical Tool

In analyzing the phenomenon of church information systems, a critical theory approach is a vital tool. Habermas and Foucault, two central thinkers in the critical theory tradition, provide a highly relevant conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between technology, power, and communication within church institutions.

Habermas (Habermas, 1984), with his theory of communicative action, emphasized the importance of a public sphere that allows for communication free from domination. In the context of church information systems, this approach raises a critical question: Does such a system allow for rational and equal participation by all parties? Or does it produce a one-way form of communication that reinforces elite authority?

In contrast, Foucault (Foucault, 1977) demonstrated that information technology is never neutral, but is always involved in the production of knowledge and power. Foucault's concept of "regimes of truth" explains how the church, through its information systems, can determine what is considered truth, who has the authority to voice it, and how it is recorded, tracked, and monitored.

Using the framework of these two figures, the church information system can be read not merely as an administrative tool, but as a field for contestation of values, ideology, and power. Habermas helps direct the system toward dialogue, deliberation, and participation. Meanwhile, Foucault opens a critical awareness of the practices of surveillance, normalization, and exclusion that may be present within the system.

Thus, critical theory is not only used as an analytical tool, but also as a normative guide in designing an ethical, participatory, and liberating church information system.

Comparison of Expert Views

TABLE 1 Comparison of Expert Views

Theme	Capitalist View	Critical View
Objectives of IS	Control, performance, efficiency ((Trotta et al., 2024) (Appau & Yang, 2024))	Ethical reflection, service (Shadle et al., 2020)(Henry et al., 2017)
Technology Literacy	Depends on the elite, exclusive (Ward, 2018) (Andok, 2023)	Community empowerment (Ganiel, 2021)(Atenas et al., 2023)
Accountability	Corporate style audit (Hegazy, 2021)	Participatory and spiritual (Tagwirei, 2024)(Conwill et al., 2025)
Theological Values	Marginalization of spiritual values (Hegazy, 2021)	Integration of ethical-theological values (Campbell, 2010)(Conwill et al., 2025)

RESULTS

Habermas VS Foucault

Habermas and Foucault's framework provides a critical lens for assessing how church information systems are influenced by the logic of capitalism, technological literacy, and accountability practices, as reflected in the analyzed literature.

From Habermas's perspective, information systems should be a vehicle for communicative action, a space for dialogue that enables communication free from domination (Habermas, 1984). However, studies by Trotta et al. (Trotta et al., 2024) and Samuelson & Yang (Appau & Yang, 2024) show that many church information systems are reduced to tools for corporate-oriented performance control and reporting. This reinforces Habermas's view that deliberative communication has been replaced by instrumental communication. Conversely, Campbell (Campbell, 2010) and Conwill et al. (Conwill et al., 2025) provide examples of how church communities can negotiate technology to align with the values of their faith. Such efforts align with Habermas's idea of creating a rational, participatory, and contextual public sphere.

Meanwhile, from Foucault's perspective, information systems function as instruments of discipline and surveillance (disciplinary power) that produce "institutional truth" (Foucault, 1977). Mónica Andok (Andok, 2023) and Feder Cooper et al. (Cooper et al., 2022) show how the control of data by a small elite creates new digital hierarchies within the church. This practice reflects what Foucault calls regimes of truth: truth determined by power structures, not by rational consensus. In fact, the transparency displayed through digital reporting is often merely symbolic (Shadle et al., 2020) (Andok, 2023) serving to legitimize the power of the church hierarchy rather than foster congregational participation.

This tension is also evident in the issue of technological literacy. Ward (Ward, 2018) shows that the "electronic church" model expands reach but simultaneously widens the digital divide. Atenas et al. (Atenas et

al., 2023) Emphasize the importance of critical data literacy so that congregations can understand who controls their data. When viewed through Habermas's lens, digital literacy is a prerequisite for enabling communicative participation. However, when viewed through Foucault's lens, critical literacy becomes a means of resistance to the power operating through information systems.

In the context of accountability, Habermas advocates for information systems to function as dialogical media that facilitate relational accountability (Henry et al., 2017)(Tagwirei, 2024), rather than simply corporate-style audits (Hegazy, 2021). Foucault, on the other hand, helps us understand how formal reporting can become an instrument of surveillance and normalization of congregational behavior (Shadle et al., 2020).

Thus, the literature reviewed in this SLR demonstrates a pattern consistent with the analyses of Habermas and Foucault. On the one hand, there is potential for information systems to serve as a medium for participation and communication free from domination. On the other hand, there is a significant risk that these systems will be used as instruments of power, producing elite versions of truth and marginalizing congregational spiritual narratives. The alternative vision offered is to build an ecclesiastical information system that is aware of power relations (Foucault, 1977), while also being committed to creating dialogical and deliberative spaces (Habermas, 1984).

CONCLUSION

This systematic study shows that church information systems are not value-free, but rather shaped by the dominant logic of capitalism and the internal power structures of religious institutions. The accountability and efficiency displayed are often symbolic and exclusionary, widening the gap between elites and congregations.

Using a critical approach, we suggest designing information systems that are more socially just, politically participatory, and theologically contextual. The church needs to develop systems that serve not only as administrative tools but also as vehicles for transformative communication, spiritual reflection, and values-based ministry.

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