

ONLINE YOUTH RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND ENGAGEMENTS IN A DIGITAL CULTURE.

Inaku K. EGERE

*Department of Communication Studies, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port
Harcourt, Nigeria.*

Corresponding email: inakuegere@yahoo.com

&

Montfort Chukwuebuka OKWARA

*Department of Communication Studies, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port
Harcourt, Nigeria.*

Email: montfortokwara@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examined online youth religious communities and patterns of engagement in a digital culture. It investigates how digital platforms have reshaped patterns of religious engagements, identity formation, and communal belonging among young people especially young Catholics in Port Harcourt within the wider context of digital culture and contemporary youth religiosity. The research was motivated by observable shifts from exclusively parish-based participation to digitally mediated forms of religious interaction and the limited empirical data on how these developments shape Catholic youth faith practice in South-South Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was adopted. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to young Catholics across selected parishes in Port Harcourt. Responses were analysed using descriptive statistics based on a four-point Likert scale. The findings indicate that young Catholics actively participate in multiple online religious communities, particularly through WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, YouTube channels, and livestreamed liturgical services. Engagement was found to be frequent and participatory, involving prayer, access to teachings, and interaction with religious content. The study further revealed that online religious engagement contributes to personal devotion, understanding of Catholic doctrine, and a sense of religious belonging. However, challenges such as distraction, superficial participation, exposure to conflicting teachings, and unstable internet access were also identified. The study concludes that online religious communities have become important complementary spaces for faith interactions among young Catholics, especially within digitally oriented culture. It therefore recommends that the church strengthen its pastoral presence in digital spaces, provides structured and credible online platforms for youth engagement, and encourage a balanced integration between online participation and active parish life.

Keywords: *Catholic Youth, Digital Culture, Online Religious Communities, Online Religious Engagement, Pastoral Communication.*

Introduction

The turn of the twenty-first century has been marked by the profound expansion of digital culture, reshaping social, cultural, and religious landscapes across the globe. Digital culture comprises the practices, norms, and meanings generated through widespread adoption of digital technologies such as social media, mobile applications, and online platforms (Moberg & Sjö, 2020). For youth populations in particular, digital environments are not merely tools for communication but spaces of identity formation, communal interaction, and meaning-making (Okhueleigbe & Omoko, 2025). Religious expression and participation, once predominantly confined to physical sacred spaces, are now increasingly mediated through online environments, giving rise to what scholars describe as “digital religion” the use of digital media in producing, experiencing, and negotiating religious beliefs and communities. This paradigm shift has significant implications for how young people engage with faith, construct religious identities, and experience belonging in an age of networked connectivity (Rainie & Wellman, cited in MDPI, 2025).

The rise of online religious communities reflects this transformation. Globally, religious institutions have adopted digital platforms to maintain communal life, facilitate worship, and extend pastoral outreach beyond geographic boundaries. Social media channels, live-streamed services, and faith-based forums now serve as virtual altars where sermons are shared, prayers are offered, and spiritual resources are accessed (Megwas, Ihechu, Benson-Eluwa, & Osuagwu, 2025). In the context of Christianity, and particularly among youth cohorts, these digital spaces offer interactive and relational platforms where religious content is not just received but co-constructed through engagement, dialogue, and shared practice. As Pasuang and colleagues (2025) argue, digital platforms function not merely as channels of one-way communication but as dynamic spaces for teaching faith and building religious communities that resonate with the lived reality of the digital generation.

In Nigeria, the influence of digital culture on religious expression has become increasingly visible. With an exceptionally youthful population nearly 60% under the age of 25. Nigeria's digital engagement sits among the highest in Africa, driven by expanding internet penetration and mobile connectivity. Recent studies highlight that Nigerian youths are actively shaping and negotiating their identities within digital cultures that intertwine secular and sacred domains (Japhet, Gbule, & Opara, 2025). Digital media now play dual roles: they connect young people to global religious discourses while simultaneously exposing them to a spectrum of influences that may challenge conventional frameworks of religious socialization. While these platforms offer opportunities for spiritual growth, they also present risks including identity fragmentation, exposure to misinformation, and the potential erosion of traditional religious norms (Japhet, Gbule, & Opara, 2025).

The Catholic Church, as one of the oldest and most institutionally structured Christian traditions, has engaged the digital turn more cautiously than some other denominations. Historically, media engagement in Nigerian Catholicism lagged behind more media-oriented Pentecostal movements; scholars note that the Church's appropriation of new information and communication technologies has often been tentative and uneven (Ihejirika, 2025). Yet this traditional caution coexists with an emerging recognition of the pastoral potential of digital spaces both for evangelization and for maintaining communal ties with younger generations. The Church's evolving approach reflects broader ecclesiological debates about how to integrate digital culture ethically and theologically into religious life without diminishing the core of embodied, sacramental community.

Port Harcourt, an urban epicentre in Southern Nigeria, embodies the intersection of youth vibrancy, digital engagement, and robust Catholic presence. With a growing population of young Catholics who are digitally active, the city presents a critical context for examining how digital culture

shapes religious experience. Young Catholics in Port Harcourt navigate multiple worlds: the lived traditions of parish life, peer cultures mediated by digital technologies, and the global flow of religious content online. Despite the prevalence of these mediated experiences, there remains a paucity of empirical research exploring how online religious communities function in the Catholic context of Port Harcourt and how they influence youth engagement with faith practice and identity.

This study focused specifically on young Catholics in Port Harcourt matters for several reasons. First, youth in this demographic represent both the present and future of the Church's faith continuity; their patterns of engagement can either invigorate or destabilize communal religious life. Second, failure to understand the role of digital religious communities risks leaving pastoral practice unresponsive to the realities of how young Catholics experience and negotiate their faith daily. Without empirical insight into these dynamics, Church leaders may overlook opportunities for meaningful digital pastoral initiatives, and young believers may remain underserved in their spiritual formation. This research thus addresses a gap in the literature by examining the forms, meanings, and consequences of online youth religious communities among young Catholics in Port Harcourt.

Against this backdrop, the present study explores the level of digital religiosity among young Catholic youths in Port Harcourt, seeking to illuminate how online engagements shape religious participation, identity, and community in a digital age. Identifying these patterns is essential not only for academic discourse but also for informing pastoral practices that resonate with the lived experiences of digital natives within the Catholic tradition.

Statement of the Problem

Across many Catholic dioceses in Nigeria, declining youth participation in physical parish activities contrasts sharply with their vibrant engagement in digital religious spaces, suggesting not a loss of faith but a

transformation in how religious experiences are expressed within an evolving digital culture. While traditional Church structures emphasize sacramental presence and physical gathering, many young Catholics increasingly encounter and practice their faith through WhatsApp prayer groups, Instagram catechesis, livestreamed Masses, and YouTube reflections spaces that often operate beyond formal ecclesial integration. The core challenge, therefore, lies in understanding how these mediated environments shape belief, identity, and belonging rather than dismissing them as mere tools. Despite global scholarship on digital religion, there remains limited empirical research on Catholic youth online engagement in South–South Nigeria, particularly in Port Harcourt, a city characterized by a youthful population, high digital penetration, and strong Catholic presence. This lack of localised data constrains both academic inquiry and pastoral planning, risking misinterpretation of youth spirituality and widening the gap between institutional Church life and lived youth experience. Consequently, this study is justified as a necessary empirical investigation into the digital religious lives of young Catholics in Port Harcourt.

Objectives of the study

The general objective is to examine online youth religious communities and engagements in a digital culture among young Catholics in Port Harcourt Diocese, Nigeria. The specific objectives are:

1. To Identify forms of online religious communities available to young Catholics
2. To examine patterns of youth Participation and engagement online
3. To assess the influence of digital religious communities on faith practice and identity
4. To explore perceived benefits and challenges of online religious engagement

Research questions

1. What types of online religious communities do young Catholics in Port Harcourt participate in?
2. How frequently do young Catholics engage with online religious platforms?
3. How does participation in online religious communities influence the faith practice of young Catholics?
4. What challenges do young Catholics encounter in online religious spaces?

Scope of the study

This study is delimited to an examination of online religious communities and patterns of engagement among young Catholics in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The focus is specifically on Catholic youths within the age bracket of 18 to 35 years who are active members of selected parishes in the metropolis. The study considers their participation in digital religious platforms such as WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, YouTube channels, and livestreamed liturgical services. Conceptually, the study is confined to four key areas: the identification of available online religious communities, the patterns and frequency of youth engagement, the influence of such engagement on faith practice and religious identity, and the challenges encountered in online religious spaces. It does not extend to a comparative analysis with other Christian denominations or non-Christian religious groups, nor does it provide a theological evaluation of digital liturgy.

Geographically, the study is limited to Port Harcourt and does not cover other dioceses or regions within Nigeria. Methodologically, it relies on data obtained through a survey design using structured questionnaires, thereby reflecting the perceptions and self-reported experiences of respondents at a particular point in time. As such, the findings are context-

specific and may not be generalised beyond similar urban Catholic settings without caution.

Review of Related Literature

Online Religious Communities

Online religious communities refer to digitally mediated networks of believers who gather through internet-based platforms to share faith, prayer, teachings, and communal support. Unlike traditional parish-based communities defined by physical proximity, online religious communities are shaped by interaction, shared symbols, and sustained communication within digital environments. Campbell (2013) defines online religious communities as spaces where “religious beliefs and practices are performed, negotiated, and given meaning through digital media” (p. 58). This definition underscores that online religious communities are not merely extensions of offline worship but contexts where religious life is actively constructed.

From a pastoral communication perspective, Egere emphasizes that community within the Church has always been closely tied to modes of communication. He argues that “changes in the communication media have always had mammoth consequences on the Church's understanding of its own nature and mission” (Egere, 2019, p. 213). Within this framework, online religious communities can be understood as contemporary expressions of ecclesial communion shaped by digital culture. While such communities may lack physical sacramentality, they foster belonging, spiritual solidarity, and shared religious identity, especially among young people who are native to digital environments. As Rheingold (2000) earlier observed, “virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough to form webs of personal relationships” (p. 5). In Catholic pastoral practice, this raises critical questions about how digital communion complements, rather than replaces, embodied parish life.

Online religious engagements

Online religious engagement refers to the ways individuals participate in religious practices, interactions, and meaning-making through digital platforms. This includes activities such as online prayer, livestreamed worship, listening to sermons, sharing devotional content, and participating in faith-based discussions. Hoover (2006) explains that contemporary religious engagement increasingly occurs within media spaces, noting that “religious meaning is now made, circulated, and contested in media-saturated environments” (p. 29). This suggests that engagement with religion today cannot be separated from digital communication practices.

Egere's pastoral communication framework provides a critical lens for interpreting online religious engagement as a form of lived faith shaped by media culture. He maintains that “every generation has its own means of communication that forms part of its heritage” (Egere, 2019, p. 216), implying that digital platforms have become legitimate spaces where faith is expressed and negotiated. Online religious engagement, therefore, reflects adaptation rather than decline in religiosity, particularly among youths. Helland (2005) further distinguishes between religion online and online religion, arguing that online religion involves “participation in religious practices through the Internet” rather than mere information consumption (p. 2). Within Catholic pastoral contexts, online engagement presents both opportunities for evangelization and challenges related to depth, authority, and sustained commitment.

Digital Culture

Digital culture refers to the shared patterns of communication, interaction, values, and meaning-making that emerge through the use of digital technologies and networked media. It shapes how individuals relate to knowledge, authority, community, and identity in contemporary society. Castells (2010) describes digital culture within the broader network society,

stating that “the network society is a social structure made of networks powered by digital communication technologies” (p. 500). This culture privileges speed, connectivity, participation, and decentralization, transforming social and religious institutions alike.

From Egere's pastoral communication standpoint, digital culture is not morally neutral but deeply formative of religious consciousness. He insists that communication technologies shape how faith is understood and practiced, arguing that the Church must critically engage media culture rather than merely use it instrumentally. This resonates with Campbell's (2012) assertion that “digital media do not simply convey religion; they help shape what religion becomes in a networked society” (p. 67). Within Nigerian society, where youth participation in digital culture is intense, digital spaces have become sites of religious encounter, negotiation, and identity formation. While digital culture offers new avenues for evangelization and community-building, it also poses pastoral challenges, including superficial engagement, fragmented authority, and competing religious narratives.

Empirical Review

Megwas, Ihechu, Benson-Eluwa, and Osuagwu (2025) conducted a mixed-methods study titled “Digital Christianity: Evaluating Exposure, Knowledge, and Use of Faith-Based Social Media Handles by Christians in Southeast Nigeria.” The study examined the level of exposure, knowledge, and use of faith-based social media platforms among Christians in Southeast Nigeria. Using a structured questionnaire, data were collected from 400 respondents drawn from 20 urban communities, out of which 375 valid responses were analyzed. The findings revealed a high level of exposure to faith-based social media platforms among Christians in the region, with NSPPD and “We Are Catholics” emerging as the most frequently followed handles. Facebook and YouTube were identified as the dominant platforms for religious engagement, and most respondents reported daily usage ranging

between one and three hours. The study further showed that participants possessed a clear understanding of the functions of these platforms in preaching, prayer, and the dissemination of church-related information. Respondents also actively utilized the platforms to access religious content and participate in virtual faith activities. The study concluded that digital faith-based platforms serve as effective channels for religious connection and church communication among Christians in Southeast Nigeria. It recommended that pastors and ministers integrate digital media strategies into church communication and maintain multiple religious social media platforms to broaden outreach and engagement within the Christian community (Megwas et al., 2025).

Japhet, Gbule, and Opara (2025) conducted a mixed method study titled “Shaping Identity, Shaping Futures: The Socio-Religious impact of Digital Culture on Nigerian Youth (p 9). The study examined the relationship between digital culture and youth identity formation in Nigeria within the context of expanding social media use and a rapidly growing youth population. Adopting a mixed-methods research design, the study explored how digital platforms shape young people's self-understanding, social relationships, and worldviews. The analysis was grounded in technological determinism and social learning theory, which provided a framework for understanding how digital environments influence identity construction. The findings revealed a dual and complex impact of digital culture on youth identity. On the positive side, digital platforms were found to facilitate self-expression, civic engagement, entrepreneurship, and creative innovation among young people. Conversely, the study identified significant challenges associated with digital participation, including increased social media pressure, exposure to cyberbullying, and the gradual weakening of cultural and religious identity. The study contributes to empirical discussions on digital culture and youth identity in Nigeria by emphasising the need for a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between digital media,

identity formation, and socio-religious contexts. It further highlights implications for policymakers, educators, and parents in addressing both the opportunities and risks associated with youth engagement in digital spaces (Japhet, Gbule, & Opara, 2025).

Adamu and Osasona (2024) examined digital faith communities among Ghanaian and Kenyan youths, showing that online platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups serve as intercessory prayer chains and digital fellowship spaces. The study emphasised the relational functions of digital communities, where regular sharing of testimonies and prayer requests fosters a sense of belonging that youth described as spiritually meaningful, even when it does not replicate traditional worship settings. Through qualitative interviews, this research captured the depth of relational engagement in African digital faith spaces, demonstrating that youths experience digital communities as “extended ecclesial networks” rather than mere information channels (Adamu & Osasona, 2024).

Ihejirika (2025) conducted research in the field of media religion and culture, making extensive comparative analyses of the Catholic and Pentecostal churches in Nigeria and their different communication strategies. He highlighted the appropriation of new information and communication technologies by these two Christian denominations in Nigeria. He paid special attention to the Catholic Church, because, unlike the Pentecostal denominations which see media technologies as an extension of the church pulpit, the Catholic Church has generally exhibited a somewhat cold attitude towards these instruments of mass communication. This attitude goes back to the advent of cinema which the Church's hierarchy then saw as having the potential of corrupting faith and moral. The Catholic Church has remained largely a print-based Church, investing most of her communication energy in the print media and in oral catechism. But in recent years, this negative attitude of the Church has started to change. Of all the technologies of mass communication, none has been so instantly accepted and embraced by the

Catholic Church as the new information and communication technologies. Using the Mater Cyberworld, (a cyber-café founded by the Ahiara Mbaize Catholic Diocese in Eastern Nigeria), as a case, he highlighted some distinctive characteristics of the Catholic Church's involvement in the new information and communication technologies. The analysis shows that this media appropriation is one of the means through which the Catholic Church establishes a strong presence in the Nigerian socio-political sphere. He analyzed the Catholic Church's adoption of new information and communication technologies (NICTs) across Nigeria, concluding that while the Church has begun to incorporate digital tools for communication, its strategies remain largely reactive and underdeveloped relative to rapidly growing youth digital cultures. The study utilized qualitative interviews with clergy and youth ministers to understand institutional perceptions of digital media. Findings showed that many Catholic leaders recognise digital platforms' potential for evangelization, yet they lack coherent frameworks for integrating these tools into structured youth ministry, resulting in patchy and uneven digital engagement (Ihejirika, 2025).

Taken together, the reviewed empirical studies demonstrate a growing scholarly interest in the relationship between digital media, religion, and youth identity in Nigeria and the wider African context. While existing studies confirm the increasing use of digital platforms for religious engagement and identity formation, they also reveal significant gaps, particularly in the area of structured institutional responses and the long-term socio-religious implications of digital faith participation. Additionally, there is limited research on the comparative effectiveness of different digital platforms in fostering spiritual growth among youth, as most studies focus on usage patterns rather than outcomes. Few studies examine the role of socio-economic and geographic factors in shaping access to and participation in digital faith communities. There is also a paucity of longitudinal research tracking changes in youth religious identity over time in response to digital

engagement. Moreover, the ethical and pastoral challenges posed by online faith communities—such as misinformation, virtual misconduct, and boundary-setting—remain underexplored. Finally, existing literature often neglects the voices and experiences of clergy and faith leaders in adapting to digital evangelisation, leaving a critical perspective on institutional readiness and leadership strategies largely unexamined. These gaps collectively provide the rationale and foundation for the present study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two theories: the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Social Presence Theory. The Uses and Gratifications Theory, advanced by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), posits that media users are active participants who select media to satisfy specific psychological and social needs. In the context of youth religiosity, UGT helps explain why young Catholics intentionally engage with online religious platforms to meet spiritual, social, and informational needs such as prayer, fellowship, religious learning, and peer support.

The Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) emphasizes the degree to which communication mediums convey a sense of personal, social, and emotional presence. In online religious spaces, social presence is critical for fostering communal engagement, maintaining relational ties, and creating shared spiritual experiences among youth who may be physically distant from parish life. High social presence in platforms like WhatsApp prayer groups, Facebook pages, or livestreamed Masses allows young Catholics to perceive others as “present” and actively participating, thereby promoting relational cohesion, collective identity, and spiritual reinforcement.

By integrating these two theories, this study conceptualizes youth online religious engagement as a motivated, interactive, and socially mediated process, shaped by personal spiritual needs and the capacity of

digital platforms to simulate relational presence. UGT provides the lens to understand why youths engage, while Social Presence Theory explains how online religious interactions can sustain community, identity, and faith practice in the digital age. Together, these theories provide a robust foundation for interpreting patterns of participation, perceived influences on faith and identity, and challenges within digital Catholic spaces in Port Harcourt.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, appropriate for examining patterns of participation, perceptions, and experiences of young Catholics within online religious communities. The study was conducted in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, an urban center with a dense concentration of Catholic parishes and a youthful, digitally active population. The target population comprised young Catholics aged 18–35 years who are registered members of selected parishes within the metropolis. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed: selected Catholic parishes were first purposively chosen based on active youth presence, after which respondents were randomly sampled within parish youth groups, yielding a sample size considered adequate for survey analysis. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to elicit information on forms of online religious communities, frequency and modes of engagement, perceived influence on faith practice and identity, and challenges encountered in digital religious spaces. The instrument was validated through expert review and a pilot test to ensure clarity and reliability. Data were analysed using descriptive statistical tools such as frequencies, percentages, and tables, with interpretations aligned to the research questions. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study: participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, anonymity and confidentiality were assured, and the data were used strictly for academic purposes.

Data presentation and analysis

RQ1: What types of online religious communities do young Catholics in Port Harcourt participate in?

Table 1: Online religious communities available to young Catholics

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Sum	Decision
WhatsApp prayer and fellowship groups are common among youth	98	87	29	16	230	Accept
Facebook Catholic pages / groups serves as religious communities	84	91	35	20	230	Accept
YouTube channels function as spaces for Catholic teaching and worship	76	94	41	19	230	Accept
Livestreamed Mass platforms form a sense of online religious community	69	88	46	27	230	Accept

The data above show strong agreement that WhatsApp prayer and fellowship groups, Facebook Catholic pages, YouTube religious channels, and livestreamed Mass platforms function as online religious communities. The concentration of responses within the “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” categories across all items suggests that young Catholics recognize and actively identify multiple digital platforms as spaces of religious community. This indicates that online religious communities among youths are diverse and not limited to a single platform.

RQ2: How frequently do young Catholics engage with online religious platforms?

Table 2: Patterns of youth participation and engagement online

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Sum	Decision
I engage with online religious platforms on a daily basis	81	89	38	22	230	Accept
I participate in online prayers and devotions	92	84	31	23	230	Accept
I watch or listen to online sermons and teachings	104	79	27	20	230	Accept
I comment, share, or react to religious contents online	67	83	49	31	230	Accept

Data generated through the survey method reveal that a substantial proportion of respondents reported frequent engagement with online religious platforms, particularly in activities such as watching sermons, participating in online prayers, and interacting with religious content. The descriptive analysis indicates that online religious engagement among young Catholics is both regular and participatory rather than occasional or passive. This pattern reflects consistent use of digital platforms as part of everyday religious practice.

RQ3: How does participation in online religious communities influence the faith practice of young Catholics?

Table 3: Influence of online religious communities on faith practice of young Catholics

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Sum	Decision
Online religious platforms strengthen my personal prayer life	88	90	32	20	230	Accept
Online participation improves my understanding of Catholic teachings	94	86	28	22	230	Accept
Online religious communities increase my sense of belonging	71	89	44	26	230	Accept
Online engagement encourages active faith practice offline	63	81	55	31	230	Accept

The above analysis shows that most respondents agree that online religious engagement strengthens personal prayer life, enhances understanding of Catholic teachings, and contributes to a sense of belonging. Although a smaller number of respondents expressed reservations about the impact on offline faith practice, the overall pattern of responses suggests that online religious communities play a meaningful role in reinforcing faith identity and devotional life among young Catholics.

RQ4: What challenges do young Catholics encounter in online religious spaces?

Table 4: Challenges encountered in online religious engagement

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Sum	Decision
Online religious platforms are often distracting	101	82	29	18	230	Accept
Online religious engagement encourages superficial participation	89	76	41	24	230	Accept
Conflicting religious teaching online create confusion	93	71	43	23	230	Accept
Poor internet access affects meaningful online participation	78	85	39	28	230	Accept

The data above show that respondents identified distractions, superficial engagement, exposure to conflicting teachings, and poor internet connectivity as significant challenges. The clustering of responses within the “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” categories indicate that while online religious platforms provide access and connection, they also present limitations that may affect depth, focus, and clarity of faith engagement. These challenges highlight the need for guided and intentional pastoral presence within digital religious spaces.

Overall, the data analysis demonstrates that online religious communities are widely accessible and actively used by young Catholics in Port Harcourt, with noticeable influence on faith practice and identity, alongside identifiable challenges that require pastoral and institutional attention.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study contribute significantly to ongoing scholarly conversations on digital religion by demonstrating that online religious communities have become a recognizable and functional part of Catholic youth religious life in Port Harcourt. The findings relating to research question one, which sought to identify the forms of online religious communities available to young Catholics in Port Harcourt, show that

respondents widely recognized WhatsApp prayer groups, Facebook Catholic pages, YouTube channels, and livestreamed Mass platforms as active spaces of religious community. The responses in Table 1 demonstrate strong agreement that these platforms function as places where young Catholics encounter religious teachings, share prayer intentions, and maintain a sense of spiritual connection. This finding corresponds with the empirical observations of Campbell (2013), who argues that digital media enable believers to construct communities that transcend geographical boundaries. It also resonates with the study on faith-based social media engagement in Southeast Nigeria, which reported that Christians regularly gather around digital religious handles for prayer, teaching, and community interaction. Within the framework of Uses and Gratifications Theory, the finding suggests that young Catholics deliberately turn to these platforms to meet specific spiritual and communal needs. In addition, Egere's pastoral communication perspective is relevant here, as he emphasises that changes in communication media inevitably reshape the forms through which religious communities are expressed and sustained.

With regard to Research Question Two, the data in Table 2 reveal that young Catholics engage actively and frequently with online religious platforms, particularly through watching sermons, participating in online prayers, and interacting with religious posts. The strong concentration of responses in the “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” categories indicates that online religious engagement has become a routine element of faith practice among many respondents. This finding supports earlier empirical studies which note that digital platforms increasingly function as everyday spaces where religious meaning is constructed and shared (Hoover, 2006). It also aligns with research on digital youth culture in Nigeria, which demonstrates that social media participation forms part of the daily communicative habits of young people. Interpreted through Uses and Gratifications Theory, the pattern suggests that youths intentionally seek religious content online to

satisfy devotional, informational, and social motivations. Egere's view that every generation expresses faith through the communication forms available to it also provides an important pastoral explanation for the regularity of such engagement.

In relation to Research Question Three, Table 3 indicates that participation in online religious communities has a noticeable influence on the faith life and identity of young Catholics. A majority of respondents agreed that online engagement strengthens their prayer life, deepens their understanding of Catholic teachings, and enhances their sense of belonging to the faith community. These findings correspond with empirical studies on digital religion which show that online religious participation can reinforce spiritual practices and sustain communal identity among believers (Helland, 2005). The results also echo research on digital youth identity in Nigeria, where scholars observe that online environments increasingly shape how young people interpret their social and religious identities. Within the theoretical framework of Uses and Gratifications, this outcome reflects the capacity of digital religious spaces to fulfil spiritual and relational needs. For Egere, such influence illustrates how digital media can serve as channels for transmitting religious meaning and sustaining faith awareness among contemporary believers.

The responses related to Research Question Four, presented in Table 4, reveal that online religious engagement also presents certain challenges for young Catholics. Many respondents acknowledged that digital platforms can create distractions, encourage superficial participation, expose users to conflicting religious teachings, and sometimes limit meaningful engagement due to poor internet connectivity. These observations are consistent with Campbell's (2012) argument that digital media can fragment religious authority and introduce competing interpretations of faith within online environments. Empirical research on digital youth culture in Nigeria has also identified similar concerns regarding information overload, online pressure,

and the difficulty of sustaining focused engagement in digital spaces. Interpreted through Uses and Gratifications Theory, these challenges indicate that while users actively seek religious content, the digital environment itself may also shape the depth and quality of engagement. Egere's pastoral communication framework further highlights the importance of guiding believers within such environments so that technological possibilities do not weaken the depth of religious formation.

Taken together, the findings of this study present a balanced picture of digital religious life among young Catholics in Port Harcourt. The field data confirm that online religious communities are widely recognized and frequently used, offering meaningful opportunities for prayer, learning, and communal interaction. At the same time, the data reveal structural and pastoral challenges that accompany digital participation. When viewed alongside the reviewed literature and theoretical perspectives, the results suggest that digital religion among Catholic youths is neither a replacement for parish life nor a marginal practice. Rather, it represents an evolving dimension of contemporary religious experience that requires thoughtful pastoral guidance and deliberate integration with the sacramental and communal life of the Church.

Conclusion

The evidence from this study affirms that online religious communities have become a significant arena through which young Catholics in Port Harcourt encounter and practice their faith. Digital platforms are no longer peripheral tools for religious communication; they have evolved into meaningful spaces where prayer, teaching, and communal interaction occur. The study therefore establishes that youth religiosity within a digital culture cannot be adequately understood without acknowledging the role of online environments in shaping patterns of participation and belonging.

At the same time, the findings make it clear that digital religious engagement

carries both promise and risk. While online communities provide accessibility, continuity of interaction, and opportunities for spiritual learning, they also create conditions where religious commitment may become fragmented or superficial if not carefully guided. The presence of conflicting teachings, distractions, and technological limitations further demonstrates that digital spaces alone cannot sustain the depth of faith life expected within the Catholic tradition.

The verdict emerging from this study is that online religious communities should be regarded as complementary arenas of faith formation rather than substitutes for embodied ecclesial life. For Catholic youths, digital engagement has the capacity to enrich religious identity and participation when it is integrated with parish structures, pastoral guidance, and sacramental practice. Consequently, the future of youth pastoral ministry must deliberately embrace digital communication while ensuring that it remains anchored in the communal and sacramental foundations of the Church.

Recommendations

In line with the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. Identification of online religious communities: Catholic dioceses and parishes should deliberately establish and coordinate credible online religious platforms, such as parish WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and livestreamed liturgical channels, to provide structured spaces for youth participation.
2. Youth participation and engagement: Church leaders and youth coordinators should receive basic training in digital communication and content management to facilitate meaningful and interactive engagement with young Catholics online.
3. Influence on faith practice and identity: Pastoral initiatives should intentionally link online religious activities with parish-based

programmes so that digital engagement strengthens rather than replaces participation in sacramental and communal life.

4. Benefits and challenges of online engagement: The Church should promote digital literacy and provide pastoral guidance to help young Catholics navigate online religious spaces responsibly and remain grounded in authentic Catholic teaching.

REFERENCES

- Adamu, I., & Osasona, S. (2024). Online religious communities and youth fellowship dynamics in Africa. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 6(3)
- Benkler, Y. (2006). *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*. Yale University Press.
- Beyer, P. (2013). Religion in the context of globalization: Essays on concept, form, and political implication. *Religion*, 43(2), 203–215.
- Bosch, R., & Schmidt, J. (2024). Catholic youth media engagement in urban South Africa. *Journal of Religion and Media*.
- Boyd, D. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press.
- Campbell, H. A. (2012). Understanding the relationship between religion online and offline in a networked society. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80(1), 64–93.
- Campbell, H. A. (2013). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. Routledge.
- Castells, M. (2010). *The rise of the network society* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Cheong, P. H. (2012). Authority. In H. A. Campbell (Ed.), *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds* (pp. 72–87). Routledge.

- Durkheim, É. (2001). *The elementary forms of religious life* (C. Cosman, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1912).
- Egere, I. K. (2019). Interlock of communication and theology in managing religious violence in *Sub-Saharan Africa*. *Asian Horizons*, 13(2), 211–224.
- Elias, N., & Lemish, D. (2009). Spinning the web of identity: The roles of the internet in the lives of immigrant adolescents. *New Media & Society*, 11(4), 533–551.
- Helland, C. (2005). Online religion as lived religion: Methodological issues in the study of religious participation on the Internet. *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 1(1), 1–16.
- Hjarvard, S. (2011). The mediatisation of religion: Theorising religion, media and social change. *Culture and Religion*, 12(2), 119–135
- Hoover, S. M. (2006). *Religion in the media age*. Routledge.
- Ihejirika, W. C. (2025). In-line religion: Catholic Church and NICTs in Nigeria. *Politics and Religion Journal*.
- Japhet, T., Gbule, N. J., & Opara, C. (2025). *Socio-religious impact of digital culture on Nigerian youth*. Khazanah Journal.
- Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1974). *Uses and gratifications research*. Sage Publications.
- Lövheim, M. (2011). Young people, religious identity, and the Internet. In M. Lövheim (Ed.), *Mediatization and religion: Nordic perspectives* (pp. 59–74). Nordicom.
- Megwas, N. U., Ihechu, P. I., Benson-Eluwa, V., & Osuagwu, G. A. (2025). Digital Christianity: Exposure and use of faith-based social media. *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation*.
- Meyer, B. (2015). Mediation and immediacy: Sensational forms, semiotic ideologies, and the question of the medium. *Social Anthropology*, 23(2), 161–177.

- Muthoni, L., & Kavoi, M. (2023). Online worship and youth engagement in Kenya. *Kenya Religious Studies Review*.
- Nwagbara, U., & Uzochukwu, C. (2015). Youth, social media, and political participation in Nigeria. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 7(3), 309–324.
- Ojebode, A. (2018). Digital media, religion, and civic engagement in Nigeria. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 17(4), 135–147.
- Okhueleigbe, O.A&Omoko, N. (2025). Hyperreal cartographies of friendship from gen. A to gen. Alpha. *Journal of Innovative, Communication and Media Studies*, (4), 72-83
- Pew Research Center. (2018). The future of world religions: *Population growth projections, 2010–2050*. Pew Research Center.
- Postman, N. (1993). *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology*. Vintage Books.
- Rheingold, H. (2000). The virtual community: *Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. MIT Press.
- Short, J., Williams, E., & Christie, B. (1976). *The social psychology of telecommunications*. London: John Wiley & Sons.
- Stark, R., & Glock, C. Y. (1968). American piety: *The nature of religious commitment*. University of California Press.
- Stout, D. A. (2012). Media and religion: Foundations of an emerging field. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 11(1), 1–19.
- Tufekci, Z. (2017). Twitter and tear gas: *The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.
- Ukah, A. (2007). African Christianities: *Features, promises, and problems*. *Exchange*, 36(3), 258–276.