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# Forms and Platform Ecologies of Digital Christian Education in Selected Churches in Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria: A Source-Based Exploratory Account

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**Abstract**
Digital Christian education is reshaping how churches teach Scripture, sustain discipleship, and extend spiritual formation beyond physical gatherings. Yet empirical evidence regarding the specific platform ecologies and pedagogical configurations of this transition in Nigerian urban contexts remains fragmented. This article provides a conceptual and exploratory analysis of digital educational practices in selected churches within Ibadan Metropolis, Oyo State, Nigeria. Drawing on a secondary synthesis of the quantitative survey strand from an exploratory study (N=200 valid responses from church leaders, Christian educators, and active members), the paper evaluates how digital media intersect with traditional church instruction. Rather than presenting unverified statistical distributions, the study analyzes qualitative relative patterns documented in the primary thesis record. Findings indicate four principal forms of engagement: online Bible-study groups, livestreamed worship and teaching, digital devotional distribution, and social-media-based discipleship. WhatsApp emerged as the most widely used medium for group communication and coordination, while Facebook and YouTube supported broadcast teaching, and Zoom and Google Meet facilitated structured synchronous classes. The dominant operational pattern was hybrid, wherein digital platforms extended inter-gathering continuity without replacing face-to-face fellowship. Interpreted through an integrated theoretical framework combining the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), and Media Ecology Theory, the paper argues that platform choice is a pedagogical and theological decision governed by user familiarity, data affordability, leadership support, and institutional purpose. The article concludes with a framework for platform audits, low-bandwidth design, and pastoral governance in urban African churches.

**Keywords:** Digital Christian education, digital religion, platform ecology, hybrid learning, church education, Technology Acceptance Model

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## 1. Introduction

Christian education involves more than the routine transmission of religious information. It encompasses the intentional formation of biblical understanding, spiritual identity, ethical conduct, devotional practice, and communal participation within a faith community. Historically, churches have pursued these educational mandates through established settings such as Sunday school classes, weekly Bible studies, catechism sessions, pulpit preaching, small-group discipleship, and formal theological training. The rapid proliferation of digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) has not supplanted these core educational functions; rather, it has reconfigured the communication environments through which Christian teaching is delivered, encountered, discussed, and internalized.

Digital religion scholarship emphasizes that online religious practices are deeply interwoven with offline institutional structures, cultural norms, and physical gatherings (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Within this broader field, digital Christian education represents a specific pedagogical domain: the intentional utilization of internet-enabled digital media for biblical instruction, theological education, discipleship, devotional guidance, and ministry training. Its contemporary expressions include instant-messaging Bible study groups, livestreamed sermons, downloadable devotional guides, social media discussion forums, virtual prayer cells, and video-conferencing classes.

The specific media platform through which Christian education occurs is not pedagogically neutral. Instant-messaging platforms like WhatsApp are structured around mobile group messaging and asymmetrical notifications; video-sharing platforms like YouTube prioritize searchable, asynchronous video archiving; social networking services like Facebook combine real-time broadcasting with social feed circulation; and video-conferencing tools like Zoom or Google Meet emphasize synchronous, multi-point audio-visual interaction. Each platform possesses technical affordances that encourage certain modes of learning while constraining others. A livestreamed service expands geographical reach but positions the participant primarily as a passive viewer; a messaging group fosters continuous dialogue but risks message overload and unstructured discussion. Consequently, the central analytical concern is not merely whether churches adopt digital tools, but how distinct platform properties align with specific educational and theological objectives.

While existing research in Ibadan, Nigeria, has established that churches extensively utilize ICTs and social media for general religious communication, public relations, and sermon broadcasting (Ogunsola & Raji, 2021; Omotayo, 2017), less attention has been directed toward the platform ecologies supporting structured Christian education. This article addresses this empirical and conceptual gap by addressing three core research questions:

1. What principal forms of digital Christian education are utilized by selected churches in Ibadan Metropolis?
2. What platform ecologies support these educational forms, and what factors shape user platform preferences?
3. What pattern of online-offline integration characterizes digital Christian education in this urban Nigerian setting?

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This paper makes a distinct conceptual contribution by separating general platform presence from structured educational use. It synthesizes data from a primary thesis record (Bamigbola, 2024) through an integrated theoretical framework, arguing that platform selection must be evaluated against criteria of interactive engagement, infrastructural accessibility, pedagogical continuity, theological accountability, and embodied fellowship.

## 2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

### 2.1 Digital Religion and Christian Education

Digital religion is best conceptualized as a negotiated space where traditional religious practices intersect with digital media environments (Campbell, 2013; Helland, 2005). Rather than creating a detached 'virtual religion,' digital tools are typically embedded within pre-existing offline religious institutions and social networks (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Hutchings, 2017).

An analytical distinction must be maintained between digital religious communication and digital Christian education. General religious communication includes publicity announcements, promotional posts, and broadcast sermons intended for broad public outreach. In contrast, Christian education requires structured learning design, incorporating defined educational objectives, facilitated interaction, systematic biblical interpretation, participant feedback, and intentional pastoral application. Merely streaming a worship service or posting a scriptural quote on social media does not automatically constitute an educational process.

Furthermore, scholarship cautions against binary views that pit online learning against physical gathering (Hutchings, 2017). In urban African contexts, digital media often operate as supplements to, rather than substitutes for, face-to-face congregational life. While digital channels provide flexibility for members facing urban commute challenges or irregular work schedules, physical gatherings remain central for mentoring, sacral participation, mutual accountability, and embodied community.

### 2.2 Contextual Realities of Urban Nigeria

Applying digital education frameworks in Ibadan Metropolis requires attention to local infrastructure and socio-economic dynamics. While mobile smartphone penetration in urban Nigeria is high, participation in digital education is mediated by material constraints: high costs of mobile internet data, network bandwidth instability, frequent electricity outages, and the reliance on shared household devices (GSMA, 2023; World Bank, 2022). Moreover, African Christian pedagogy has historically emphasized relational, oral, and communal modes of learning. Digital tools can democratize access to teaching materials, but high data demands can inadvertently exclude lower-income members. Therefore, platform selection in urban Nigerian churches is constrained by data efficiency and network accessibility.

### 2.3 Integrated Theoretical Framework

To interpret platform choice and educational integration, this study synthesizes three complementary theoretical models: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), and Media Ecology Theory.

**1. Technology Acceptance Model (TAM):** Formulated by Davis (1989), TAM posits that technology adoption is determined by Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use

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(PEOU). In this study, TAM serves as an ex-post qualitative interpretive lens. Perceived usefulness reflects how church leaders and members evaluate a platform's capacity to enhance teaching reach and continuity. Perceived ease of use encompasses user familiarity, minimal technical complexity, and low data consumption.

**2. Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB):** Ajzen's (1991) model adds subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. Church participation is socially organized; leadership approval and congregational expectations (subjective norms) grant spiritual legitimacy to digital channels. Perceived behavioural control accounts for individual digital literacy, device availability, and internet access.

**3. Media Ecology Theory:** Drawing on McLuhan (1964) and Postman (1992), Media Ecology examines how media environments structure human perception, interaction, and authority. While TAM and TPB explain why a platform is adopted, Media Ecology analyzes how the adopted medium reshapes the educational process, turning broadcast channels into passive viewing spaces and messaging groups into conversational networks.

## 3. Methodology, Scope, and Research Ethics

### 3.1 Study Setting and Target Population

The empirical domain of this study is restricted to selected churches within Ibadan Metropolis, Oyo State, Nigeria. Ibadan represents a major South-Western urban center characterized by a diverse religious landscape, encompassing historical mainline Protestant denominations, large Pentecostal/charismatic ministries, evangelical independent churches, and Catholic parishes.

The target population comprised pastors, Christian education directors, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, media personnel, and adult church members actively engaged in church-based educational programs. 'Selected churches' refers specifically to congregations that maintained active, identifiable digital education channels. Consequently, non-adopting churches were excluded, meaning this study evaluates user practices within adopting congregations rather than overall adoption prevalence across Ibadan Metropolis.

This article represents a secondary synthesis and qualitative re-interpretation based on the quantitative survey strand of a master's thesis completed at the University of Ibadan (Bamigbola, 2024). The primary study utilized a structured questionnaire to capture digital media practices across selected Ibadan churches. Out of 240 administered instruments, 218 were retrieved. After data cleaning and screening for completeness (>20% missing items excluded), a final valid analytical denominator of N = 200 responses was retained.

Because the original sampling frame and raw item-level frequency tables could not be independently audited for raw counts, this paper avoids fabricating numerical distributions. Instead, it synthesizes the verified relative qualitative patterns and thematic classifications documented in the primary thesis record.

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### 3.3 Research Ethics and Governance

The underlying data collection adhered to standard academic ethical protocols. Institutional clearance was secured through departmental review at the University of Ibadan. Informed consent was obtained from all survey respondents prior to instrument administration. To protect institutional privacy and fulfill confidentiality commitments, individual church names are anonymized using site codes (e.g., SITE-01 to SITE-12). Recruitment protocols were designed to minimize potential coercion arising from pastoral authority, ensuring voluntary member participation.

## 4. Source-Based Synthesis of Digital Christian Education Patterns

Synthesizing the documented findings from the primary thesis record (Bamigbola, 2024) reveals distinct structural forms, platform preferences, and operational models across the studied Ibadan congregations.

### 4.1 Principal Forms of Digital Christian Education

Digital Christian education in the selected sites operates not as a single uniform activity, but as a portfolio of four distinct functional forms:

1. **Online Bible-Study Groups:** Asynchronous or synchronous small-group Scripture reading, textual analysis, and practical application conducted primarily via instant messaging. These groups provide midweek learning continuity between Sunday physical services.
2. **Livestreamed Worship and Teaching:** Real-time broadcasting of weekend sermons, expository Bible lectures, and midweek teaching services via video platforms. This form prioritizes broad reach and accessibility for absent or distant members.
3. **Digital Devotional Distribution:** Daily or weekly dissemination of concise devotional commentaries, prayer points, and memory verses formatted as text messages, graphics, or short audio clips.
4. **Social-Media-Based Discipleship:** Facilitated group interaction focused on peer encouragement, topical Christian ethical discussions, leadership training, and informal pastoral care.

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**Table 1: Author Synthesis and Theoretical Classification of Digital Christian Education Forms**

| Form of DCE | Primary Functional Objective | Pedagogical Requirements | Primary Platform Environments | Theoretical Lens Mapping |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Online Bible Study | Expository reflection, Scripture application, peer discussion. | Active facilitation, conversational norms, feedback loops. | WhatsApp, Telegram | TAM: High Perceived Usefulness & Ease of Use |
| Livestreamed Teaching | Sermon broadcasting, lecture delivery, archival access. | Reliable video capture, stable internet, passive viewing management. | YouTube, Facebook Live | Media Ecology: Broadcast environment; low interaction |
| Digital Devotionals | Daily spiritual reflection, Scripture memory. | Concise messaging, low data footprint, readable graphics. | WhatsApp Status, Broadcast Lists | TAM: Optimized for low bandwidth & mobile ease |
| Social Media Discipleship | Topical mentoring, ethical reflection, pastoral check-ins. | Group moderation, safe space governance, leadership oversight. | WhatsApp Groups, Zoom, Google Meet | TPB: Subjective norms & leadership endorsement |

### 4.2 Platform Ecology and Adoption Drivers

The data demonstrates that churches operate within a platform ecology, deploying multiple digital tools based on functional specialization rather than relying on a single application.

**Table 2: Functional Mapping of Platform Affordances, Observed Uses, and Operational Limits**

| Platform | User-Reported Primary Use | Technical Affordances | Observed Operational Constraints & Risks |
|---|---|---|---|
| WhatsApp | Group Bible studies, devotional text distribution, ministry coordination. | Mobile ubiquity, asynchronous messaging, low data consumption, group controls. | Chat fragmentation, message overload, unmonitored side-conversations. |
| Facebook | Live video streaming, public event broadcasting, sermon clips. | Social feed circulation, wide public reach, notification alerts. | Algorithmic feed distractions, low viewer retention, passive consumption. |
| YouTube | On-demand video archiving, structured sermon series, Bible lectures. | Searchable video storage, high-definition streaming, playback speed control. | High data consumption, lack of built-in interactive feedback mechanisms. |

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| Platform | User-Reported Primary Use | Technical Affordances | Observed Operational Constraints & Risks |
|---|---|---|---|
| Zoom / Google Meet | Real-time interactive classes, leadership training, executive meetings. | Synchronous audio-visual multi-point interaction, screen sharing, breakout rooms. | High data bandwidth cost, schedule rigidity, participant screen fatigue. |

WhatsApp emerged as the dominant platform for routine, midweek educational contact. Interpreted through TAM, its widespread adoption is driven by high Perceived Ease of Use (minimal technical barrier, existing user familiarity) and Perceived Usefulness (ability to function effectively under low bandwidth and unstable power conditions). Facebook and YouTube serve as broadcast engines for public teaching, while Zoom and Google Meet are reserved for specialized, synchronous interactive classes due to higher data costs.

### 4.3 Operational Pattern: Hybrid Integration

The dominant operational pattern across selected Ibadan churches is hybrid integration. Digital platforms do not replace physical church gatherings; rather, they serve as extensions that maintain educational continuity between Sunday services.

Digital tools extend the temporal and spatial reach of church education, allowing members with demanding work schedules or long urban commutes to remain connected to the church curriculum. However, face-to-face settings retain primary importance for spiritual mentoring, pastoral care, and embodied communal practices.

## 5. Critical Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

### 5.1 Beyond Technical Adoption: Affordances, Exclusion, and Familiarity

A critical finding of this synthesis is that platform adoption must not be equated with educational effectiveness. While WhatsApp is widely adopted due to low data demands, its unstructured chat interface can lead to fragmented discussions, off-topic postings, and information overload. Conversely, while video platforms offer rich instructional capabilities, high data costs create a risk of digital exclusion for lower-income church members.

Furthermore, user familiarity with social media often reflects pre-existing personal habits rather than intentional pedagogical design. When churches adopt a platform simply because members already use it, they risk importing casual social media communication norms into sacred instructional spaces. Effective digital Christian education requires transforming familiar communication channels into structured learning environments through intentional moderation, clear study prompts, and active facilitation.

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### 5.2 Framework for Church Practice

To optimize digital Christian education, church leaders and Christian educators should adopt a structured four-stage operational framework:

1. **Platform & Pedagogy Audit:** Map learning objectives to specific platform affordances; assess congregational data affordability and device access.
2. **Low-Bandwidth Inclusive Design:** Provide audio-only, text-summary, and downloadable formats; establish asynchronous study options for shared devices.
3. **Educator Capacity & Intergenerational Teams:** Pair media-savvy youth with experienced theological leaders; train facilitators in digital group moderation and privacy.
4. **Theological Governance & Outcome Evaluation:** Establish clear guidelines for content review and privacy; evaluate engagement via discussion quality and pastoral care.

## 6. Recommendations and Future Research

Based on the synthesis of thesis patterns and the theoretical framework, the following prioritized recommendations are offered for local churches and denominational bodies:

1. **Develop Written Digital Education Policies:** Local congregations should formulate clear policy guidelines covering digital curriculum standards, platform usage rules, data privacy, and online safeguarding.
2. **Implement Low-Bandwidth Standards:** Core educational materials (such as Sunday school lessons and Bible study outlines) should be made available in low-data formats including text summaries, audio recordings, and compressed PDFs, to prevent digital exclusion.
3. **Form Intergenerational Ministry Teams:** Churches should establish digital learning teams that combine the technical skills of younger members with the pastoral experience of senior leaders.
4. **Establish Pastoral Governance and Moderation:** Digital study groups should assign trained moderators to guide discussions, correct doctrinal misunderstandings, and maintain respectful online environments.
5. **Prioritize Formative Evaluation:** Educational effectiveness should be evaluated using qualitative indicators such as participant comprehension, discussion quality, and pastoral follow-up rather than superficial metrics like view counts or likes.

### Priorities for Future Empirical Research

Future studies should address the limitations of the current literature by executing comparative empirical research across different denominations and socio-economic contexts. Researchers should utilize validated survey instruments, publish complete item-level response distributions, integrate objective platform analytics, and incorporate qualitative accounts of learner spiritual formation.

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## 7. Conclusion

Selected churches in Ibadan Metropolis demonstrate a dynamic, hybrid approach to digital Christian education. By deploying a platform ecology comprising WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Zoom, and Google Meet, congregations successfully extend biblical teaching beyond the physical sanctuary. Platform selection is mediated by practical considerations of data cost, user familiarity, leadership endorsement, and instructional intent. Ultimately, digital Christian education achieves its spiritual objectives when technology is subordinated to sound pedagogy, inclusive access, theological accountability, and the relational building of Christian community.

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