

Research paper

Digital Religious Engagement after Covid-19: Experiences of Online Prayer and Church Attendance among University of Ibadan Students

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted traditional religious practices globally, compelling faith-based communities to adopt digital platforms for worship, prayer meetings, and fellowship. Although physical religious gatherings resumed fully after the pandemic, many university students continue to engage in online religious activities. This *development* raises critical questions about how students perceive and experience digital religious participation and its relationship with traditional physical fellowship. This study explored the lived experiences of Faculty of Education students at the University of Ibadan regarding online prayer meetings and physical church attendance in the post-COVID-19 era. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological research design, eleven participants were purposively selected from among students with experience of both online and physical religious engagement. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Five interconnected themes emerged from the findings: digital convenience and spiritual compromise, factors sustaining online religious participation, the irreplaceable nature of physical fellowship, challenges of online religious engagement, and envisioning a hybrid model for the future. The findings reveal that while online prayer meetings offer flexibility and accessibility, they are perceived as inadequate substitutes for the communal, spiritual, and accountability dimensions of physical church attendance. The study concludes that a complementary hybrid approach is most desirable among students in the post-COVID-19 digital era.

Keywords: digital religious engagement, online prayer meetings, physical church attendance, covid-19, digital spirituality

Religious participation has historically been inseparable from physical gathering. Congregational worship, communal prayer, shared fellowship, and face-to-face spiritual accountability have constituted the foundation of religious life across traditions. Physical religious spaces provide more than sites for spiritual exercise; they serve as arenas for interpersonal **relationships**, communal identity formation, spiritual mentorship, and social support networks that sustain individual and collective faith (Cnaan et al., 2021). For university students in particular, religious communities often function as important sources of belonging, meaning-making, and moral orientation during a formative and often challenging period of life (Leffel et al., 2022).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019, and the global spread that followed in 2020, created unprecedented disruptions in virtually every domain of social life, including religious practice. Government-mandated lockdowns, social distancing protocols, and restrictions on gatherings forced religious organisations worldwide to suspend physical worship activities and transition rapidly to digital alternatives. Online streaming

platforms, social media, virtual prayer meetings, and mobile applications became the new infrastructure for religious engagement, enabling congregations to maintain spiritual activities during extended periods of physical separation (Acheampong & Acheampong, 2021; Idler et al., 2021).

Initially regarded as emergency responses to an extraordinary crisis, digital religious practices proved sufficiently functional and appealing to many participants that they persisted beyond the pandemic period. Even as physical gatherings resumed, a notable proportion of worshippers continued to engage with online religious content alongside, or in some cases in place of, attending physical services. University students, as a population characterised by strong digital fluency, flexible schedules, and diverse social commitments, emerged as particularly active participants in continued online religious engagement (Muñoz-García & Villanueva-Blasco, 2022).

This development has provoked considerable scholarly and pastoral interest. Advocates of digital religious participation highlight the accessibility, convenience, and geographical reach of online platforms, which enable students to maintain spiritual connections with home communities, access diverse teaching, and engage in religious activities without interrupting academic schedules (Campbell, 2020). Critics, however, raise concerns about whether online participation provides the depth of community, spiritual accountability, embodied worship, and relational intimacy associated with physical religious gatherings (Chiroma & Kure, 2022). These contrasting positions reflect broader debates regarding the relationship between digital technologies and religious authenticity, community, and commitment.

Nigeria presents a particularly significant context for examining these questions. Religious participation rates in Nigeria are among the highest in the world, with Christian university students typically maintaining active involvement in campus fellowships, local churches, and interdenominational organisations (Pew Research Center, 2010). Religion in this setting also functions as a major axis of identity, moral formation, and social integration, with implications for communal cohesion that extend well beyond individual devotion (Fabode, 2012). Prior work in this context has examined how religious commitments shape economic ethics and civic responsibility, underscoring the role of religion as a formative influence on values and everyday conduct beyond formal worship settings (Oyewole, 2026). The Faculty of Education at the University of Ibadan represents a student population with high levels of religious engagement and meaningful exposure to digital technologies, making it an appropriate site for investigating how post-pandemic digital religious practices are understood and navigated in the Nigerian university context.

Despite growing international scholarship on digital religion and the COVID-19 pandemic, relatively limited research has examined the specific experiences and perceptions of Nigerian university students regarding online prayer meetings and physical church attendance in the post-pandemic period. Understanding students' phenomenological experiences, including their motivations, perceived benefits, challenges, and views on the future relationship between online and physical religious engagement, is important for religious organisations, campus ministries, and educators seeking to support the spiritual well-being of students in an increasingly digital world.

Therefore, this study explored the lived experiences of Faculty of Education students, University of Ibadan, regarding online prayer meetings and physical church attendance in the post-COVID-19 era. The study examines students' perceptions of online religious engagement, the factors that sustain or diminish their participation, comparative experiences of online and physical worship, challenges encountered in digital religious settings, and perspectives on the future of religious engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious participation and digital technologies

The relationship between religion and digital technology has attracted growing scholarly attention over the past two decades. Digital technologies have progressively transformed how religious communities organise, communicate, and practise faith, with researchers identifying successive waves of digital religious engagement from early websites and online forums to sophisticated live-streaming platforms and virtual reality worship environments (Campbell, 2020). The concept of 'digital religion' captures how the boundaries between online and offline religious practice have become increasingly permeable, with digital spaces functioning not merely as supplements to physical worship but as distinct religious environments with their own dynamics, rituals, and communities (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, digital religious participation was largely voluntary and supplementary. Worshippers who could not attend physical services due to illness, travel, or disability accessed online content, while others used digital platforms to extend their religious engagement between physical gatherings. Research in this period generally found that online religious participation was associated with lower levels of commitment, weaker social bonds, and reduced accountability compared with physical attendance (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). However, scholars also noted that digital platforms enabled novel forms of religious community and spiritual exploration, particularly among younger generations (Heidi Campbell, 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a qualitative shift in this landscape. For the first time, digital platforms became the primary and in many cases sole channel for religious participation for billions of worshippers globally. Religious organisations invested substantially in digital infrastructure, and participants developed new capacities for online worship (Acheampong & Acheampong, 2021). Studies conducted during lockdown periods indicated that many worshippers found digital participation more meaningful and substantive than expected, and that online religious communities demonstrated remarkable resilience and creativity in maintaining fellowship (Idler et al., 2021; Wildman et al., 2020).

COVID-19 and the transformation of religious practice

The pandemic period generated substantial research documenting the rapid transformation of religious practices across traditions and geographies. Across Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and other traditions, religious communities adapted to digital platforms at unprecedented speed, repurposing existing technologies and developing new practices suited to virtual environments (Idler et al., 2021). For Christian communities in sub-Saharan Africa, the transition was particularly significant given the region's high rates of religious participation and the centrality of communal worship in African Christianity (Acheampong & Acheampong, 2021).

Research conducted in Nigerian and broader West African contexts during the pandemic documented widespread adoption of online prayer meetings, virtual church services, and WhatsApp and Zoom-based fellowship groups (Chiroma & Kure, 2022). Studies found that students in particular embraced digital religious participation, utilising platforms that aligned with their existing digital communication practices. In the Nigerian context specifically, Oyewole and Otelaja (2023) documented the significant disruptions COVID-19 created for pre-service teachers, including disruptions to their social, academic, and religious routines, underscoring the extent to which the pandemic reshaped everyday life for Nigerian university students. However, researchers also noted the inequalities introduced by digital transitions, as students with limited internet access, unreliable electricity, or inadequate devices experienced exclusion from online religious activities (Adeyemo & Adeyemo, 2022).

The post-pandemic period has been characterised by a complex negotiation between resumed physical gatherings and persisting digital practices. Rather than a straightforward return to pre-pandemic religious behaviour, many individuals and communities have adopted hybrid approaches that combine physical attendance with selective online participation (Muñoz-García & Villanueva-Blasco, 2022). This development has prompted religious organisations to reconsider their strategies for engagement, pastoral care, and community formation in a digital age.

Perceptions of online versus physical religious engagement

Comparative studies examining how worshippers experience and evaluate online versus physical religious participation have generated nuanced and sometimes contradictory findings. A consistent finding across multiple contexts is that physical religious gatherings are generally perceived as providing richer, more authentic, and more spiritually satisfying experiences than online participation. The embodied dimensions of worship, including music, communal prayer, sacramental practices, and face-to-face fellowship, are identified as elements that digital platforms struggle to replicate (Chiroma & Kure, 2022; Schradie, 2020).

Physical attendance is also associated with stronger social bonds, greater accountability, and more robust integration into religious community life. Studies of university students in particular find that physical participation in campus fellowships and local churches is linked to higher levels of religious commitment, stronger peer relationships, and greater involvement in service and leadership activities (Leffel et al., 2022). The accountability structures inherent in physical attendance, including visibility to leaders and fellow members, shared rituals, and communal expectations, are perceived as important motivators for consistent religious practice.

Online religious participation, by contrast, is frequently characterised by greater passivity, reduced accountability, and weaker social connections. Research has documented tendencies toward distraction, multitasking, and reduced engagement during online services, as well as challenges in maintaining the sense of sacred space and communal presence associated with physical worship (Wildman et al., 2020). Nevertheless, online participation offers distinctive affordances that physical gatherings cannot match, including accessibility for those unable to attend in person, exposure to diverse teaching and worship styles, and the ability to participate anonymously or from any location (Campbell, 2020).

Factors influencing students' religious participation

University students' religious participation is shaped by a complex interplay of individual, social, and structural factors. Academic demands, time constraints, residential patterns, peer influence, and personal spiritual development all contribute to decisions about how, when, and where students engage in religious activities (Leffel et al., 2022). Research consistently finds that the convenience and flexibility of online participation are particularly

salient for students balancing academic, social, and religious commitments, and that digital platforms enable students to maintain religious engagement during examination periods, travel, or other disruptions to routine attendance (Muñoz-García & Villanueva-Blasco, 2022).

Social factors also play an important role. Students whose peers participate in online religious activities are more likely to do so themselves, while those embedded in strong physical religious communities are more likely to prioritise in-person attendance. Campus ministry involvement, relationships with religious mentors and peers, and the culture of specific religious communities all influence students' preferences and practices (Leffel et al., 2022). In the Nigerian context, family religious expectations and the social importance of visible religious participation add additional dimensions to students' decision-making about religious engagement.

Technological factors, including access to reliable internet, device availability, data costs, and digital literacy, also mediate students' participation in online religious activities. Studies in sub-Saharan African contexts have highlighted the digital divide as a significant constraint on equitable participation in online religious activities, with economically disadvantaged students facing greater barriers to consistent online engagement (Adeyemo & Adeyemo, 2022). Oyewole and Jatau (2025) similarly found that among Nigerian educators, technological self-efficacy and access to digital resources were critical determinants of meaningful digital engagement, suggesting that individual confidence with technology and institutional access to digital infrastructure jointly shape the quality of online participation — a dynamic equally relevant to students navigating online religious activities.

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives: phenomenological philosophy and the theory of digital religion. Husserl's phenomenological approach provides the philosophical foundation for the study's focus on the lived experiences of participants, emphasising the importance of understanding how phenomena are experienced and perceived from the first-person perspective (Smith, 2018). Phenomenology is particularly well-suited to exploring complex subjective experiences such as religious participation, where meaning, perception, and embodied experience are central to understanding the phenomenon under investigation.

The theory of digital religion, as developed by Campbell (2020) and Campbell and Evolvi (2020), provides a framework for understanding how digital technologies mediate and transform religious practice. This theory recognises that online and offline religious environments are not simply parallel or competing spaces but interact dynamically, with individuals moving fluidly between them and integrating digital and physical religious experiences in varied and personalised ways. Together, these perspectives enable the study to explore not only what students do in digital and physical religious settings but how they make sense of and assign meaning to their experiences in each context.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is concerned with exploring the essence of lived experiences as perceived and described by individuals who have undergone a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design was appropriate because the study sought to understand the subjective experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes of students regarding online prayer meetings and physical church attendance, rather than to quantify or generalise religious behaviour. The phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to explore the depth and nuance of participants' experiences, attending to the meanings they assign to digital and physical religious engagement in the post-COVID-19 period.

Study setting and participants

The study was conducted in the Faculty of Education, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The Faculty of Education was selected as the study setting because its students represent a cross-section of disciplines with high levels of both digital literacy and religious engagement, making them well-positioned to reflect meaningfully on the study's research questions. The University of Ibadan is one of Nigeria's premier federal universities and is characterised by a diverse student population with active campus religious communities.

Participants consisted of eleven Christian students enrolled in the Faculty of Education who had experienced both online prayer meetings and physical church attendance before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Christian students were specifically selected because the study focussed on prayer meetings and church attendance as primary forms of religious engagement, recognising the predominantly Christian character of the Faculty of Education student population. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 30 years and represented diverse levels, departments, and denominational backgrounds. A demographic profile of participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Demographic profile of participants*

Participant	Age	Gender	Level	Department	Denomination	Years of Online Participation
P1	21	Female	200	Educational Foundations	Pentecostal	3 years
P2	23	Male	300	Human Kinetics	Baptist	3 years
P3	24	Female	400	Guidance and Counselling	Anglican	4 years
P4	22	Male	200	Educational Management	Pentecostal	3 years
P5	25	Female	500	Special Education	Catholic	4 years
P6	20	Female	200	Adult Education	RCCG	2 years
P7	27	Male	PG	Teacher Education	Baptist	4 years
P8	19	Female	100	Educational Technology	Methodist	2 years
P9	30	Male	PG	Educational Foundations	Pentecostal	5 years
P10	22	Female	300	Guidance and Counselling	Anglican	3 years
P11	26	Male	400	Physical Education	RCCG	4 years

Sampling technique

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who possessed direct and meaningful experience with the phenomenon under investigation. This sampling technique is considered appropriate in phenomenological research because it enables the researcher to identify information-rich participants whose experiences align closely with the study's objectives (Patton, 2015). Participants were recruited through campus fellowship networks, departmental notice boards, and peer referrals. Eligibility criteria required that participants had engaged in online prayer meetings during or after the COVID-19 pandemic and had also attended physical church services or prayer meetings, enabling meaningful comparison of both forms of engagement.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted individually with each participant. This method was selected because semi-structured interviews enable participants to describe their experiences in depth and in their own words while allowing the researcher to probe emerging themes and seek clarification (Bryman, 2016). An interview guide comprising fifteen open-ended questions was developed around five thematic areas aligned with the research questions: perceptions of online prayer meetings, factors sustaining online participation, comparative experiences of online and physical attendance, challenges of online religious engagement, and views on the future of digital religious practice.

Interviews were conducted in a quiet and confidential setting convenient to participants. Each interview lasted between forty-five and seventy minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted in English, with the researcher clarifying questions where necessary to ensure clear communication.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis procedure: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity before systematic coding commenced. Initial codes were generated from meaningful units within participants' responses and subsequently grouped into broader categories. Related categories were reviewed and refined into coherent themes that captured the essence of participants' lived experiences. The analysis was iterative and reflexive, with themes continuously interrogated against the raw data to ensure authenticity and rigour.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking, whereby preliminary findings were shared with selected participants for verification. Dependability was supported through detailed documentation of all methodological decisions and an audit trail of the analytical process. Confirmability was strengthened by maintaining reflexivity throughout data collection and analysis, with the researcher continuously examining how personal assumptions and experiences might influence interpretation. Transferability was promoted through thick description of the study context, participant characteristics, and analytical procedures.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority before data collection commenced. All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement, having been fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study; participants are identified using codes (P1 to P11) rather than their names. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher. All participants were treated with respect and dignity throughout the research process.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the interview data generated five interconnected themes that capture the essence of Faculty of Education students' lived experiences of online prayer meetings and physical church attendance in the post-COVID-19 era. These themes are: (1) Digital Convenience and Spiritual Compromise, (2) Factors Sustaining Online Religious Participation, (3) The Irreplaceable Nature of Physical Fellowship, (4) Challenges of Online Religious Engagement, and (5) Envisioning a Hybrid Model for the Future. Together, these themes illuminate the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which students navigate digital and physical religious spaces.

Theme 1: Digital convenience and spiritual compromise

The dominant pattern in participants' perceptions of online prayer meetings was a tension between the convenience that digital platforms afford and a perceived diminishment of spiritual depth and communal authenticity. Participants consistently acknowledged that online prayer meetings had become a familiar and accessible feature of their religious lives, particularly during periods of academic pressure or physical unavailability. However, this convenience was frequently described as coming at a spiritual cost.

Subtheme 1.1: Accessibility and flexibility as primary appeals

Participants identified the accessibility and flexibility of online prayer meetings as their most significant advantages. Several noted that online platforms enabled them to maintain religious engagement during examination periods, hospital visits, or when they were far from their home churches.

"During exams, I cannot leave campus to attend church. The online prayer meetings allow me to still participate without travelling. It is very convenient for a student in my situation." (P3)

"I come from Kano and my church is far away. Online prayers help me stay connected to my home fellowship even though I am in Ibadan." (P7)

This accessibility dimension was particularly valued by postgraduate students with heavier academic and personal commitments, who described online participation as a mechanism for sustaining religious engagement that might otherwise lapse entirely during demanding academic periods.

Subtheme 1.2: Perceived spiritual inadequacy of online participation

Despite valuing convenience, the majority of participants expressed a perception that online prayer meetings produced a less spiritually enriching experience than physical attendance. Several described a qualitative difference in the depth of spiritual engagement they experienced in each context.

"When I am at church physically, I feel the presence of God more strongly. Online, I am always slightly distracted or not fully in the moment. Something is missing spiritually." (P1)

"Online prayer is good but it feels incomplete. The spirit of corporate worship is different when you are physically gathered. You cannot replicate that through a screen." (P11)

Participants attributed this perceived spiritual inadequacy to several factors, including environmental distractions at home, reduced sense of sacred space, and the absence of the embodied dimensions of worship such as communal singing, laying on of hands, and shared physical presence.

Theme 2: Factors sustaining online religious participation

Despite recognising the limitations of online prayer meetings, all eleven participants reported continued engagement with digital religious activities in the post-COVID-19 period. Analysis revealed multiple overlapping factors that sustained their online participation beyond the pandemic period.

Subtheme 2.1: Academic demands and time constraints

Academic pressure emerged as the most frequently cited factor sustaining online religious participation. Participants described the university environment as one characterised by competing time demands that made consistent physical church attendance difficult, particularly during intensive academic periods.

"There are weeks when my schedule simply does not allow me to leave campus on a Sunday. Online participation has become a way to remain connected to God and my church without sacrificing my studies." (P9)

"Assignment deadlines, practicals, and tests come when they come. I cannot always plan my spiritual life around a fixed Sunday morning schedule. Online meetings are flexible in ways physical church is not." (P9)

Subtheme 2.2: Continued connection to home and campus communities

Many participants described online prayer meetings as important mechanisms for maintaining connection with multiple religious communities simultaneously, including home churches, campus fellowships, and interdenominational organisations.

"I attend my campus fellowship physically but I also join my home church's midweek prayer online. Without online platforms, I would be completely disconnected from my home church while in school." (P5)

"Online prayer meetings introduced me to fellowships outside my denomination. I have been growing spiritually by joining different prayer groups online that I would never have been able to attend physically." (P7)

Theme 3: The irreplaceable nature of physical fellowship

A prominent and consistent theme across all interviews was participants' strong affirmation of physical church attendance as providing experiences that online platforms could not adequately replicate. Physical fellowship was described as holistically richer, spiritually deeper, and socially more meaningful than digital participation.

Subtheme 3.1: Communal presence and corporate worship

Participants described the experience of worshipping physically alongside others as qualitatively distinct from any form of online participation. The embodied dimensions of corporate worship, including shared music, collective prayer, physical proximity to other worshippers, and the shared use of religious space, were identified as irreducibly important.

"There is something about being in a room full of people all worshipping together that no screen can reproduce. The energy, the anointing, the sense of being part of something larger than yourself. It is simply not the same online." (P2)

"When we pray together physically, I can feel the prayers of the people around me. I can hear them, I can touch them, we are carrying each other spiritually in a way that is impossible through a phone screen." (P6)

Subtheme 3.2: Accountability and spiritual discipline

Physical attendance was also strongly associated with accountability, spiritual discipline, and commitment. Participants described the social visibility and communal expectations of physical church attendance as important motivators for consistent and serious religious engagement.

"When you are in church physically, you cannot pretend. Your pastor sees you, your fellow church members see you. There is accountability that keeps you committed. Online, you can mute yourself, turn off your camera, even sleep. Nobody knows." (P4)

"Physical attendance demands something from you. You have to prepare, to dress, to arrive, to engage. Online you can join in your pyjamas and leave whenever you want. That kind of casualness is not conducive to serious spiritual growth." (P4)

Theme 4: Challenges of online religious engagement

Participants identified numerous challenges associated with online prayer meeting participation. These challenges operated at technological, environmental, social, and spiritual levels and collectively shaped the quality and consistency of their digital religious engagement.

Subtheme 4.1: Technological and infrastructural barriers

Unreliable internet connectivity and the cost of mobile data were identified as the most pervasive technological challenges affecting online religious participation. Many participants described experiences of disconnection, poor audio and video quality, and the frustration of being excluded from participatory moments in online meetings.

"Sometimes I join a prayer meeting and the connection keeps breaking. You miss the prayers, you miss the worship, you miss what the minister is saying. It is very discouraging and you end up feeling more spiritually depleted than refreshed." (P8)

"Data is expensive for students. I cannot always afford to join long online prayer meetings, especially those that run for two or three hours. I have to ration my participation based on my data balance." (P8)

Subtheme 4.2: Distraction and reduced concentration

Home and hostel environments were widely described as poorly suited to focused religious engagement. Participants identified physical distractions, notifications from other applications, and the psychological association of digital devices with non-religious activities as significant challenges.

"My phone is my device for everything, studying, socialising, entertainment. When I am using the same phone for prayer, my mind is not fully in the prayer. A notification pops up and my attention is gone. Physical church does not have these distractions." (P10)

"At home in the hostel, there is noise, there are roommates moving around, there are other things happening. You cannot create the kind of environment that a church building creates. The environment for worship matters greatly." (P3)

Theme 5: Envisioning a hybrid model for the future

When asked about their views on the future relationship between online prayer meetings and physical church attendance, participants converged strongly around the vision of a complementary hybrid model. Rather than seeing online and physical religious participation as competing alternatives, students described a future in which both modes of engagement serve distinct and mutually reinforcing purposes.

Subtheme 5.1: Online as supplement, not substitute

Participants were consistent in their position that online prayer meetings should not replace physical church attendance but should function as a supplement that extends and supports physical participation rather than substituting for it.

"Online prayer meetings should be a bridge, not a destination. They should connect you to the church, maintain your spiritual life when you cannot be there physically, and create hunger to return to the physical community. They should never become the main thing." (P7)

"The church made a mistake during COVID if it thought online was equivalent to physical. It is not. Online is a supplement, a support system. The physical church must remain the centre of Christian life." (P9)

Subtheme 5.2: Recommendations for religious organisations

Participants also offered specific recommendations for how religious organisations should approach the integration of online and physical religious activities. These recommendations emphasised investment in quality digital infrastructure, deliberate efforts to maintain community during online participation, and clear communication about expectations regarding physical attendance.

"Churches need to improve the quality of their online platforms. Poor audio and video drive people away. If the online experience is substandard, people will give up on it. Invest in good technology." (P9)

"Religious organisations should use online platforms to strengthen community, not just broadcast content. Online prayer should feel like an interactive community experience, not just watching a video. Engagement is key." (P7)

"Leaders should be clear that online participation does not replace physical fellowship. Without that clarity, students will use online as an excuse never to attend physically. Both must be cultivated intentionally." (P11)

DISCUSSION

Digital convenience and the spirituality of presence

The finding that students simultaneously value the convenience of online prayer meetings and perceive them as spiritually inadequate reflects a tension that has been widely observed in the literature on digital religion. Campbell (2020) has argued that while digital platforms expand access to religious content and community, they tend to attenuate the embodied, sensory, and communal dimensions of worship that many traditions regard as

spiritually essential. The present study's participants expressed this tension vividly, describing online participation as convenient but somehow incomplete, a finding consistent with Wildman et al. (2020), who found that the perceived spiritual quality of online worship was consistently rated lower than physical attendance even among participants who found value in digital religious engagement.

The concept of sacred space is relevant to understanding this perception. Physical church buildings are invested with religious significance not only through their formal designation but through the accumulated experiences of worship, prayer, and community that occur within them (Chiroma & Kure, 2022). When students participate in online prayer meetings from dormitory rooms, classrooms, or cafeterias, these spaces lack the symbolic and experiential associations that contribute to the sense of spiritual presence reported in physical religious settings. This finding supports the argument that digital religious environments, despite their many affordances, struggle to replicate the spatial and embodied dimensions of physical worship.

The role of community and accountability

The strong emphasis participants placed on the accountability and community dimensions of physical church attendance aligns with substantial prior research on the social functions of religious participation. Leffel et al. (2022) found that for university students, the relational and accountability structures of physical religious communities were among the most important factors sustaining long-term religious commitment. The present study's participants expressed similar views, describing how the social visibility and communal expectations of physical attendance function as positive motivators for consistent religious engagement.

The anonymity and reduced accountability of online participation, on the other hand, were identified as significant limitations. Students described online environments as conducive to passive consumption rather than active spiritual engagement, echoing findings from Schradie (2020) and Muñoz-García and Villanueva-Blasco (2022) that online religious participants are more likely to be observers than active participants. This distinction between consumption and participation is particularly significant for students, whose spiritual formation depends not only on receiving religious teaching but on active engagement in prayer, fellowship, and service.

Structural factors and digital inequality

The technological and infrastructural challenges identified by participants reflect the broader digital inequalities that shape access to and quality of online religious participation in the Nigerian context. The high cost of mobile data, unreliable internet connectivity, and the multipurpose nature of digital devices all emerged as significant constraints on the quality of students' online religious engagement. These findings are consistent with Adeyemo and Adeyemo (2022), who documented the digital divide as a significant source of inequality in online religious participation among Nigerian students. Furthermore, Oyewole and Jatau (2025) demonstrated among Nigerian educators that technological self-efficacy and access to digital resources are jointly critical for meaningful online engagement, reinforcing the present study's finding that both individual digital confidence and access to reliable infrastructure determine the quality of students' online religious participation.

The finding that data costs and connectivity problems discourage sustained online participation has important implications for religious organisations seeking to maintain digital ministries. If online participation requires significant financial investment from students who may already be managing limited resources, the apparently inclusive and accessible nature of digital religious engagement may mask significant inequalities in practice. Religious organisations should consider how they can subsidise or reduce the cost of participation for students with limited financial means.

Towards a complementary hybrid model

The convergence of participants around a hybrid model that combines online and physical religious participation as complementary rather than competing modalities reflects an increasingly prominent position in the literature on post-pandemic religious engagement. Muñoz-García and Villanueva-Blasco (2022) found that the most religiously engaged young people in the post-pandemic period were those who participated in both online and physical religious activities, suggesting that the two modes of engagement are synergistic rather than mutually exclusive. The present study's participants expressed a similar vision, describing online participation as ideally serving to sustain and extend engagement with physical religious communities rather than replace them.

This finding has practical implications for campus ministries and local churches in the Nigerian university context. Rather than viewing online and physical participation as alternatives between which students must choose, religious organisations would benefit from developing integrated approaches that use digital platforms to complement and strengthen physical community. This might include online prayer meetings and discipleship content designed explicitly to prepare participants for physical attendance, digital follow-up for absentees, and online fellowship groups that supplement rather than substitute for in-person community. A comparable argument

has been advanced in relation to Nigerian civic institutions, where continued relevance and effectiveness are shown to depend on deliberate structural adaptation to changing social conditions rather than on the persistence of established practice alone (Obaje & Fabode, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Faculty of Education students at the University of Ibadan regarding online prayer meetings and physical church attendance in the post-COVID-19 era. Using a qualitative phenomenological design and thematic analysis, five interconnected themes were identified: digital convenience and spiritual compromise, factors sustaining online religious participation, the irreplaceable nature of physical fellowship, challenges of online religious engagement, and envisioning a hybrid model for the future.

The findings reveal that students experience a persistent tension between the convenience and accessibility of online prayer meetings and the perceived spiritual depth, communal richness, and accountability of physical church attendance. While online participation offers important affordances for students navigating academic demands, geographical distance, and time constraints, it is widely regarded as an incomplete substitute for the embodied, communal, and accountable experience of physical worship. Physical fellowship is perceived as irreplaceable in its capacity to foster genuine community, spiritual accountability, and the sense of sacred presence that students identify as central to meaningful religious engagement.

The study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on digital religion and post-pandemic religious practice by documenting the specific experiences and perspectives of Nigerian university students, a population whose voices have been underrepresented in the largely Western-dominated literature on digital religion. The findings affirm that the post-COVID-19 religious landscape is characterised not by a straightforward shift to digital participation but by a complex negotiation between online and physical modalities, in which students seek to combine the affordances of both while remaining fundamentally committed to the embodied community of physical religious life.

Religious organisations, campus ministries, and university pastoral services should take account of these findings in developing strategies for engaging students in the post-pandemic period. Investment in quality digital infrastructure, deliberate efforts to maintain community in online spaces, and clear communication about the complementary rather than substitutive role of online participation are all recommended. Future research should examine how hybrid religious engagement models affect long-term spiritual formation, religious commitment, and community belonging among university students in Nigerian and broader African contexts.

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Ethical Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for educational research. Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate departmental and institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Respondents were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there are no competing interests regarding the publication of this paper.

Author Contributions

FSO solely conceptualized the study, developed the research instruments, collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the findings, conducted the literature review, drafted and revised the manuscript, and approved the final version submitted for publication.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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