



The digital pulpit: Leveraging African united methodist church youth social media networks for peer-to-peer evangelism

Nelly Okongo Lutshaka

Institute of Theology and Religious Studies, Africa University, Zimbabwe

*Corresponding author: Nelly Okongo Lutshaka

Received 11 Jun 2026; Accepted 23 Jul 2026; Published 8 Aug 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64171/JAES.6.4.175-179>

Abstract

This study investigates how African United Methodist Church (UMC) youth use social media networks as digital pulpits for peer-to-peer evangelism, reshaping traditional modes of faith-sharing in contemporary African society. With the rapid rise of digital communication platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok, young believers are increasingly positioned as agents of religious discourse online. Drawing upon social capital theory (Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988), networked religion theory (Campbell, 2012), and media ecology perspectives (McLuhan, 1964), this paper situates African UMC youth within broader debates on digital religion and contextual theology. The study highlights the relevance of digital evangelism in sustaining church growth amidst challenges of secularization, globalization, and shifting youth identities. It identifies a research gap in existing scholarship, which has largely focused on Western contexts, and proposes a conceptual framework tailored to African Methodist traditions. Findings suggest that African UMC youth can transform evangelism through collaborative campaigns, contextual theological engagement, and innovative digital strategies such as internet Joke, hashtags, and livestreamed worship. Practical implications include the need for digital literacy training, theological depth in online discourse, and integration of social media strategies into official church programs. Ultimately, the digital pulpit emerges not as a replacement for traditional ministry but as a complementary tool that bridges physical and virtual communities. By leveraging faith and technology, African UMC youth are composed to lead a new wave of evangelism that expands the mission of the church and strengthens resilience in African Christianity.

Keywords: African UMC youth, Digital evangelism, Networked religion, Peer-to-peer evangelism, Social capital theory, Social media networks, Youth ministry

Introduction

The social media evolution has profoundly transformed communication, community-building, and religious practice across the globe. In Africa, where Christianity continues to experience rapid growth, particularly among youth populations (Gifford, 2015; Mbiti, 1990) ^[7, 10], digital platforms have become central to how young believers express and share their faith. For African United Methodist Church (UMC) youth, platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok provide unprecedented opportunities to narrate personal testimonies, engage in theological dialogue, and extend evangelism beyond the physical boundaries of church walls (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021) ^[4]. These networks function as digital pulpits, enabling peer-to-peer evangelism that resonates with the lived realities of African youth in a globalized, technologically mediated society.

The significance of this study lies in its contextual focus, while scholarship on digital religion has expanded in recent years (Campbell, 2017; Hutchings, 2017) ^[3, 9] much of it remains centered on Western contexts leaving African perspectives underexplored. Yet, African Christianity is unique in its vibrancy, communal ethos, and contextual theology (Bediako, 1995; Oduyoye, 2001) ^[1, 12]. Understanding how African UMC youth harness digital platforms for evangelism is crucial for sustaining church growth and addressing contemporary challenges such as secularization, globalization, and the rise of alternative spiritualities.

Moreover, the African church's youth demographic is particularly significant, according to GSMA (2020) ^[8], mobile penetration among African youth is among the fastest growing globally, with social media usage expanding rapidly in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. This digital engagement intersects with religious identity, creating fertile ground for innovative evangelism strategies. By analyzing these dynamics, this paper contributes to both academic scholarship and practical ministry, offering insights into how African UMC youth are redefining evangelism in the digital age.

Relevance of the study

The African church is experiencing rapid growth, particularly among youth populations, making it one of the most dynamic centers of global Christianity (Gifford, 2015; Mbiti, 1990) ^[7, 10]. This demographic shift underscores the importance of understanding how digital platforms can be leveraged for evangelism. Youth are not only the largest demographic group in many African nations but also the most digitally connected, with mobile penetration and social media usage expanding at unprecedented rates (GSMA, 2020) ^[8]. For the African United Methodist Church (UMC), this presents both an opportunity and a challenge: how to harness digital tools to sustain spiritual growth while addressing the pressures of secularization, globalization, and shifting cultural identities.

Digital evangelism is particularly relevant in African contexts where traditional communal structures intersect with modern technological networks. Scholars such as Bediako (1995) and Oduyoye (2001) ^[1, 12] emphasize the importance of contextual theology that resonates with African cultural realities. Social media platforms provide a space where African youth can integrate faith with cultural expression, using memes, hashtags, and digital storytelling to communicate the gospel in ways that are both authentic and accessible. This study is therefore significant because it situates African UMC youth within broader debates on digital religion, highlighting their role as innovators in evangelism.

Furthermore, the relevance of this study extends to practical ministry. Churches across Africa are grappling with how to remain relevant in a rapidly changing digital landscape. By examining how youth utilize social media as digital pulpits, this research provides insights into strategies that can sustain church growth, deepen discipleship, and foster resilience in African Christianity. It also addresses the pressing need for theological depth in digital discourse, ensuring that evangelism remains rooted in biblical foundations while adapting to contemporary realities.

Research gap

While scholarship on digital religion has grown significantly in recent years (Campbell, 2017; Hutchings, 2017; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021) ^[3, 9, 4], much of it remains focused on Western contexts, particularly North America and Europe. Studies often examine how churches in these regions adapt to digital platforms, how authority is reshaped online, and how religious communities navigate virtual spaces. However, limited research has explored how African youth, particularly within the United Methodist Church, engage in digital evangelism. This gap is critical because African Christianity is not only numerically significant but also culturally distinct, shaped by communal values, oral traditions, and contextual theology (Bediako, 1995; Mbiti, 1990) ^[1, 10].

Existing studies on African Christianity often emphasize themes of growth, resilience, and contextualization (Gifford, 2015; Oduyoye, 2001) ^[7, 12], but they rarely address the intersection of these themes with digital media. Moreover, youth ministry scholarship (Smith & Denton, 2005; Dean, 2010) ^[14, 6] highlights the importance of peer influence in shaping faith, yet little attention has been given to how this peer influence operates in digital spaces among African youth. This study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on African UMC youth and their use of social media for peer-to-peer evangelism.

The research gap also extends to methodological approaches. While Western studies often rely on ethnography or content analysis of online platforms, few empirical studies have been conducted in African contexts to examine how digital evangelism impacts discipleship, theological depth, and church growth. This study therefore contributes to filling that gap by proposing a conceptual framework that integrates social capital theory (Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988) ^[13, 5], networked religion theory (Campbell, 2012) ^[2], and African contextual

theology. By doing so, it not only enriches academic scholarship but also provides practical insights for ministry in African Methodist traditions.

Research objectives

- To analyze how African UMC youth use social media for evangelism.
- To develop a conceptual framework for peer-to-peer digital evangelism.
- To explore biblical and theological foundations for digital ministry.

Thesis statement

African UMC youth, through social media networks, are redefining evangelism by creating digital pulpits that foster peer-to-peer faith-sharing, thereby expanding the mission of the church in contemporary African society.

Conceptual framework

This study employs a multi-theoretical framework to explain how African UMC youth utilize social media networks for peer-to-peer evangelism. The framework integrates social capital theory, networked religion theory, and media ecology perspectives, providing a holistic lens through which digital evangelism can be understood.

Social capital theory, as articulated by Putnam (2000) and Coleman (1988) ^[13, 5], emphasizes the role of trust, reciprocity, and social networks in fostering collective action. Within the African UMC context, social capital manifests in the relational bonds among youth, which are extended and amplified through digital platforms. Social media enables the creation of “bridging capital” that connects diverse groups and “bonding capital” that strengthens intra-community ties. Evangelism thrives when these networks are mobilized to share testimonies, encourage discipleship, and foster accountability. Networked religion theory, developed by Campbell (2012) ^[2], highlights the fluidity of religious practice in digital spaces. Authority becomes decentralized, participation is interactive, and religious identity is negotiated through online interactions. African UMC youth embody this theory by creating memes, hashtags, and livestreamed worship services that democratize evangelism. These practices reflect a shift from hierarchical models of ministry to participatory, peer-driven approaches. Finally, media ecology theory (McLuhan, 1964) ^[11] underscores how communication technologies shape human perception and social structures. Just as Paul’s letters shaped the early church’s communication networks, social media platforms today reshape theological discourse and evangelistic strategies. African UMC youth are not merely using technology as a neutral tool; they are inhabiting a media environment that influences how faith is expressed, shared, and understood.

Together, these theories provide a robust conceptual framework for analyzing digital evangelism. They highlight the interplay between relational trust, participatory culture, and technological mediation, offering insights into how African UMC youth are redefining evangelism in the digital age.

Literature review

The literature on digital religion has grown substantially in recent decades, reflecting the increasing role of technology in shaping religious practice. Scholars such as Campbell (2017)^[3] and Campbell & Tsuria (2021)^[4] argue that online platforms reshape religious authority, community, and ritual. Hutchings (2017)^[9] explores how churches create online spaces that replicate and transform traditional practices, while Dean (2010)^[6] emphasizes the importance of youth faith formation in contemporary contexts.

In African theology, scholars such as Kwame Bediako (1995) and John Mbiti (1990)^[1, 10] stress the importance of contextual approaches to evangelism that resonate with local cultures. Bediako highlights the renewal of Christianity in Africa as a non-Western religion, while Mbiti emphasizes the communal and oral traditions that shape African spirituality. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001)^[12] adds a gendered perspective, underscoring the role of women and youth in shaping African theology. These insights are crucial for understanding how African UMC youth integrate cultural identity with digital evangelism.

Youth ministry scholarship also provides valuable perspectives. Smith & Denton (2005)^[14] demonstrate the centrality of peer influence in shaping the religious lives of teenagers, while Dean (2010)^[6] critiques the superficiality of youth faith in America, offering lessons for African contexts where digital evangelism risks theological shallowness. These studies underscore the importance of peer-to-peer dynamics, which are amplified in digital spaces.

Globally, digital evangelism has been studied in contexts ranging from online churches to virtual prayer groups. However, African scholarship remains limited. Studies often focus on church growth, development, and contextual theology (Gifford, 2015)^[7], but rarely examine how digital platforms intersect with these themes. This gap highlights the need for research that situates African youth within global debates on digital religion while acknowledging their unique cultural and theological contexts.

In summary, the literature reveals three key insights: (1) digital platforms reshape religious practice and authority, (2) African theology emphasizes contextualization and communal identity, and (3) youth ministry highlights the importance of peer influence. This study builds on these insights by focusing specifically on African UMC youth and their innovative use of social media for evangelism.

Biblical foundations

The biblical mandate for evangelism is rooted in the Great Commission: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”* (Matthew 28:19–20, NRSV). This passage underscores the universal call to spread the gospel, a mission that transcends cultural and technological boundaries. For African UMC youth, social media becomes a contemporary vessel through which this commission is fulfilled, extending evangelism beyond physical church walls into digital spaces.

The apostle Paul provides a compelling precedent for digital evangelism through his use of letters and networks in the early church. In Romans 1:8–12, Paul commends the faith of believers and expresses his desire to encourage them through written communication. His epistolary ministry parallels modern digital communication, where messages are transmitted across distances to build faith communities. Just as Paul leveraged the communication technologies of his time, African UMC youth today harness social media to share testimonies, encourage discipleship, and foster spiritual growth.

The Pentecost narrative in Acts 2 further illustrates the role of communication in evangelism. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit enabled the apostles to speak in diverse languages, symbolizing the universality of the gospel message. In the digital age, social media functions as a modern “tongue,” enabling African youth to communicate across linguistic, cultural, and geographical boundaries. This resonates with African contextual theology, which emphasizes the integration of faith with cultural identity (Bediako, 1995; Mbiti, 1990)^[1, 10].

Thus, the biblical foundations affirm that technology, far from being a distraction, can serve as a legitimate vessel for evangelism. African UMC youth, empowered by scripture and contextual theology, are uniquely positioned to embody the Great Commission in digital spaces.

Discussion

African UMC youth are actively reshaping evangelism through innovative digital practices. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok serve as digital pulpits where faith is shared interactively and creatively. These practices embody Campbell’s (2012)^[2] concept of networked religion, where authority is decentralized, participation is democratized, and religious identity is negotiated through online interactions. One prominent strategy is the use of humorous and hashtags, humorous allow youth to communicate theological truths in humorous, relatable formats, while hashtags such as #JesusSaves or #FaithFriday create searchable communities of believers. These tools foster peer-to-peer evangelism by making faith content accessible and shareable. Case studies from Nigeria and Kenya reveal how WhatsApp groups are used for daily devotionals, prayer chains, and evangelistic campaigns, demonstrating the power of digital networks in sustaining spiritual growth.

Livestreamed worship services are another significant practice. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many African churches turned to Facebook Live and Zoom to conduct services. Youth played a central role in facilitating these digital gatherings, ensuring that worship remained communal despite physical restrictions. These livestreams not only maintained continuity but also expanded reach, attracting participants from across national and denominational boundaries.

However, challenges persist. Digital distractions, misinformation, and theological shallowness threaten the integrity of online evangelism. The proliferation of prosperity gospel messages on social media, for instance, risks distorting

biblical teaching. Moreover, the brevity of digital communication can lead to superficial engagement with scripture. Scholars such as Dean (2010) ^[6] warn against the dangers of “almost Christian” faith, where commitment is shallow and uncritical. Addressing these challenges requires intentional training in digital literacy and theological depth.

Despite these challenges, the opportunities are immense. African UMC youth are not passive consumers of digital media; they are active creators of faith content. Their innovative strategies demonstrate resilience and adaptability, positioning them as leaders in shaping the future of evangelism. By embracing digital pulpits, they expand the mission of the church, bridge physical and virtual communities, and embody the biblical mandate for evangelism in contemporary African society.

Practical implications for the African UMC

The findings of this study carry significant practical implications for the African United Methodist Church (UMC), particularly in equipping youth to harness digital platforms for evangelism. These implications can be grouped into three major areas: digital literacy and theological training, collaborative evangelism campaigns, and integration of social media strategies into official church programs.

- **Digital literacy and theology:** Digital evangelism requires more than technical proficiency; it demands theological depth and discernment. Training programs should equip youth with skills to critically evaluate online content, identify misinformation, and engage in responsible digital discourse. Scholars such as Dean (2010) ^[6] warn against superficial faith expressions, emphasizing the need for robust theological grounding. By integrating digital literacy with biblical training, the African UMC can ensure that online evangelism remains faithful to scripture while adapting to contemporary realities.
- **Collaborative evangelism campaigns:** Social media thrives on collaboration and interactivity. The African UMC should encourage youth to design cross-platform campaigns that utilize hashtags, memes, and short videos to spread the gospel. Collaborative efforts across congregations and even denominations can amplify reach and foster unity. For example, coordinated campaigns during Easter or Pentecost could engage thousands of youth across Africa, creating a digital revival that complements traditional worship.
- **Integration into official church programs:** Digital evangelism should not remain a peripheral activity but be integrated into the church’s official mission. This includes appointing youth digital ministry leaders, allocating resources for online campaigns, and recognizing digital evangelism as a legitimate form of ministry. By institutionalizing these practices, the African UMC affirms the value of youth contributions and ensures sustainability. Moreover, ethical guidelines should be established to safeguard against misuse of digital platforms, ensuring that evangelism remains Christ-centered and culturally sensitive.

In sum, the practical implications highlight the need for intentional investment in youth digital ministry. By equipping, empowering, and integrating youth into the church’s mission, the African UMC can harness the full potential of digital pulpits to expand its evangelistic reach.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that African UMC youth are redefining evangelism through their innovative use of social media networks. By employing platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, they create digital pulpits that foster peer-to-peer faith-sharing, embodying the biblical mandate of the Great Commission in contemporary contexts. Drawing on social capital theory, networked religion theory, and media ecology perspectives, the study situates digital evangelism within both theological and sociological frameworks, highlighting its transformative potential.

The conclusion affirms that social media is not a replacement for traditional ministry but a complementary tool that bridges physical and digital communities. African UMC youth, empowered by faith and technology, are uniquely positioned to lead a new wave of evangelism that resonates with their peers and sustains church growth. Their practices memes, hashtags, livestreams, and collaborative campaigns demonstrate resilience, creativity, and adaptability in the face of globalization and secularization.

At the same time, challenges such as misinformation, theological shallowness, and digital distractions must be addressed through intentional training and integration into official church programs. By investing in digital literacy, theological depth, and collaborative strategies, the African UMC can ensure that digital evangelism remains faithful, impactful, and sustainable.

Ultimately, the digital pulpit represents a new frontier for African Christianity. It embodies the spirit of Pentecost, where diverse voices proclaim the gospel across boundaries, and echoes Paul’s epistolary ministry, where communication technologies serve as vessels for faith. As African UMC youth continue to innovate, they will not only expand the mission of the church but also contribute to the renewal of global Christianity in the digital age.

Future directions

While this study highlights the innovative ways African UMC youth utilize social media for peer-to-peer evangelism, further research is needed to assess the long-term impact of these practices. Several directions emerge:

- **Church growth and discipleship:** Future studies should examine how digital evangelism contributes to measurable church growth, both numerically and spiritually. Longitudinal research could track whether online faith-sharing translates into sustained discipleship, deeper theological engagement, and active participation in church life.
- **Comparative denominational studies:** Research should compare digital evangelism across denominations in Africa, such as Pentecostal, Anglican, and Catholic

traditions. This would illuminate whether strategies employed by UMC youth are unique or part of broader trends in African Christianity.

- **Technological innovations:** Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and the metaverse present new opportunities for evangelism. Scholars should explore how these tools might be integrated into African contexts, assessing both their potential and their theological implications.
- **Gender and inclusivity:** Future research should also examine how gender dynamics shape digital evangelism. Building on Oduyoye's (2001) ^[12] insights, studies could explore how young women in African UMC contexts engage with digital pulpits and how inclusivity can be fostered in online ministry.
- **Ethical considerations:** Finally, research should address ethical challenges such as privacy, digital addiction, and the spread of misinformation. Developing ethical frameworks for digital evangelism will be crucial for ensuring that online ministry remains faithful, responsible, and sustainable.

Final Thoughts

The digital pulpit represents a profound shift in how evangelism is practiced and understood in African contexts. It is not a replacement for traditional ministry but a complementary tool that expands the mission of the church into new frontiers. African UMC youth, empowered by faith and technology, embody the spirit of innovation and resilience that has long characterized African Christianity.

This study affirms that digital evangelism is both biblically grounded and contextually relevant. The Great Commission, Paul's letters, and the Pentecost narrative all underscore the legitimacy of using communication technologies to spread the gospel. In the digital age, social media becomes a modern vessel for faith-sharing, enabling African youth to transcend boundaries of geography, language, and culture.

Ultimately, the future of evangelism in Africa will be shaped by the creativity, commitment, and theological depth of its youth. By embracing digital pulpits, the African UMC can sustain growth, foster discipleship, and remain relevant in a globalized world. The challenge lies in ensuring that digital evangelism is not shallow or distracted but rooted in scripture, contextual theology, and ethical practice. If this balance is achieved, African UMC youth will not only transform evangelism in their own communities but also contribute to the renewal of global Christianity in the digital era.

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