

## Negotiating mediation and embodiment: A qualitative study of digital communication in African Seventh-day Adventist church post-COVID-19

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### ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 ramifications brought about the adoption of online communication technology even in churches, remodeling ecclesial ordinances and worship rituals, sense-giving, and communal interaction. This qualitative study is theoretically guided by several key frameworks, including Digital Discourse Theory, Stakeholder Communication Theory, and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) Theory. These theories elucidate how digital media reshape the delivery of core messages, enhancing governance and community life in the post-COVID-19 era. The target population was made of key church stakeholders who were actively engaged in digital communication platforms during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employed a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected sample of 18 key church stakeholders comprising church administrators, clergy, and lay members who actively engaged in digital communication platforms during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The research employs thematic analysis to establish four interlinked themes: (1) digital reach and organizational efficiency, (2) digital literacy, access, and generational divides, (3) governance, policy, and stakeholder-centered communication, and (4) limits of digital mediation for spiritual and communal life. By use of interview data and scholarship on organizational communication, online religion, and digital knowledge, the research posits that as much as virtual spaces promote access, continuity, and openness, they must be operated within the confines of hybrid ecclesial models and reliable governance paradigms in order to enhance spiritual intercourse and communal cooperation. The study concludes that while digital platforms enhance organizational efficiency, accessibility, and continuity of worship, they are limited in fostering embodied spirituality and communal intimacy. It is recommended that hybrid ecclesial communication models be adopted, supported by clear governance frameworks, stakeholder-centered communication policies, and inclusive digital literacy strategies.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Ecclesial Communication, Qualitative Research, Social Media, Virtual Conferencing, Virtual Religion

### I. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the impact of adopting social media and virtual conferencing tools in communicating organizational discourse and stakeholder engagement, pivoting stakeholders' perceptions and lived experiences. The rapid development of digital communication technology has profoundly changed the ways in which people, organizations, and societies interact and function through the creation of meaning and maintenance of their relationships in the present time. In the past, communication mainly evolved through symbols and oral ways of passing information, and then through printed and broadcast media; nowadays, it is going through a digitized communication period characterized by instantness, two, way communication, use of multiple modes, and worldwide distribution (van Deursen & van Dijik, 2014; Dwivedi et al., 2021). The changes in communication methods do not only involve changing of tools but also result in changes of research practices, social communication ways, and corporate communication organisation of various industries (Cantoni & Danowski, 2015; Leonardi et al., 2013).

In this digital era, communication is easily mediated through social media, video conferring, cloud based collaboration tools, and mobile technology which in the end ensue both dialogical and didactic interaction that go beyond the physical walls and temporal restrictions (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). As much as technology give opportunities for inclusion, participation, and institutional efficiency, they also bring about complex challenges in line with discourse quality, digital literacy, stakeholder engagement, ethical governance, and perennial digital divides (Passey, et al., 2024; McNeely, 2024). Scholarship insist that online communication should not be seen as a mere technological shift but as a vital social-cultural rebirth that interfaces authority relations, policy, identity construction, and channels of institutional and communal participation (Sindoni, 2013; Herring, 2019). Digital discourse blends spoken and written forms,

incorporates visual and multimodal elements, and often blurs the boundaries between formal and informal communication, redefining norms of interaction and meaning-making (Bhatia, 2023; Jones, 2022).

In the institutional context, online communication advances have become pivotal to stakeholder involvement, discourse communication, and legitimacy of an institution. Social media spaces enable dialogical communication which occurs in real time and broaden conversation participation, while virtual conferencing and collaborative tools enable functionality and interlinking across physical boundaries (Capriotti et al., 2021; Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Camilleri, 2021). However, research reveals perennial challenges, including message misinterpretation, reduced interpersonal cues, unbalanced access to technology, and unequal levels of digital literacy among stakeholders (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014; Njuka & Phiri, 2022; McNeely, 2024; Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted the adoption of digital technology, compelling organizations—including religious institutions—to rely heavily on social media and virtual conferencing for communication, engagement, and service delivery (Sun et al., 2023; Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025). This sudden adaptation showcased both the resilience and susceptibility of organizational communication systems, especially in the face of limited digital infrastructure and pronounced socio-economic inequalities (Passey et al., 2024; Cullen, 2001).

Despite the growing scholarship in the scope of how of digital communication tools impact organizational discourse and stakeholders engagement, there is limited empirical research relating to the African setting, particularly in the context of faith-based practice. Suffice to state, existing studies predominantly concentrate on educational, politically, or corporate settings, usually forgoing the peculiar communicative, ethical dynamics, and cultural influence of religious organizations (Elele et al., 2024). This gap is especially significant on the premise of discourse, community, and embodied interaction in religious practice, positing the need for contextually underpinned, stakeholder-centered research.

Suffice to posit that social media platforms enable interactive, dialogic, and networked communication among organizational stakeholders and virtual conferencing technologies facilitate synchronous communication, collaboration, and coordinated institutional action in digitally mediated environments (Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025; Lim & Ratan, 2025). These technologies are examined in terms of their affordances, accessibility, frequency of use, communicative functions, and the digital literacy required for effective participation (Bulfin & McGraw, 2015; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014).

The dependent variables are: Organizational discourse, defined as the patterns, meanings, and practices through which organizations communicate values, authority, identity, and institutional narratives (Darics & Lockwood, 2023; Hardy & Maguire, 2016). Stakeholder engagement, understood as the degree of interaction, participation, trust, and perceived inclusion of internal and external stakeholders in organizational communication processes (Capriotti et al., 2021; Tsai & Men, 2017). Previous scholarship demonstrate effective use of online communication technologies can advance dialogic interaction, transparency, and stakeholders satisfaction, resulting into strengthening entity legitimacy and resolve (Allen, 2016). Suffice to say, surmounting digital divide, exclusionary platform design, or poor execution of communication strategies can hamper discourse, coherence, exacerbate inequalities, and reduce meaningful engagement (Koukiadis, 2025; Acilar & Sæbø, 2023).

Accordingly, this study investigates how variances in the integrated usage of social media and virtual conferencing technologies (independent variables) influence the quality, effectiveness, and inclusivity of organizational discourse and stakeholder engagement (dependent variables). By foregrounding stakeholders' perceptions and lived experiences, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the role of online communication in influencing an institutionalized life within digitally transforming societies.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

The COVID-19 pandemic necessities the adoption of digital communication tools within churches, shifting social media platforms and virtual conferencing from not-so often used into enduring components of ecclesial communication. This technology propelled speed, reach, and effective administrative functionality, yet adoption usually happened without consistence governance frameworks, digital literacy initiatives, or theological context. As a result, congregations then faced perennial challenges in relation to sense-giving and sense-making, stakeholder engagement, leadership authority, and the limitations of online worship.

Also, the disparities posed by both digital and generational divide have worsened participation inequalities, triggering ethical and missional concerns in relation to equity, inclusion, and communal sense of belonging. The lack of visible communication guidelines and stakeholder-focused governance systems makes churches vulnerable to misinformation, weakened trust, and diminished organizational credence. Despite an impressive amount of scholarship on digital religion, empirical research - more so from African context - remains scarce, with just a few studies navigating how church stakeholders interpret and live with these integrations beyond the crisis. Thus, this research addresses the said gap by examining stakeholders' perceptions of digital ecclesial communication in the post-pandemic era, giving insights opportunities and challenges of integrating online tools into enhancing ecclesial practice.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

- i. Examine church stakeholders' perceptions of social media and virtual conferencing in post-COVID-19 ecclesial communication.
- ii. Analyze how digital communication platforms shape sense-giving and sense-making within church organizations.
- iii. Explore challenges and opportunities related to digital literacy, access, and generational differences.
- iv. Investigate the role of governance frameworks and stakeholder-centered communication in shaping trust and legitimacy.
- v. Assess perceived limitations of digital mediation for spiritual formation and communal life.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

Scholars increasingly posit that present day communication spaces are active social-cultural environments for actively negotiating meaning, identity, and authority and not just mere technical systems. For instance, *digital discourse theory* gives an elementary context for studying how online communication remolds sense-making through multimodality, platform-particular standards, and interactivity (Sindoni, 2013; Bhatia, 2023). Different from traditional linear communication, digital discourse is shaped by fragmentation, co-construction, and immediacy thereby allowing several actors to simultaneously shape institutional narratives.

In this context, discourse is a policed authority that dynamically produces, realities, legitimacy, and authority relations, rather than merely sharing information (Hardy & Maguire, 2016; Darics & Lockwood, 2023). As much as communication is shifting into online spaces, discourse becomes more perennially clear and reacted to, triggering both participation and objectivity. This salience is specifically important to religious entities, where communication transposes important theological, moral and communal significance.

*Computer-mediated communication* (CMC) theory explains how digital spaces shape interactional cues, perception of presence, and relational dynamics. CMC studies show that as much as digital online communication increases efficiency and reach. It usually reduces non-verbal cues, expands interpretative ambiguity, and remolds power interactions (Herring, 2019). These dynamics create an ambiguity towards sense-giving and sense making, especially in organizations where credence, relational impact, and shared meaning are cardinal.

*Stakeholder communication theory* qualifies these perspectives by expounding dialogical interaction, inclusivity, and organizational (Allen, 2016). Organizations are answerable to various stakeholders whose perceptions can shape stability and credibility. Suffice to say, digital spaces enhance the stakeholders' presence and voice, which can influence governance systems, communication protocols, and ethical issues which are essential for upholding coherence and credence (Capriotti et al., 2021; Anderson & Jones-Bodie, 2023). Together these theoretical frameworks provide a nuanced perspective for understanding ecclesial online communication, showing both its opportunities and difficulties at the crossroad of technology, governance, discourse, and community in modern religion life.

### 2.1 Overview of Digital Ecclesial Communication

Digital ecclesial communication refers to the use of digital technologies and online platforms by religious entities to initiate communication, governance, worship, and communal interactions. In the past decades, the exponential development of digital media has sufficiently influenced how churches with internal and external stakeholders. Online spaces like social media, live-streaming tools, messaging applications, and virtual conferencing tools have increased ecclesial outreach for church communication, enabling them to go beyond geographical limitations and engage dispersed congregations in real time (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). For this reason ecclesial communication hedged by geographical worship spaces but happens in digitally mediated spaces.

The concept of digital ecclesial communication Comes from a broader range of digital religion, which investigate how spiritual practices, institutional systems, and identity interface with digital technologies. Scholars posit that digital platforms have developed new kinds of ecclesial participation which includes virtual worship programs, online prayer rooms, and interactive spiritual discussions (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). These transformations have brought about a change to the traditional way of communication by ushering in new ways of engagement that integrate information sharing and communal interactions. In the end, ecclesial communication has become more instantaneous, dialogical, and networked.

The importance of ecclesial communication became so evident during Covid-19 which had caused lockdowns, physical, and social restrictions as a result the church to maintain its worship continuity, pastoral care, and institutional governance. This necessitated the integration of social Media and virtual conferencing into ecclesial practice, enabling the church to enhance communal interaction in the face of physical separation (Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025). This era showed the capacity online communication to support institutional adaptability and continuity in times of disruption.

However, scholars emphasize that online ecclesial communication is not merely a technical transaction but a transformative mechanism that molds authority systems, communal interaction, and the reality of spiritual interaction (Kołodziejska et al., 2024). As much as online spaces enhance accessibility and broaden participation, they also bring about questions about credence, relational depth, and the preservation of embodied spiritual experience. Understanding these elements is cardinal for analyzing how digital communication impacts ecclesial practice, policy, and stakeholder engagement in modern religious entities. This overview gives conceptual foundation for examining the broader scholarship on online and ecclesial transformation discussed in the subsequent areas.

## 2.2 Empirical Review

### 2.2.1 Digital Religion and Mediated Worship

Research on digital religion shows that digital platforms go beyond physical spaces, enabling virtual worship, virtual prayer communities, live-streamed homilies, and online pastoral care. Researchers note that these digital tools have greatly expanded ecclesial reach and interaction, especially during crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025). By leveraging digital platforms, congregations were able to uphold continuity in worship, leadership linkage, and worship engagement despite restrictions on physical gatherings.

Meanwhile, digital religion studies warn against technological determinism. The fact that virtual worship improves accessibility and convenience, it ideally changes the lived and relational elements of spiritual life (Kołodziejska et al., 2024). Mediated interaction usually emphasizes content sharing over embodied presence, ordinance engagement, and communal interchange. This tension reveals the importance of thoroughly analyzing how digital communication impacts ecclesial leadership, spiritual formation, and sense of belonging, rather than predicting its adaption as inherently advantageous or equivalent to interpersonal practice.

### 2.2.2 Stakeholders' Perceptions of Digital Ecclesial Communication

Empirical scholarship consistently shows mixed stakeholder perceptions in relation to online communication. Stakeholders admit the importance of social media and virtual conferencing for their speed, efficiency, and capacity to go beyond geographical barriers (Passey et al., 2024), supporting time-bound information sharing, coordination among leadership, and wider outreach, particularly within dispersed or isolated communities.

Conversely, stakeholders share fears about compromise to relational depth, information overload, and scarce opportunities for meaningful interpersonal connection. In religious contexts, these concerns are particularly pronounced given the centrality of relational ministry, pastoral care, and communal worship. Research indicates that while digital tools are appreciated for administrative, governance, and outreach functions, they are often viewed as inadequate substitutes for embodied religious engagement, with limitations in fostering spiritual presence, communal intimacy, and sacramental experience (Hussain & Wang, 2024; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

### 2.3 Digital Sense-Giving, Sense-Making, and Organizational Discourse

Sense-giving and sense-making are important systems through which organizations construct shared understanding, interpret change, and sustain collective identity. In digital spaces, these processes are shaped by platform affordances, interaction norms, and participants' digital literacy (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Research indicates that digital discourse often fragments narratives, allowing multiple interpretations and competing meanings to coexist (Bhatia, 2023).

Organizational studies scholarship further shows that online communication enhances the visibility of discourse while at the same time reducing managerial control over meaning (Leonardi et al., 2013). This adaptation entails cardinal implications for authority and credence, especially in institutions like churches, where doctrinal coherence and leadership guidance are foundational. In the absence of deliberate communicative strategies, digital platforms may inadvertently magnify ambiguity, misinformation, or theological contestation (Herring, 2019). At the same time, researchers posit the participatory ability of digital discourse, making stakeholders to actively relate with organizational narratives rather than inactively receiving them (Boulianne, 2020). This view underscores the importance of examining how religious organizations navigate the tensions between openness and coherence, leveraging online spaces to enhance inclusive dialogue whilst protecting theological soundness and organizational identity.

### 2.4 Digital Literacy, Access, and Inequality

A substantial body of literature highlights persistent digital divides shaped by factors such as age, education, income, and geographical location (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014; McNeely, 2024). Mere access to devices and internet connectivity does not ensure meaningful participation; digital literacy, confidence, and familiarity with platforms are equally critical (Jones, 2022). Research demonstrates that persons with low digital proficiency usually disengage from online communication, reinforcing exclusion even when digital infrastructure is in place. In religious contexts, these inadequacies carry significant ethical and pastoral challenges. Studies indicate that older church members

and economically disadvantaged persons are prone to marginalization in digitally mediated spaces (Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023). Such exclusion underplays organizational inclusivity, communal belonging, and the sense of shared identity, raising important questions about fairness, responsibility, and stewardship in integration of online communication strategies.

Scholars posit that handling digital divide needs deliberate organizational intervention, with targeted training programs, mentorship opportunities, and inclusive online space design (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014; Jones, 2022). In the ecclesial setup, these activities are closely linked with theological practices of care, involvement, and openness, strengthening both ethical mandate and practical outreach in online worship and organizational life.

#### **2.4.1 Governance, Trust, and Stakeholder-Centered Communication**

Governance emerges as a cardinal element in telling the effectiveness of online communication. Scholarship in organizational communication emphasizes that whilst online spaces amplify interchange and reach, they also heighten reputational vulnerability, formulating clear policies, oversight, and accountability systems (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Leonardi et al., 2013). In the absence of systematic governance, entities may face challenges such as misinformation, unclear authority demarcation, and loss of stakeholder trust.

Empirical studies show that stakeholder-centered communication backed by openness, responsiveness, and dialogical interchange cements institutional legitimacy and stability in times of crisis (Ki & Hon, 2007; Tsai & Men, 2017). In religious organizations, governance mechanisms must additionally secure doctrinal integrity, ethical adherence, and pastoral duties, adding layers of complexity to online communication system. Scholarship shapes digital governance not merely as a mechanical concern but as a relational and normative practice. Effective governance dictates clarity in relation to institutional spokespersons, online channel moderation protocols, and dispute resolution mechanisms. Attending to these dynamics is vital for upholding trust, coherence, and accountability within digitally interlinked ecclesial spaces, ensuring that technology enhances rather than hampers communal and organizational integrity.

#### **2.4.2 Constraints of Digital Mediation and the Rationale for Hybrid Approaches**

Although digital communication technologies provide numerous benefits, scholarship consistently points to their limitations in cultivating strong interpersonal connections, embodied interaction, and a collective sense of belonging (Baym, 2015; Walther, 2011). Research examining virtual meetings and online collaboration further identifies challenges such as mental exhaustion, reduced emotional engagement, and imbalanced participation among users, particularly when digital interaction occurs frequently or for extended periods (Fauville et al., 2021).

Within religious environments, these challenges become even more evident because many elements of faith practice rely on physical presence, symbolic actions, and communal experiences. Worship services, sacraments, and other forms of spiritual fellowship are inherently relational and embodied, making it difficult for purely digital environments to reproduce their full meaning and impact. For this reason, an increasing number of scholars advocate for hybrid models of communication that deliberately combine digital technologies with in-person interaction. These models seek to retain the accessibility, efficiency, and broad reach provided by digital platforms while safeguarding the relational richness, spiritual depth, and ritual authenticity associated with physical gatherings (Hussain & Wang, 2024). In this framework, digital communication is not viewed as a replacement for traditional interaction but rather as a supportive tool that enhances engagement while preserving the communal foundations of ecclesial life.

#### **2.4.3 Integrative Summary and Identification of the Research Gap**

Existing literature demonstrates that digital communication has become an integral component of contemporary organizational and religious operations. Its adoption has enabled institutions to broaden their outreach, improve operational effectiveness, and maintain continuity during times of disruption. Nevertheless, studies also reveal several ongoing concerns, including difficulties related to shared interpretation and meaning-making, challenges in achieving inclusive participation, governance limitations, and the structural constraints inherent in mediated communication. Another notable observation is the geographical and contextual concentration of existing research. A large portion of studies has been conducted within corporate settings or Western societies, leaving limited exploration of how digital communication is experienced within religious institutions in the Global South. As a result, there remains insufficient qualitative insight into how church stakeholders in these contexts interpret, negotiate, and incorporate digital communication into their institutional practices.

This study seeks to address this deficiency by examining how members and leaders within church communities understand and engage with digital ecclesial communication in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on themes such as sense-giving processes, governance dynamics, and communal interaction, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how digital platforms are integrated into church life. In doing so, it highlights the ways digital communication not only supports organizational continuity during crises but also contributes to broader

transformations in institutional discourse, stakeholder involvement, and perceptions of ecclesial legitimacy beyond the immediate pandemic period.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design to examine stakeholders' perceptions of digital ecclesial communication in the post-pandemic era, giving insights opportunities and challenges of integrating online tools into enhancing ecclesial communication, governance and communal life. A qualitative approach was ideal strategy because this study aimed to examine the stakeholders' perception, lived experience, and sense-making process instead of testing the relationships between the variables or come up with quantitative measurements. Semi-structured interviews facilitated in-depth exploration of participants' meanings and interpretations of digital worship, organizational discourse, and mediated interaction. This approach aligns with interpretivist traditions in institutional and ecclesial communication research, with emphasis on interpreting the social phenomena in the context of lived experiences of those in a particular cultural or organizational context.

#### 3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted within selected congregations and administrative units of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Data were collected from participants primarily based in urban and peri-urban areas, with a concentration in Lusaka and other major towns where access to digital infrastructure and engagement in online ecclesial activities is more prevalent. Zambia is relevant to the Global South context, characterized by growing digital adoption alongside perennial disparities in digital literacy, access, and infrastructural capacity. This scenario allowed the study to examine the interplay between technological opportunities and socio-structural constraints in ecclesial communication. The research was conducted under the ethical and academic guidelines of the University of Zambia, ensuring adherence to institutional protocols and rigorous standards of research integrity.

#### 3.3 Target Population

The target population was made of key church stakeholders who were actively engaged in digital communication platforms during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These included: Church administrators executing governance, policy adherence, and institutional communication management; Clergy delegated with pastoral care, worship coordination, preaching, and leadership communication; and Lay members who regularly participated in online worship services, virtual meetings, and church-related digital forums. This population was intentionally selected due to its direct involvement in the production, dissemination, and reception of digitally mediated ecclesial communication. By encompassing leadership, managerial, and congregational perspectives, the study captured a holistic understanding of how digital platforms shaped organizational discourse, spiritual practice, and stakeholder engagement within the ecclesial context.

#### 3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants with relevant experience in digital ecclesial communication. Selection criteria required participants to have actively used social media platforms or virtual conferencing technologies for church-related communication during and after the COVID-19 period. This ensured that participants possessed lived experiences in both the opportunities and constraints associated with digitally mediated ministry. A total of 18 participants were interviewed, a sample size considered sufficient to achieve thematic saturation in qualitative research, where no substantially new themes emerge from additional data. The sample was intentionally diverse in terms of age, gender, ecclesial roles (including clergy and lay leaders), and geographical location. This diversity enabled a multi-perspectival analysis of digital communication practices, governance dynamics, and lived experiences, thereby strengthening the depth, credibility, and transferability of the study's findings.

#### 3.5 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, enabling both flexibility and alignment with the study's objectives. The interview guide explored participants' experiences with digital communication tools, perceptions of virtual worship and online meetings, leadership and governance practices, policy awareness, digital literacy challenges, and perceived limitations of mediated ecclesial interaction. This format allowed participants to elaborate on issues of theological, organizational, and relational significance while ensuring coverage of core research themes. Interviews were conducted face-to-face where feasible and by mobile phone where physical access was constrained, ensuring inclusivity and contextual adaptability. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and

subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy, nuance, and analytical depth. This rigorous documentation process strengthened the credibility and dependability of the qualitative findings.

### 3.6 Data Analyses

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following an iterative and inductive approach. Interview transcripts were imported into ATLAS. It to support systematic organization and coding of qualitative data. The analysis began with open coding, through which recurring patterns, key phrases, and significant concepts were identified directly from the data. These preliminary codes were then compared across transcripts using constant comparison techniques and clustered into broader, higher-order categories. Through repeated engagement with both the empirical material and the theoretical frameworks guiding the study, themes were progressively refined and conceptually integrated. This process culminated in the identification of four interrelated thematic domains: digital reach and efficiency; digital literacy and inequality; governance and stakeholder communication; and the limits of digital mediation for spiritual and communal life. By combining inductive coding with theoretical sensitivity, the analytical process enhanced coherence, transparency, and interpretive depth, ensuring that the findings were both grounded in participants' lived experiences and meaningfully situated within existing scholarly discourse.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was rigorously upheld throughout the research process. Participants received comprehensive information outlining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and voluntary nature, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. The principles of autonomy and transparency guided all interactions. Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded through the use of participant codes, alongside the removal of any identifying details from interview transcripts and final reports. All data were securely stored using password-protected systems and were accessed solely for academic and research purposes. The study complied fully with institutional ethical guidelines and research governance standards. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty or adverse consequences. By adhering to the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, and accountability, the research ensured the protection, dignity, and rights of all participants throughout the study.

**Table 1**

*Thematic Analysis Table*

Theme	Participant	Key Insights / Quotes
1. Digital Platforms as Catalysts for Mission	CCL	<i>"Messages reach people quickly and effectively... WhatsApp and Facebook groups help announcements move across districts and local churches".</i>
	JCK	<i>"Zoom has made it easier to organize people... even when members attend from their homes".</i>
	BMM	<i>"Social media is so powerful that even non-members can listen to sermons or Bible programs and be drawn to the church".</i>
2. Strategic Online Management and Policy Implementation	EVL	<i>"Leaders must be admins of social media groups... the communication policy adopted by the unions has proved effective".</i>
	KCK	<i>"There should be assigned custodians who understand church communication policy ... ensuring content is accurate".</i>
	CCL	<i>"Members should vote on the creation of WhatsApp groups to enhance ownership".</i>
	RCK	<i>"Continuous education and sensitization help members adhere to guidelines".</i>
3. Digital Literacy and Pastoral Competence	HHN	<i>"We cannot employ a pastor who is not knowledgeable about social media; they will find themselves out of the picture".</i>
	BMM	<i>"Pastors must be conversant with digital platforms; when they model use, members follow".</i>
	CCL	<i>"Theological curricula should include communication policy and online engagement skills".</i>
	MCN	<i>"Employing pastors trained in technology allows them to reach youth online".</i>
4. Opportunities and Challenges in Online Church Engagement	BMM	<i>"People convert through Facebook or Zoom programs without attending physical church".</i>
	JCK	<i>"Some people appear online but are busy doing other things... fellowship is not as complete".</i>
	KCK,RCK, BMM	Limited access due to bundles, devices, or connectivity.
	ECL, MCN	Programs must be brief, relevant, and engaging to capture attention.



## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Findings

Below is the thematic coding table summarizing key themes, codes, sample participants, and illustrative quotes derived from participant interviews. This table provides a concise overview of the main findings identified in the study.

**Table 2**  
*Thematic Coding Table*

Theme	Codes	Sample Participants	Illustrative Quote
Digital Reach & Efficiency	Cost reduction; speed; coordination	JNL, KCK	"Zoom has been a blessing"...
Digital Divide	Access; affordability; literacy	KCK	"Some may not have the gadgets"...
Governance & Policy	Training; custodianship; ethics	JNL, KCK	"Weak adherence to policies"...
Spiritual Limits	Embodiment; intimacy; fellowship	JNL	"Physical contact may supersede"...

The findings of this study indicate that digital communication, initially adopted as a temporary solution during crises, has gradually evolved into a central element of social interaction. It now plays an important role in how churches structure, administer, and sustain communication in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the interaction between social media platforms and virtual conferencing technologies as independent variables and their influence on organizational discourse and stakeholder engagement as dependent variables, the research highlights both the transformative potential of digital communication and the limitations that accompany its use in African Seventh-day Adventist context

### 4.2 Digital Reach and Organizational Efficiency

Participants reported that tools such as social media platforms and video-conferencing systems significantly increased the speed, scope, and convenience of organizational communication. JNL stated:

*"Zoom has really been a blessing in cutting costs on physical movements, flights, hotels, and conferencing." (JNL, 21 October, 2023)*

Similarly, WhatsApp, email, and Facebook were reported to facilitate broad information dissemination:

*"WhatsApp and email allow us to share information quickly with the intended groups, while Facebook and radio reach a wider audience." (KCK, 17 October, 2023)*

These findings align with the digital religion literature, posting that online platforms extend the spatial and temporal reach of religious practice (Campbell & Evolvi 2020; Hussain & Wang, 2024). They also support organizational resilience theory, which frames online tools as adaptive resources that sustain governance, coordination, and participation under uncertain conditions (Duchek, 2020; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). However, consistent with the principles of computer-mediated communication theory, respondents acknowledged that digital efficiency does not automatically translate into deeper relationships, theological formation, or sustained discipleship. While online interaction can support organizational communication, it cannot entirely replace the relational depth and embodied experiences associated with face-to-face engagement (Baym, 2015; Walther, 2011). Participants emphasized the importance of leadership structures and clearly defined communication policies for maintaining order and credibility in digital spaces. Effective governance mechanisms were viewed as essential for preventing conflicts and ensuring that engagement remains constructive.

### 4.3 Digital Literacy, Access, and Generational Differences

The study also identified ongoing digital inequalities related to age, socioeconomic status, and technological familiarity. KCK observed:

*"Some may not have the gadgets... others don't even know these programs exist because they are not online." (KCK, 17 October, 2023)*

Older congregants were often less able to participate, reflecting findings from van Deursen and van Dijk (2014) and Hargittai (2010) that digital competence mediates engagement. Participants identified these divides as ethical and pastoral challenges, threatening inclusion and communal belonging—a concern also noted by Jones (2022) in organizational and religious contexts. The findings therefore suggest that simply providing access to technology does not guarantee meaningful involvement. Instead, churches must invest in digital literacy training, mentorship initiatives, and inclusive platform design to ensure that members from all backgrounds can participate effectively. Existing research similarly emphasizes that successful online participation requires intentional support structures to overcome technological inequalities (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014; Helsper, 2012).

#### 4.4 Governance, Policy, and Stakeholder-Centered Communication

Participants highlighted the centrality of governance and structured communication to organizational legitimacy. JNL noted:

*“The church must create effective engagement platforms to prevent members from bursting out in public.”*  
(JNL, 21 October, 2023)

KCK emphasized the need for trained platform custodians and oversight:

*“Training, having a platform custodian, and institutional oversight are essential for proper engagement.”*  
(KCK, 17 October, 2023)

These findings align with stakeholder communication theory, which emphasizes transparency, dialogic engagement, and institutional accountability as key to trust and credibility (Ki & Hon, 2007; Tsai & Men, 2017)). Similarly, organizational communication literature stresses that structured messaging and ethical policies enhance legitimacy and reduce reputational risk in digitally mediated contexts (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Leonardi et al., 2013). In African church contexts, these results indicate that governance is not merely administrative but also relational and theological. Churches must negotiate the intersection of authority, doctrinal coherence, and participatory engagement, reinforcing the literature that digital platforms amplify both opportunity and risk in institutional discourse (Herring, 2019; Hardy & Maguire, 2016).

#### 4.5 Embodiment, Community, and Limits of Digital Mediation

Although participants acknowledged the advantages of digital technologies, they consistently noted that online platforms cannot fully reproduce the relational intimacy and embodied nature of worship and community life. JNL remarked:

*“Online church programs sort of hide the person from others. It’s difficult to talk to people you can’t see. There is a level in which personal physical contact may supersede the online praxis, but all the same, online mission programs may not meet the physical needs of members, eating together and sharing the burdens of real life.”* (JNL, 21 October, 2023)

Scholars of digital religion similarly point to the inherent tension between mediated presence and embodied religious practice (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Hussain & Wang, 2024; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). While virtual worship enhances accessibility, continuity, and inclusion—especially during periods of crisis, certain aspects of ecclesial life, including relational depth, sacramental practice, and communal identity, remain constrained when interactions occur primarily through digital media (Baym, 2015; Walther, 2011). For this reason, many participants supported a hybrid communication approach that intentionally combines online and in-person engagement. This perspective corresponds with emerging research suggesting that digital platforms should complement, rather than substitute, embodied religious practices (Fauville et al., 2021; Hussain & Wang, 2024). Such a model allows technology to broaden participation and extend communication networks while preserving the theological integrity, relational authenticity, and sacramental dimensions rooted in physical community life.

#### 4.6 Synthesis

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that social media platforms and virtual conferencing tools significantly shape organizational communication and stakeholder interaction. Their influence is multifaceted and highly dependent on contextual factors. Although these technologies improve outreach, operational coordination, and institutional adaptability, their effectiveness is limited by unequal access to technology, disparities in digital literacy, insufficient governance structures, and the inherent constraints of mediated interaction. The empirical evidence also supports key assumptions of digital discourse theory, computer-mediated communication theory, and stakeholder communication frameworks. At the same time, the study expands these perspectives by situating them within African ecclesial contexts. Unlike many corporate organizations in Western settings, churches incorporate theological, pastoral, and relational considerations into their communication practices. Consequently, adopting digital technologies involves not only technical adjustments but also ethical and spiritual reflection that must align with doctrinal commitments and communal values (Trem & Leonardi, 2013; Herring, 2019; Ki & Hon, 2007).

Overall, the study suggests that post-pandemic ecclesial communication should be understood as a negotiated hybrid practice. Churches must balance the efficiencies offered by digital technologies with concerns about institutional legitimacy, embodied spirituality, and communal cohesion. Strengthening digital participation therefore requires inclusive access strategies, long-term capacity building, responsible leadership, and governance frameworks that ensure technological innovation enhances rather than fragments the life of the faith community.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

### 5.1 Conclusion

This study shows that church communication after COVID is diverse in nature, it is a hybrid of digital efficiency and embodied spirituality. Hybrid communication models post, COVID offer Churches both the flexibility of online interactions and the warmth of personal encounters for sharing and community building. Churches are therefore called upon to develop digital literacy, governance frameworks, and inclusive strategies to complement the physical church community which they value as essential and not replaceable. Considering the stakeholders' voices primarily, this article presents the views of the Global South as a contribution to the ongoing debates on religion, media, and digital culture.

### 5.2 Recommendations

Adopt Hybrid Communication Model: Integrate online and in-person engagement to preserve spiritual connection and meaningful relationships while promoting operational effectiveness. Enhance Digital Literacy: Offer capacity-building programs, mentorship opportunities, and user-friendly platform designs to bridge generational and socio-economic gaps in technology use. Strengthen Governance and policy: Establish comprehensive communication guidelines, designate responsible digital administrators, and create transparent grievance procedures to safeguard trust and doctrinal consistency. Integrate Theological Reflection: Ensure that digital initiatives are grounded in sound theological and ethical foundations so that they support rather than substitute embodied worship and communal fellowship. Collectively, these strategies will enable churches to utilize digital technologies responsibly and productively while sustaining spiritual vitality, community unity, and organizational stability.

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