Article

Gender Dynamics in Online Religious Leadership in Nigeria: Investigating How Digital Platforms Shape Communication, Authority, and Influence

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Abstract: This study explored the role of digital platforms in shaping gender dynamics within Christian religious leadership in Nigeria. Historically, religious leadership in Nigerian Christianity has been predominantly male-dominated, with women often relegated to subordinate roles despite their significant contributions as preachers, healers, and founders. The advent of digital platforms has introduced a new paradigm, offering both male and female leaders with avenues to expand their communication, authority, and influence. Utilizing mediatization theory, this research investigated how online spaces allow women to bypass traditional patriarchal structures, engage broader audiences, and influence religious narratives. Through in-depth interviews with twenty religious leaders across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones and comment analysis from online community interactions, the study identified eight main themes that reveal the complex interactions between gender, authority, and influence in both digital and offline contexts. The findings suggest that while digital platforms provide women with increased visibility and opportunities, male leaders retain a higher level of authority and reach, even in online spaces. The study highlights the dual nature of digital media as both liberating and limiting for female leaders, presenting an environment where empowerment coexists with persistent gendered expectations. This research contributes to understanding how digital platforms impact gendered access to religious authority, revealing the ongoing struggle for gender equality within Christian leadership in Nigeria.

Keywords: gender dynamics; religious leadership; digital platforms; Nigeria; Christian leadership; online religious communities; mediatization theory and authority

1. Introduction

Religious leadership has historically been a male-dominated domain in many cultures and religions, with women often relegated to supportive roles (Adeboye 2005; Crumbley 2003; Rubenstein 2004). This gendered dynamic is evident in Christianity, where leadership positions have typically been held by men, while women predominantly occupy subordinate roles (Musoni 2022; Rubenstein 2004). In Nigeria, this global trend is reflected in the Christian religious landscape. Historically, women have played significant roles in the church, being among the first converts and key figures in spreading the faith. Even today, women continue to serve as preachers, healers, prophetesses, and church founders, and they make up the majority of congregations in many churches. However, despite their considerable contributions, women remain largely absent from formal leadership

structures, which are overwhelmingly male-dominated (Adeboye 2005; Crumbley 2003; Mwaura 2013; Lang 2020).

In recent years, there has been a gradual shift in some Christian denominations in Nigeria, with more visibility for women in leadership roles (Oyewole 2017; Attoh 2017), especially in African Independent Churches and the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, where gender equality is gaining more recognition. However, traditional hierarchies persist, and tensions remain between emerging gender-equal perspectives and conservative church teachings (Oyewole 2017; Rubenstein 2004). Women's access to formal leadership positions, particularly those with full administrative authority, remains limited (Crumbley 2003). Even in denominations that acknowledge women as spiritual leaders or church founders, their authority is often constrained, as they are expected to operate within male-dominated structures while fulfilling roles in line with traditional gender expectations (Mwaura 2013; Lang 2020).

The evolving yet constrained role of women in Nigerian Christian leadership reflects Martin's (2003) gender paradox, where Pentecostal movements empower women to lead by prioritizing spiritual gifts over institutional qualifications. However, these movements also reinforce traditional gender norms, emphasizing women's roles as nurturers, thus balancing leadership aspirations with societal expectations. Similarly, Soothill's (2007, 2015) studies on African Christianity revealed that while Pentecostal and Charismatic movements offer platforms for women to exercise spiritual authority, the cultural expectations of women as nurturers limit their full participation in leadership. Both perspectives highlight the tension between progress and tradition, where opportunities for female leadership exist but are constrained by ongoing societal and cultural expectations.

The rise of digital platforms has dramatically altered the religious leadership landscape, providing new opportunities for both male and female leaders to expand their communication, authority, and influence beyond the confines of traditional church settings. As Tsuria and Campbell (2021) noted, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram have become vital tools for religious leaders to share their messages, engage with their communities, and establish authority. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift as physical gatherings were suspended, pushing churches to adopt online formats (Wobodo 2020).

Unlike offline church structures that limit women's access to leadership roles, digital platforms offer female religious leaders the chance to reach wider audiences and bypass the patriarchal hierarchies that favor male leadership (Chiluwa 2012). This shift is particularly significant for younger, urban Nigerian Christians—educated, tech-savvy individuals who are more open to rethinking the established religious authority. Through digital platforms, many have formed virtual Christian communities, allowing them to express their religious identities and access a diverse range of religious content from online sources across geographical boundaries (Campbell and Bellar 2022). Within these virtual spaces, both male and female Christian influencers, many of whom may not hold formal positions in traditional churches, are increasingly taking on leadership roles.

This democratization of religious leadership challenges patriarchal norms and introduces alternative models of authority (Campbell and Bellar 2022), particularly appealing to younger audiences. These virtual Christian communities do not merely consume religious content; they actively participate in it through comments, shares, and discussions (Mamman-Muhammad 2022), further influencing the dynamics of authority in digital religious spaces. Consequently, digital platforms foster a more fluid and dynamic environment where gender, communication, and authority are continually renegotiated.

Although numerous studies have explored the impact of digital platforms on religious practices and authority (e.g., Barker 2005; Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 2005; Campbell 2007;

Hjarvard 2016; Bekmurzaev 2018), few have focused specifically on the intersection of gender and religious authority. Most research highlights how digital platforms transform religious authority and democratize access to religious content, but often neglect gender-specific inquiries, particularly regarding leadership and communication styles. For instance, while Hjarvard (2016) and Christensen (2012) explored the media's influence on religious practices, they did not examine how gender hierarchies were maintained or challenged within religious leadership. Similarly, Barker (2005) and Bekmurzaev (2018) discussed the decentralization and diffusion of religious authority without considering the differing impacts on male and female religious leaders. While Oyewole (2017) addressed the intersection of media, gender, and religion in shaping female leadership within Nigerian Christianity, the focus was primarily on traditional media and specific denominations. The study did not explore the extent of female access to leadership roles or the influence of gendered communication styles among these leaders.

This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a clearer understanding of how digital platforms influence gender-based access to religious leadership roles. It will investigate whether these platforms empower women to challenge existing power structures or reinforce traditional patriarchal norms.

It will also consider how these leaders are received and perceived by their community members. While previous research has broadly discussed the influence of digital platforms on authority and leadership, this study, like Campbell (2007), posits that what constitutes religious authority and thus leadership online may be community and context-specific. Therefore, a focused examination of how these platforms challenge and reinforce traditional gender hierarchies in Nigerian Christian religious leadership is essential and will be the central focus of this study.

The study begins by examining the historical development of Christian religious leadership in Nigeria, tracing the influence of colonialism, missionary activities, and local traditions on the leadership structures within Nigerian churches. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of gendered expectations in Christian religious leadership, highlighting how cultural and religious norms have shaped leadership roles and opportunities for women and men within these settings. Next, the study explores the role of digital platforms as new spaces for religious leadership. This section provides context on how digital platforms may challenge or reinforce traditional leadership structures, and how gender dynamics play out in online religious spaces. A discussion of authority in the traditional church leadership structure in Nigeria follows, outlining the hierarchical, ideological, and textual dimensions of authority that have long governed religious leadership and their implications for gender.

The study concludes with a discussion of the theoretical framework guiding the research. This framework forms the foundation for understanding how digital platforms, along with gendered authority, influence, and communication styles, intersect within the broader context of Christian religious leadership in Nigeria. A comprehensive qualitative analysis of interviews with religious leaders from various Christian denominations with a strong online presence, along with content analysis of their digital discourse including an examination of the community members' reactions to the leaders' messages, will provide empirical data to support the exploration of these themes.

2. Evolution of Christian Religious Leadership in Nigeria

Christian leadership in Nigeria spans diverse denominations grouped into three main categories. The first includes mainline denominations, established by 19th and early 20th-century missionaries, such as the Roman Catholic Church, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Baptists, known for their hierarchical structures and liturgical worship. The second comprises African Initiated/Independent Churches (AICs), which emerged in the early

20th century to integrate African cultural practices, emphasizing prophecy and healing, as seen in the Cherubim and Seraphim Society and Church of the Lord (Aladura). The third is the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, originating in the mid-20th century, marked by vibrant worship, Holy Spirit focus, and prosperity teachings and exemplified by RCCG, Deeper Life, and the Living Faith Church (Adeboye 2005; Mwaura 2013; Eche 2018).

Based on a conventional perspective commonly held within Christian scholarship, Christian religious leaders are individuals believed to be divinely called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to guide believers in fulfilling God's purpose. They are expected to exhibit Christ-like character, moral integrity, leadership competence, and decision-making authority to influence their communities (Clinton 1988; Barna 1998; Sanders 1994). Wilmore (1998) adds that Christian leaders must also possess the authority and responsibility to make decisions within their community. Leadership roles, reflecting varying denominational traditions, often include responsibilities like spiritual guidance and decision-making. Common titles include Bishop, Priest, Pastor, Minister, Elder, Apostle, Evangelist, Deacon, and Archbishop.

Christian religious leadership in Nigeria, shaped by 19th- and 20th-century European missionary efforts, adopted hierarchical, male-dominated structures aligned with patriarchal norms (Afisi 2010; Mwije 2012; Lang 2020). Men were assigned high-ranking leadership roles, while women were confined to supportive positions like welfare management, requiring no formal training or ordination (Adeboye 2005; Lang 2020). This gender divide stems from colonial traditions and misinterpreted biblical teachings emphasizing male headship in religious spaces (Uchendu 2024). As Nigeria advanced through the 20th and 21st centuries, societal changes like education, urbanization, and women's movements have influenced Nigerian church leadership, prompting some denominations to include women in prominent roles. African Indigenous Churches led this shift, later followed by the Pentecostal movements (Adeboye 2005). Women now serve as pastors and founders, though cultural biases often limit their authority.

The rise of media has transformed leadership dynamics in Nigerian Christianity, boosting the visibility of female pastors, especially in the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements (Oyewole 2017). Digital platforms like Facebook and YouTube enable women bypass the limitations of offline churches, redefining religious authority while presenting both opportunities and challenges (Chiluwa 2012; Tsuria and Campbell 2021).

3. Gendered Expectations in Christian Religious Leadership in Nigeria

Gendered expectations in Nigerian Christian leadership are shaped by entrenched patriarchal structures, which position men as natural leaders while limiting women to subordinate roles despite their active participation and spiritual gifts (Crumbley 2003). Women are often excluded from leadership, ordination, and decision-making, which curtails their authority (Adeboye 2005). These gendered expectations are influenced by missionary traditions, cultural values, and interpretations of scripture such as 1 Timothy 2:12. This biblical verse states, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet", and is often cited to justify male leadership (Uchendu 2024).

Regional differences also reflect varying gender expectations. In northern Nigeria, conservative values and Islamic influence have resulted in predominantly male-led church structures. Conversely, in southern and western Nigeria, especially in urban areas, more progressive attitudes toward women in leadership have been demonstrated. This is due to the influence of the African Initiated Churches (AICs) and Pentecostal movements, where spiritual gifts are prioritized over gender, enabling women to attain leadership positions based on their perceived spiritual authority. However, tensions between gendered cultural norms and gender equality movements persist. Younger urban congregants advocate for

change, while male leaders and some female congregants who have internalized these norms resist, citing cultural and religious values (Oyewole 2017; Uchendu 2024).

4. Digital Platforms as New Spaces for Religious Leadership

Digital platforms have significantly disrupted traditional practices, as noted by Fu et al. (2021). These platforms are online, software-driven infrastructures that connect users, facilitate services, and enhance efficiency in workflows (Webb 2024; Gibson 2024). Their integration with offline church activities has transformed religious practices and communities, making religion more accessible and allowing religious leaders to connect with large numbers of followers remotely (Mamman-Muhammad 2022). This digital shift has also expanded the freedom of religious expression by fostering online religious churches and online religious communities that have become increasingly significant in reshaping how religious identities and practices are formed and expressed in the digital age.

Online churches extend offline church activities into the digital space, enabling religious leaders to broadcast sermons, conduct worship services, and maintain structures resembling traditional church environments. Initially referred to as "cyber churches", these platforms began by replicating offline services through websites. However, the integration of advanced technologies such as live streaming, social media, and interactive features has significantly broadened their scope (Campbell 2012). Online churches preserve formal elements like pastoral leadership and structured services while offering members a more flexible format for engagement (Tsuria and Campbell 2021). A key offshoot of online churches is the emergence of online religious communities. These communities are formed around shared religious interests, beliefs, or experiences. Members actively participate in discussions, share content, and debate religious interpretations, creating inclusive and participatory spaces (Mamman-Muhammad 2022). These communities emphasize member interaction and can center on various themes including denominational doctrines or personal spiritual exploration. As a result, online religious communities promote a more dynamic and personalized approach to religious expression.

Mediatization theory, as outlined by Hjarvard (2016), provides insights into the emergence and growth of online churches and religious communities. This theory suggests that media including digital platforms play a crucial role in shaping religious practices and beliefs. In online spaces, mediatization is evident as traditional religious authority becomes decentralized, giving rise to new forms of religious expression. As individuals increasingly turn to platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram for religious engagement, these platforms mediate religious experiences, enabling the formation of virtual congregations that are not limited by geographic boundaries or institutional ties. As a result, online communities foster religious engagement that emphasizes personal interpretations and shared experiences, rather than a reliance on a singular, authoritative source.

Digital platforms also contribute to the democratization of religious authority. In offline church structures, power is concentrated in the hands of a few authoritative figures. However, the participatory nature of online platforms challenges this concentration of authority. As individuals interact with religious content, share their thoughts, or create religious narratives, authority becomes more dispersed. This shift is particularly significant for women and marginalized groups, who have historically been excluded from leadership roles in Christian religious institutions. Digital platforms enable them to assert authority and influence in virtual spaces, reflecting a broader trend of democratization, where authority is no longer solely tied to institutional leaders but can be shaped through collective online participation (Gibson 2024). Additionally, the creation of online religious communities fosters the development of new religious identities. These communities offer members the opportunity to express beliefs that may differ from traditional or mainstream

interpretations, leading to greater pluralism in religious expression. As members engage in discussions and debates, they are exposed to diverse religious viewpoints, which can inspire reinterpretations of established beliefs. The process of religious identity formation in these online spaces is fluid, allowing individuals to adapt their beliefs based on interactions within the community. This flexibility promotes new, hybrid forms of religious belonging that transcend rigid traditional boundaries.

In Nigeria, the rise of digital platforms, particularly social media, has further transformed religious leadership, providing both male and female leaders with opportunities to reach wider audiences (Fu et al. 2021). These platforms enable direct, interactive engagement, extending the influence of religious leaders beyond offline church settings (Chiluwa 2012; Mamman-Muhammad 2022). For women, digital platforms have been particularly empowering. While offline church structures often limit women's access to leadership roles, social media allows women to assert spiritual authority and build large followings without the constraints of patriarchal oversight. Prominent female pastors, such as Funke Felix-Adejumo and Pastor Nike Adeyemi, have successfully developed substantial online ministries, demonstrating how digital platforms challenge traditional gender roles within the church (Oyewole 2017). This shift is reshaping perceptions of authority and influence in Nigeria's Christian communities, signaling that digital engagement is increasingly shaping the future of religious leadership.

This shift in religious leadership dynamics can be analyzed through mediatization theory, which suggests that digital media shape religious authority by enabling leaders to connect with followers on a more personal level. Mediatization theory underscores how digital platforms decentralize authority, making it more fluid and accessible to anyone who has the right digital tools and content (Tsuria and Campbell 2021). This shift allows women to bypass traditional gatekeepers and assert authority on their own terms, though it does not eliminate societal or institutional barriers. Women may still encounter resistance, skepticism, and digital harassment, which can undermine their authority and influence (Gibson 2024). As these platforms democratize access to leadership, they also expose women to new forms of resistance and marginalization. Even in virtual spaces designed for more egalitarian leadership, women who assert authority are often expected to conform to nurturing or supportive roles, which undermines their status as equal authority figures to their male counterparts (Webb 2024).

The digital shift has also raised critical concerns regarding access and equity in religious leadership. As Campbell (2012) and Tsuria and Campbell (2021) emphasize, the transition to online engagement is not equally accessible to everyone. Women may face challenges such as a lack of necessary technological infrastructure, skills, and financial resources, which can hinder their ability to effectively participate in or lead online ministries. The digital divide could deepen existing inequalities, limiting some women's ability to fully capitalize on the opportunities offered by digital platforms. Moreover, as Gibson (2024) points out, the commercialization of digital religious content may create disparities in audience access and resource availability, with more established leaders, often male, dominating the digital religious landscape. If this divide remains unaddressed, it could reinforce gender-based inequalities in religious leadership.

The evolving landscape of religious leadership in Nigeria, shaped by digital platforms, presents a complex dynamic where these tools both empower and constrain women's leadership. While platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube provide new opportunities for women to challenge traditional gender roles in Christian leadership, the persistence of cultural and institutional barriers continues to influence their experiences in both online and offline settings. The future of religious leadership in Nigeria will depend not only on

the continued growth of digital engagement, but also on tackling underlying societal biases and ensuring equitable access to leadership opportunities, regardless of gender.

5. Authority and Influence in Offline Church Leadership in Nigeria

Offline churches in this context refer to Christian denominations that function primarily through established, physical buildings or places of worship. These churches are characterized by formal, structured environments where in-person gatherings, liturgical services, and sacraments are regularly held. Leadership is closely tied to authority, as a leader's effectiveness and influence largely depend on the amount of authority they possess. In this context, authority refers to the power or right to direct, influence, or control (Eche 2018). According to Eche (2018), leadership requires the authority to guide, influence, and make decisions. Christian leaders in Nigeria, whether ordained or not, are revered for their perceived closeness to God and hold significant authority, influencing not only spiritual matters but also social, political, and cultural dynamics (Eche 2018; Mamman-Muhammad 2022).

In Nigerian's offline churches, the leadership structure is typically hierarchical, with distinct roles and responsibilities at various levels. Local churches are typically led by pastors, who handle the day-to-day operations including preaching, teaching, and providing spiritual guidance. They are supported by deacons and elders, who assist with church services, visit members, and help with decision-making processes. In formal denominations, bishops oversee multiple churches within a region, appointing pastors, ensuring doctrinal purity, and providing strategic direction. Additionally, senior pastors of church networks lead networks of churches, often spanning multiple regions or countries, providing vision, leadership training, and resources to their network. The Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria also follows a hierarchical structure, with the Pope at the top, followed by cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, and deacons. Bishops oversee dioceses and are responsible for spiritual and administrative leadership, while priests serve individual parishes, conducting sacraments and providing pastoral care. Senior leadership roles in Nigerian churches across various denominations are predominantly male, reflecting broader societal norms and cultural expectations. These structures are often based on historical and doctrinal foundations. Their authority is legitimized through formal training, ordination, and often divine sanction, which reinforces their power and influence within the church community. Although women hold leadership roles, their authority is typically limited to secondary areas (Adeboye 2005; Lang 2020), which excludes them from key decision-making positions. Furthermore, when women do take on leadership, they often face resistance (Oyewole 2017; Uchendu 2024).

Ordination in Christianity is the formal process by which individuals are consecrated, set apart, and authorized to perform various religious rites and duties. It often includes a public affirmation by a religious community and the laying on of hands by church leaders to signify the conferral of spiritual authority and responsibilities. Ordination is closely tied to specific religious offices, such as the office of the priest, pastor, deacon, or bishop, depending on the denomination, and serves as a recognition of an individual's calling, character, and capability to serve the church and its congregation. Female ordination in Nigeria touches on theological, cultural, and social dimensions. It is an area of significant contention, reflecting both the global debate within Christianity and the unique cultural challenges of a patriarchal society. While some Nigerian churches ordain women into leadership roles, others resist the practice, citing scriptural interpretations and ecclesiastical traditions.

The Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria adheres strictly to the global doctrine, which reserves priestly ordination for men. Women, however, play vital roles as nuns, catechists,

and leaders of lay organizations like the Catholic Women's Organization (CWO). While these roles are influential, they fall short of ordained ministry, as the Church maintains its theological stance against female ordination. The Anglican Church in Nigeria has largely resisted the ordination of women as priests or bishops. This is in contrast to other provinces within the Anglican Communion, such as the United States and South Africa, where women are ordained. The Nigerian Church's position reflects its conservative theological stance and deference to cultural expectations that emphasize male leadership. In the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, which dominate the Christian landscape in Nigeria, women have found more opportunities for leadership. These churches often emphasize spiritual calling over institutional hierarchy, allowing women to serve as pastors, prophets, and even bishops. Similarly, many female pastors in Pentecostal churches have been ordained and have led large congregations and ministries, challenging conventional gender roles. In indigenous and independent African churches, such as the Cherubim and Seraphim and the Celestial Church of Christ, women have historically played significant leadership roles. Although some restrictions still exist, women are often recognized as prophetesses and spiritual leaders, reflecting the egalitarian aspects of these movements compared to mainstream denominations. Despite these challenges, there is growing advocacy for the inclusion of women in ordained ministry in Nigeria.

6. Theoretical Framework

In Nigeria, patriarchal structures have long dominated leadership roles, particularly within Christian religious institutions. The advent of digital platforms offers the potential to shift this dynamic, creating opportunities for women to step into leadership positions or, alternatively, reinforcing existing gender hierarchies. Mediatization theory, introduced by Stig Hjarvard (2008), provides a useful framework for analyzing these changes. The theory posits that media including digital platforms are not merely communication tools, but transformative agents that influence social institutions, cultural practices, and power structures. In this study, mediatization theory helps explain how digital platforms might reshape access to authority, leadership structures, and communication styles, potentially altering traditional gender roles in Christian religious leadership.

Hjarvard's theory highlights two key processes of mediatization that are especially relevant to this research. The first is how the media operates as a semi-independent institution. Here, media including digital platforms operate according to their own logic, to which institutions like religious organizations must adapt to remain relevant. As a result, religious leaders are driven to adopt digital communication tools, such as social media, to maintain their influence and visibility. This mediatization of religious practices changes the way religious messages are conveyed and received, potentially democratizing access to leadership roles. For instance, women may find new opportunities to lead and influence through social media, circumventing traditional gatekeepers. However, this shift could also reinforce existing hierarchies if the new media environment mirrors the power structures present offline in traditional churches. The second key process is the integration of media into other institutions. Here, the media become embedded in the daily practices of religious leaders, shaping how they present themselves and influence which communication styles are favored. This integration may have gendered implications as digital platforms could amplify certain communication styles. This framework allows for a deeper exploration of whether digital platforms promote more egalitarian communication styles or continue to perpetuate traditional gendered dynamics in communication.

To illustrate the relevance of mediatization theory, two relevant studies offer valuable insights into how the media influences religious authority. Hjarvard (2016) explored the role of media in shaping the authority of religious organizations and beliefs in Scandinavian

societies, finding that digital platforms enhance the visibility of religion by making practices and discourses more accessible. Using mediatization theory, Hjarvard identified processes such as the media's influence on religious practices and the rise of "banal religion", a fusion of religious representations shaped by media. His empirical analysis, which included media content analysis and case studies, revealed that while media democratized access to religious content, it simultaneously challenged traditional authority, creating a continuous negotiation of religious norms in the digital landscape. Similarly, Bekmurzaev (2018) examined how media facilitated the dissemination of religious messages in Kyrgyzstan, finding that media increased the visibility and accessibility of religious practices. Utilizing mediatization theory, he highlighted the decentralization of religious authority and the emergence of new voices that challenge traditional structures. Through media content analysis and interviews with religious leaders and community members, Bekmurzaev demonstrated that although media broadened access to religious content, it also disrupted traditional authority by introducing new interpretations and dynamics. Both studies underscore the transformative role of media in reshaping religious authority and perceptions, reinforcing the relevance of mediatization theory in understanding online religious leadership.

7. Materials and Methods

7.1. Study Design

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate gender dynamics within online Christian religious leadership in Nigeria. Using in-depth interviews and comment analysis, it examined how digital platforms impact gender-based access to leadership roles in Christian contexts and the perception of their online leadership. The study also explored interactions between Christian religious leaders from various denominations and their online communities, focusing on the influence of gender in these engagements. A purposive sampling method was applied to select participants and community comments aligned with the research goals, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives. To enhance validity and reliability, the data were triangulated by drawing from multiple sources.

7.2. Sample and Recruitment

The study sample consisted of religious leaders and community members from Christian denominations across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones: North-West, North-East, North-Central, South-West, South-East, and South-South. Twenty religious leaders were included, with representation across denominations as follows: Pentecostal (six women and two men), mainline (six men), and African Indigenous Churches (AIC) (four women and two men). These leaders are active in offline church settings and online platforms. While the male leaders generally assume primary roles in both offline churches and online, the female leaders assume supportive roles in offline church settings but take on primary roles in the online space. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring diversity based on denominational affiliation, online activity, gender, and regional location. The recruitment of participants was carried out via email and phone, where the participants received consent forms, confidentiality information, and detailed study objectives prior to data collection. To gain insights into community perspectives, a sample of 300 comments from active followers engaging with the selected leaders' online content was analyzed. In Table 1, we present an overview of the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants.

Religious Leader's ID	Gender	Denomination	Location	Community Members' ID
M1	Male	Mainline	North Central	C1–C15
M2	Male	Mainline	North Central	C16–C30
F3	Female	Pentecostal/Charismatic	North Central	C31–C45
M4	Male	Pentecostal/Charismatic	North West	C46–C60
M5	Male	Mainline	North East	C61–C75
F6	Female	Pentecostal/Charismatic	South East	C76–C90
M7	Male	AIC	South South	C91–C105
F8	Female	Pentecostal/Charismatic	North East	C106–C120
F9	Female	Pentecostal/Charismatic	South East	C121–C135
F10	Female	Pentecostal/Charismatic	North Central	CI36–C150
M11	Male	Mainline	North East	C151–C165
F12	Female	AIC	South West	C166–C180
F13	Female	Pentecostal/Charismatic	North West	C181–C195
F14	Female	Pentecostal/Charismatic	North East	C196–C210
M15	Male	AIC	South South	C211–C225
M16	Male	Mainline	South East	C226–C240
M17	Male	Mainline	South West	C241–C255
F18	Female	AIC	South West	C256–C270
F19	Female	AIC	South West	C271–C285
M20	Male	AIC	South South	C286–C300

7.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection followed a structured approach, beginning with the development of an interview guide to address digital engagement, gender roles, and leadership themes. Ethical approval was secured prior to participant recruitment, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, each lasting 45 to 90 min. A total of 20 interviews were held, with approximately 6–8 leaders per denomination to ensure data saturation. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns in gender dynamics, leadership styles, and community engagement within the interview transcripts and comments in response to digital content. A comment analysis further examined the community responses to the leaders' digital content, exploring gendered perceptions of authority in online religious spaces and providing insights into each leader's influence.

8. Results from Interview Analysis

The analysis of the transcribed interview manuscripts generated six main themes and twenty sub-themes that captured the participants' perspectives on their journey into religious leadership, transformations driven by digital platforms, gender dynamics in online versus offline settings, authority and influence across digital and physical spaces, and communication styles in the online realm. In Table 2, we present the themes and sub themes that emerged from the interview analysis.

Table 2. Themes and sub themes emerging from the interviews.

No	Themes	Sub-Themes
1	Journey to Religious Leadership	Early Religious and Parental Influence
		The Training Received
2	Transformation of Religious Leadership through Digital Platforms	COVID-19 as a Turning Point
		Choice of Platforms and Preferences for Engagement
		Increased Reach through Digital Platforms
		Digital Platforms as Empowerment Tools for Expression
3	Gender Dynamics: Online (Digital) vs. Offline Churches	Gendered Limitations in Offline Church Leadership
		Opportunities for Women in Online Spaces
		Equitable vs. Equal Opportunities Online
		Digital Platforms as a Mixed Space: A Challenge and Reinforcement of Patriarchal Norms
4	Authority and Influence: Online vs. Offline Churches	Authority in offline Churches: Hierarchical and Structured
		Authority and Influence Online: Decentralized and Expansive
		Maintaining Influence: Continuous Engagement through Relevance and Resilience
		Challenges to Authority and Influence Online

These themes offer detailed insights into how digital media are reshaping Christian religious leadership in Nigeria, highlighting the intersection of empowerment, patriarchal norms, and evolving leadership dynamics. Below, we present our findings and discuss their broader implications.

8.1. Theme 1: Journey to Religious Leadership

This section analyzes the participants' journeys to religious leadership, focusing on key influences that shaped their spiritual growth and leadership aspirations. Mediatization theory suggests that media including digital platforms not only serve as communication tools, but also influence social institutions and power structures. In the context of religious leadership, digital platforms play a transformative role, influencing how individuals access leadership opportunities and how leadership itself is practiced and perceived. This analysis integrates the theoretical framework with the participants' experiences, providing a deeper understanding of how their journeys unfolded in both the offline and digital religious settings.

8.1.1. Sub-Theme 1.1: Early Religious and Parental Influence

Early religious exposure and parental involvement played a pivotal role in shaping the participants' spiritual direction and leadership aspirations. Early religious experiences, particularly through familial engagement, laid the foundation for the participants' lifelong commitment to faith and leadership. Mediatization theory helps contextualize how the

media shaped these early experiences, particularly how religious teachings and practices become integrated into the lives of young people. As F18 noted, "*My journey to this religion stuff started when I was 7 years of age. So during those times my parents left me in church*". This early exposure to religious life deeply influenced her spiritual development. The active involvement of parents in religious life serves as both a model and a motivating factor for future leadership aspirations. Similarly, M16 reflected, "*I was born into a Christian home, my dad's been a pastor, so I just grow up being a pastor's son and you know from there becoming a member of the choir, becoming an instrumentalist*". These quotations highlight the early integration of faith-based practices into the participants' lives, preparing them for future roles within religious leadership.

Mediatization theory suggests that these early exposures to religion and leadership are not isolated but are shaped by broader societal practices including media portrayals of religious leaders, which help define the role of faith in personal and community life. This early immersion sets the stage for the participants' leadership development, fostering a deep connection to faith from childhood and a natural progression toward leadership roles within the community.

8.1.2. Sub-Theme 1.2: The Training Received

Both formal and informal training played a crucial role in the development of the participants' leadership skills. While formal theological education provided a structured path for the male participants, informal training, particularly through mentorship and practical ministry experience, was significant for the female leaders, offering more flexibility but less institutional recognition. Male participants, particularly those from mainline churches, often followed a long and formal educational journey that involved years of structured study in theology and philosophy. For instance, M1 stated, "*I did all my academic training in Benue state for my philosophy, then my theology was at Jos and that's the story*". Similarly, M5 emphasized, "*I did my postgraduate in theology so I wasn't just launched into ministry without adequate foundation*". These quotations underscore the importance of formal education in preparing men for leadership roles, equipping them with the intellectual and theological knowledge necessary for institutional leadership.

On the other hand, the women often pursued a more informal route to leadership, centered around personal calling and ministry-specific training rather than structured, institutionalized education. For example, F9 explained, "*I didn't really attend a formal training, as it were, but over the years we attended discipleship classes*". This highlights the flexibility and accessibility of informal training, which, though less structured, remains an essential part of leadership development, particularly for women.

Mentorship, however, played a critical role in both the male and female leadership journeys. As M5 noted, "I've had the privilege of studying under men and women of God who eventually released me into the assignment that I stepped into". This quotation highlights how mentorship provides both practical experience and spiritual guidance, helping the participants navigate the complexities of leadership roles. Today, digital platforms enhance these conventional training methods by offering easily accessible online resources and facilitating connections with a global network of mentors and leaders.

According to mediatization theory, the integration of media into religious training can shape the style and scope of leadership. Digital platforms offer a new avenue for self-directed learning, allowing religious leaders to access training materials, sermons, and teachings from a wide range of sources. This integration of media into leadership development is an essential factor in the evolving nature of religious authority, particularly for women, as they can access educational resources and mentorship that were once difficult to obtain in offline church settings.

8.2. Theme 2: Transformation of Religious Leadership Through Digital Platforms

This section explores how digital platforms, functioning as both semi-independent institutions and integrated into other existing social institutions in line with mediatization theory, have redefined religious leadership in Nigeria. These platforms have transformed how leaders engage with their congregations and have created new leadership opportunities, especially for women who face limitations in offline church settings. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated these changes, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges women encounter in leadership roles.

8.2.1. Sub-Theme 2.1: COVID-19 as a Turning Point

The COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies the mediatization process by forcing religious institutions to adapt to digital tools as a necessity for survival. Hjarvard's concept of media integration into institutional practices is evident here. When physical gatherings were restricted, platforms like Facebook and YouTube became central to religious engagement. For instance, Participant M4 stated, "*When the pandemic period came in 2019/2020, it now became a huge necessity because after that period that became the only means by which churches could meet because of the lockdown*". This reflects how digital media became indispensable for maintaining religious functions. Similarly, Participant M2 highlighted the pandemic's permanent impact on digital ministry: "*The moment that made it bigger was the COVID-19 experience. . . shut down the churches, and made people stay at home. So there was this longing for a revival of the Spirit. . . from then I've never stopped*".

These quotations illustrate the pandemic as a turning point that ingrained digital platforms into religious leadership, demonstrating how media acted as a transformative agent. By reshaping religious communication during crises, digital platforms ensured that religious functions continued uninterrupted, providing a vital means to nurture and connect with congregants during challenging times.

8.2.2. Sub-Theme 2.2: Choice of Platforms and Preferences for Engagement

Mediatization theory emphasizes media logic, the concept that media functions as a semi-independent institution, shaping how other institutions including religious organizations adapt their practices to align with the inherent logic and features of digital platforms. This adaptation is evident in the strategic use of these platforms by religious leaders. For instance, Participant M2 shared his preference for Facebook, stating: "*I started with Facebook because Facebook had a very large audience for me. . . so the first platform I started using was Facebook*". Similarly, Participant M5 described using multiple platforms to target different groups:

> "I use Twitter to reach the elites, I use Instagram to reach the young people, I use Facebook to reach a little bit more of the older people and then YouTube reaches all and then TikTok is more for the upward, mobile young generation people that are looking for something new".

These quotations demonstrate how media logic empowers religious leaders to align their communication strategies with platform-specific characteristics, enabling them to customize their outreach for diverse audiences. This adaptability provides a level of flexibility and inclusivity that offline church settings often lack.

8.2.3. Sub-Theme 2.3: Increased Reach Through Digital Platforms

One of the core implications of mediatization is the expansion of reach beyond offline structures and institutional boundaries. Hjarvard (2016) emphasizes how the media democratizes access to religious practices, a point supported by the participants' experiences. Participant M2 remarked: "*In your church. You may have only 500 people. But on Facebook*

you may have more than a thousand people listening to you which is even larger in some other cases". This observation highlights how digital platforms amplify the leaders' influence, enabling them to connect with larger and more diverse audiences. These digital tools provide opportunities for dynamic expressions of faith, transcending the geographic and institutional limitations of offline church settings.

8.2.4. Sub-Theme 2.4: Digital Platforms as Empowerment Tools for Expression

Digital platforms have emerged as significant tools for empowerment, particularly for women. The mediatization framework explains this by highlighting the autonomy that digital platforms provide users, allowing them to bypass institutional gatekeepers such as religious authorities in offline church settings. Participant F19 reflected: "*Women are able to express how they feel at that point in time, and without having an issue of being judged or looked at them negatively*". Similarly, Participant F9 emphasized the flexibility and accommodation offered by digital platforms: "*There are things ordinarily you can't achieve in the traditional setting that you can on digital platforms. And I think the digital platform is also very accommodating and well accepting*".

These quotations illustrate how digital platforms create a safer environment for women to express themselves freely, bypassing the restrictions often found in offline church settings. They also highlight digital media's potential to democratize leadership and expression, though questions remain about whether such empowerment translates into enduring institutional change.

8.3. Theme 3: Gender Dynamics: Online (Digital) vs. Offline Churches

This section, framed within mediatization theory, explores how digital platforms are reshaping gender dynamics in Nigerian Christian leadership. It examines the persistence of patriarchal limitations in offline church settings, the opportunities online spaces provide for women to bypass traditional barriers, and the influence of societal biases on perceptions of women's leadership. The analysis underscores the interplay between entrenched offline structures and the democratizing yet complex impact of digital media on leadership dynamics.

8.3.1. Sub-Theme 3.1: Gendered Limitations in Offline Church Leadership

In offline church settings, entrenched patriarchal structures and cultural norms resist the transformative potential of mediatization theory, reinforcing traditional authority and restricting women's roles. These deeply embedded structures are maintained through scriptural interpretations and cultural traditions, which together uphold hierarchical practices within religious institutions. Participant F9 illustrated this reliance on scripture, stating:

> "There are certain scriptures that seem to limit and restrict women's participation. . . and I would like to read a Scripture for you in 1st Corinthians, chapter 14 verse 34, where it says that let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience as also see it in the law".

Further compounding these barriers are cultural expectations. As Participant M7 noted: "We still believe that women in their menstrual flow are not allowed into the church premises and its environment".

These quotations demonstrate how cultural norms and religious doctrines intertwine to limit women's leadership opportunities. According to mediatization theory, such deeply ingrained practices are resistant to change unless external forces such as digital media intervene. While digital platforms have the potential to democratize leadership and disrupt entrenched cultural and institutional barriers, offline churches continue to serve as

strongholds of patriarchal authority. This ongoing tension highlights the challenges of reshaping authority structures within conventional settings, even as digital media offer new avenues for transformation.

8.3.2. Sub-Theme 3.2: Opportunities for Women in Online Spaces

Digital platforms represent a transformative shift, enabling women to bypass the institutional gatekeeping prevalent in offline churches and showcase their leadership potential. As F14 emphasized, "*digital platform really gave women more leadership freedom to show their leadership potentials*", further adding, "*so many women who have the leverage online without the online maybe might never have been known to be good leaders, or given that opportunity to lead*". Similarly, F9 reflected, "*There are things ordinarily you can't achieve in the traditional setting that you can on digital platforms. And I think the digital platform is also very accommodating and well accepting*".

These quotations illustrate how digital media democratize leadership by allowing women to sidestep the male-dominated institutional constraints found in offline churches, establish online ministries, connect with followers, and share their messages globally. Such platforms prioritize individual reach and influence over institutional validation. However, mediatization theory also warns that while digital platforms offer these new opportunities, they may also reflect and perpetuate existing societal and cultural biases. Even in the digital realm, women's leadership may still be shaped by perceptions and judgments rooted in offline hierarchies. This underscores the complex interplay between conventional norms and the evolving possibilities of digital environments.

8.3.3. Sub-Theme 3.3: Equality of Access vs. Equity in Perceptions Online

While digital platforms theoretically provide equal access to leadership opportunities, perceptions of leadership remain deeply gendered. Mediatization theory highlights that while media can democratize access, it does not inherently dismantle the societal and cultural biases that shape perceptions. For example, Participant M11 argued, "It's a balancer, it's the greatest democracy one can find even in the church", suggesting that digital platforms offer more equitable access to leadership roles. However, Participant M1 disagreed, stating, "*A woman cannot coordinate mass, whether online or offline, you can't still do that*", underscoring the persistent limitations placed on women due to cultural and religious norms. Participant M4 further elaborated on these biases:

> "There are serious traditional religious belief and cultural belief that women are not meant to preach, or women are not meant to be pastors or apostles or prophets or teachers, for the male is always accepted. You know that a man can be a reverend, a man can be a pastor, a man can be anything he wants to be. But for a woman you have to fight your way through for them to believe or to accept, so that equal opportunity is not really there".

These quotations highlight that while digital platforms may provide equal access to opportunities, true equality remains obstructed by deeply rooted societal biases. Mediatization theory thus explains that the democratizing potential of media is often tempered by the persistence of conventional norms, which continue to influence perceptions of leadership, even in the digital realm.

8.3.4. Sub-Theme 3.4: Digital Platforms as a Mixed Space: A Challenge and Reinforcement of Patriarchal Norms

Digital platforms create a mixed space where empowerment and limitations coexist, offering women opportunities to transcend traditional church restrictions while simultaneously reflecting societal and cultural biases. According to mediatization theory, digital

media, while transformative, continue to be shaped by traditional power structures, reinforcing existing norms even as they provide new opportunities. Participant M7 highlighted the empowering aspect of digital platforms, stating, "*So they can take any form they choose to online because they're not restricted by the church community*". This demonstrates the freedom women gain in digital spaces, enabling them to bypass the limitations imposed by offline church structures. However, Participant F10 noted, "*There are certain things you can't say because you're a woman, and there are certain things you mustn't do because you're a woman and so it was limiting us because of gender preferences*". This reveals how gendered restrictions persist even in digital environments, reflecting traditional patriarchal norms. Similarly, Participant M16 pointed out, "*You know on the physical, because of tradition and all that, there's this perception about women. . .*" This highlights how societal expectations continue to shape women's roles and behavior, even online.

In line with mediatization theory, these quotations underscore that while digital platforms create opportunities for change, deeply rooted gendered limitations remain embedded, complicating the process of reshaping authority and leadership structures in religious contexts.

8.4. Theme 4: Authority and Influence: Online vs. Offline Churches

This section examines how digital platforms have restructured authority and influence in religious leadership by decentralizing power and creating new avenues for women to lead. However, these opportunities are accompanied by significant challenges, as digital media still reflect deeply rooted cultural and societal biases. This dual dynamic underscores the ongoing tension between traditional norms and the evolving possibilities brought about by digitalization in religious settings.

8.4.1. Sub-Theme 4.1: Authority in Offline Churches: Hierarchical and Structured

In offline church settings, authority is embedded in hierarchical structures governed by doctrines and cultural norms that often marginalize women. As M15 explained, "*. . .our rules and regulations did not allow female members to participate much*". This underscores how male-dominated power structures define authority in offline settings, systematically excluding women from significant leadership roles. According to mediatization theory, such rigid systems are slow to adapt due to the integration of conventional institutional values. Authority in offline churches remain deeply institutionalized, highlighting the patriarchal barriers women face in assuming leadership roles in these settings.

8.4.2. Sub-Theme 4.2: Authority and Influence Online: Decentralized and Expansive

Digital platforms provide a stark contrast by decentralizing authority and enabling women to bypass institutional gatekeeping. M5 emphasized, "*Women don't have to ask for permission from any man in their church. . . because in the past the men need to give you a platform, and that was an instrument of control, because women can't find an opportunity to function until a man gives them the permission or the opportunity to do so, right now, women just need their phone*". Similarly, F14 observed, "*Yes, I feel the digital platform really gave women more leadership freedom to show their leadership potentials. . .online, you just come, you can be yourself, you can reach audience. You can be a leader using the platform*". She further added, "*I believe that so many women who have the leverage online without the online maybe might never have been known to be good leaders or given that opportunity to lead*".

These quotations reflect the transformative potential of digital platforms, which democratize leadership by prioritizing individual reach and influence over institutional validation. The global reach of digital spaces further amplifies this opportunity, as noted by F19, "*. . .All over the world, India, Canada, South Africa, Dubai. So we all come together as one women, one voice. And we prayed together*".

Mediatization theory explains these shifts as the result of digital platforms functioning as semi-independent institutions, creating opportunities for women to build follower-ship and influence on their terms without adhering to the constraints of offline church hierarchies.

8.4.3. Sub-Theme 4.3: Maintaining Influence: Continuous Engagement Through Relevance and Resilience

Maintaining influence in the digital space demands continuous engagement and relevance, as audiences have more freedom to shift their attention. M5 emphasized, "*First, is consistency. You've digital media, it requires consistency*". F3 similarly highlighted the importance of relevance, stating, "*It's basically by being relevant in your area of calling and that is just the truth. If you are not relevant, you will be left aside*".

These quotations reflect the unique challenges of authority online, where influence is tied to a leader's ability to remain active and adapt to evolving audience expectations. Mediatization theory describes this as media logic, where digital platforms require leaders to operate according to the rules of interactivity, visibility, and engagement to sustain their authority.

8.4.4. Sub-Theme 4.4: Challenges to Authority and Influence Online

While digital platforms offer new opportunities, they also present challenges that undermine women's authority and influence. These include gender-based harassment, technological limitations, and the need to maintain credibility. F13 shared her experience:

"I have faced harassment, I have faced rejection, I have faced a lot of criticisms. People have been critical and judgmental. . .I think on the top of the list, and then sometimes such harassments get down to the point where some people want to even seduce you".

This illustrates how online spaces, despite their openness, remain influenced by patriarchal norms that undermine female leaders. Technical difficulties also pose significant barriers. As M15 pointed out, "*In Nigeria, our network is not so stable. . . So, in order to pass such messages across, you might have to be repeating, and keep repeating the same thing at the same time, in order for them to get the full knowledge of the information*".

Time zone management and spiritual challenges also emerge as obstacles. M15 noted, "*Our times in Nigeria are different from the U.S.. . . you must be able to see to their own time too*". F19 added a perspective unique to African spirituality, "*The spirituality in Africa is not a joke at all. . .within space of 3 weeks, my 3 phones got spoilt, and it's just for this ministry*".

Credibility is another critical issue, as M20 explained, "You think they are not watching you, but they are watching. So even when you are backsliding, they will know this person is going offbeat".

Maintaining consistency and integrity is essential for sustaining influence in digital spaces. Mediatization theory explains these challenges as the integration of societal norms and institutional constraints into digital media, which reflects but does not entirely escape the power structures of offline contexts.

9. Results from Comment Analysis

The analysis of comments generated six main themes and sixteen sub-themes that captured the community members' perspectives on the evolving dynamics of Christian religious leadership in Nigeria. These themes and sub themes shed light on perceptions of gender roles, authority, and influence as well as the impact of digital media on leadership styles and visibility. Through these themes, we gained detailed insights into how digital media is reshaping Christian religious leadership in Nigeria, highlighting the intersections

of empowerment, patriarchal norms, and evolving leadership dynamics. Key areas of focus include perceptions of gender dynamics, evaluations of the leaders' authority and effectiveness, challenges or supports patriarchal norms, appreciation for content quality, and varying degrees of support for increasing female visibility in leadership roles. In Table 3, we present the themes and sub themes that emerged from the comment analysis.

Table 3. Themes and sub themes emerging from the comments analysis.

No	Themes	Sub-Themes
1	Perceptions on Gender Dynamics in Religious Leadership	Male Leaders
		Female Leaders
2	Perception on Leader's Authority, Influence, and Effectiveness	Positive Perceptions
		Negative Responses
		Comparison of Perceptions of Authority between Female and Male Leaders
3	Challenges or Supports Patriarchal Norms	Supports Patriarchal Norms
		Challenges Patriarchal Norms
4	Perception on Content of Leaders' Discussions	Appreciation for Insightful and Relevant Content
		Critique Based on Leaders' Inexperience
		Alignment with Doctrinal Expectations
5	Support for Increased Visibility of Female Leaders	Positive Reinforcement
		Resistance

9.1. Theme 1: Perceptions on Gender Dynamics in Religious Leadership

This section delves into the varied perceptions of gender dynamics in religious leadership, focusing on how male and female leaders are viewed and treated within the religious community. Through the lens of mediatization theory, we can understand how media and communication platforms shape these perceptions, influencing how authority and leadership roles are constructed and challenged in religious contexts. While both male and female leaders receive support, the scrutiny and the expectations placed upon them are distinctly gendered, reflecting societal norms and traditional beliefs.

9.1.1. Sub-Theme 1.1: Male Leaders

For male leaders, the community's perceptions are generally supportive and affirming, with little attention given to their gender. Comments and responses directed at male leaders often emphasize their spiritual authority, teachings, and religious insights without questioning their roles or the legitimacy of their leadership. This is evident in the remarks made by C7 and C13, who wrote, "*Thanks, Padre, as always*" and "*The Lord is your strength and more grace to you in the vocation*". These comments highlight the supportive tone of community feedback for male leaders, reinforcing their established positions as reliable and respected figures. The community engages with them primarily based on their spiritual contributions, rather than their gender. Mediatization theory suggests that media including digital platforms play a key role in shaping and maintaining this perception of male authority. As male leaders typically occupy established, formalized leadership roles in religious communities, their authority is communicated and reinforced through media

and public discourse, often without the scrutiny or questioning that female leaders face. The lack of gender-related commentary or questioning of their authority is consistent with conventional gender norms, where male leadership is normalized, and their authority is rarely challenged.

9.1.2. Sub-Theme 1.2: Female Leaders

In contrast to their male counterparts, female leaders face a more complex reception from the community. While they often receive strong support and admiration for their leadership, they also encounter occasional scrutiny regarding the legitimacy of their roles, particularly in relation to scriptural interpretations. This highlights a gendered expectation that female leaders must justify their authority more rigorously than male leaders. For example, C145 challenged a female leader's role by asking, "*Pastor woman, can you please tell us the verse or chapter in the bible where God says woman should pastor and leave her head uncovered?*". This comment reflects skepticism toward female leadership, suggesting that the commenter may be questioning the scriptural basis for a woman's role as a pastor, particularly highlighting the issue of "head covering", which is often debated within religious communities. The request for a specific scripture further underscores the complexity of how female leadership is perceived, while the commenter seems aware that such a directive does not exist explicitly in scripture, the question itself implies a deeper discomfort or resistance to female authority within religious contexts.

While many female leaders are celebrated as inspirational figures, they are often subjected to a higher level of scrutiny and are frequently held to different standards than their male counterparts. This can be attributed to conventional gender expectations in religious communities, where the leadership of women, especially in roles historically dominated by men, is often questioned. Mediatization theory explains that while digital platforms provide opportunities for women to assert their leadership, these same platforms also reflect and perpetuate societal biases and traditional norms, reinforcing the scrutiny female leaders face.

9.2. Theme 2: Perceptions on Leader's Authority, Influence, and Effectiveness

This section examines how community members perceive the authority, influence, and effectiveness of religious leaders, revealing a dual dynamic of admiration and subtle criticism. By applying mediatization theory, the analysis explored how digital platforms amplify both positive and critical feedback, shaping the way that religious leaders' authority and effectiveness are constructed in the digital space.

9.2.1. Sub-Theme 2.1: Positive Perceptions

Community members widely express their admiration for both male and female religious leaders, frequently highlighting their spiritual guidance, wisdom, and motivational impact. For instance, a male leader received glowing praise from C63, who described a program as "*truly amazing and worth every moment of my time. It exceeded all my expectations*". This comment underscores the community's appreciation for the leader's ability to deliver inspiring and impactful teachings, reflecting a perception of effectiveness and authority. Similarly, female leaders are often celebrated for their ability to inspire and lead. As noted by C117, "*You inspire so many of us*", where followers acknowledge the significant influence these leaders have on their personal spiritual journeys. These affirmations demonstrate how digital platforms amplify positive feedback, reinforcing the leaders' perceived spiritual authority and effectiveness.

Mediatization theory explains this as a result of digital platforms serving as semi-independent institutions, enabling followers to engage with their leaders directly and publicly express their admiration. Such interactions contribute to the construction of

religious authority in the digital space, as positive perceptions are widely visible and further enhance the leaders' influence.

9.2.2. Sub-Theme 2.2: Negative Perception

Despite the general positivity, some community members have offered subtle criticisms, reflecting a more restrained but meaningful form of engagement. These critiques often relate to perceived gaps in personal experience or alignment with religious expectations. For example, C15 remarked, *"In as much as some of your teachings are correct in this topic, you still lack the experience required to do justice to that topic"*. Directed at a celibate male leader discussing marriage, this comment highlights how followers question a leader's experiential authority when it is seen as essential to the subject matter. Similarly, female leaders also faced critical feedback, often linked to their personal appearance or perceived adherence to religious norms. For instance, C135 commented, *"You are doing great; please remove those earrings if you want to make heaven"*. While acknowledging the leader's contributions, the comment underscores how followers sometimes prioritize external conformity to conventional gender role expectations over the leader's spiritual effectiveness. These remarks reflect the complex ways in which digital platforms shape religious authority.

Mediatization theory suggests that while digital media democratizes engagement and creates opportunities for leaders to connect with their communities, it also opens them to increased scrutiny and critical feedback. Followers use these platforms to voice personal perspectives, questioning their leaders' authority in ways that would be less visible in offline church settings.

9.2.3. Sub-Theme 2.3: Comparison of Perceptions of Authority Between Female and Male Leaders

The perceptions of authority for male and female leaders in religious communities differed significantly, reflecting deep-rooted societal and cultural biases. Male leaders are generally viewed as inherently authoritative, with their leadership seamlessly aligning with the established norms. Consequently, they receive widespread affirmation and encouragement from their followers, who seldom question their legitimacy or seek further validation, as evidenced by comments such as C7 and C13. In contrast, female leaders, despite being widely admired and respected for their inspirational qualities, are often subjected to additional scrutiny. Their authority is frequently challenged, particularly with demands for justification rooted in doctrinal or scriptural interpretations, as highlighted by the comment made by C15. This contrast underscores a persistent societal bias that positions male leadership as the default and female leadership as exceptional, requiring continuous validation.

Through the lens of mediatization theory, these dynamics emerge from the role of digital platforms in amplifying societal norms while simultaneously providing spaces for engagement and critique. Digital platforms empower female leaders by offering them with avenues to assert their authority and directly engage with their followers. However, they also expose female leaders to intensified public questioning and scrutiny, making their challenges more visible. Conversely, male leaders benefit from the reinforcement of traditional norms, which uphold their legitimacy without challenge. This dual role of digital platforms, simultaneously fostering empowerment and reflecting entrenched biases, highlights the ongoing tension between evolving leadership roles and deeply ingrained cultural and religious expectations.

9.3. Theme 3: Challenges or Supports Patriarchal Norms

This section examines how digital platforms influence perceptions of gender roles in Christian religious leadership, revealing a dual dynamic of reinforcement and resistance

to patriarchal norms. By applying mediatization theory, the analysis explores how digital spaces both uphold conventional gender expectations and provide opportunities for female leaders to challenge and reshape these norms, highlighting the complex interplay between empowerment and conventional norms in online religious communities.

9.3.1. Sub-Theme 3.1: Supports Patriarchal Norms

While digital platforms are often seen as transformative, they can also reflect and reinforce existing patriarchal structures within religious institutions. Some comments strongly uphold traditional gender roles, portraying male authority as inherently appropriate for leadership. For example, C15 stated, *"The priest came from family too. He don't need to be married before preaching about marriage. Jesus and Paul preached about marriage and they never got married"*. This illustrates how male authority is frequently validated, even in the absence of experiential qualifications, reinforcing the notion that leadership is more naturally aligned with men, irrespective of context or expertise.

9.3.2. Sub-Theme 3.2: Challenges Patriarchal Norms

On the other hand, digital platforms create opportunities to challenge traditional gender expectations in religious leadership. Comments like that made by C142, "More fresh anointing upon you, mummy", highlight significant support for female religious leaders and indicate a shift toward inclusivity within the faith community. This quotation showcases the empowering potential of digital spaces, where women can assert their authority and gain recognition. As Hjarvard's mediatization theory suggests, digital platforms democratize leadership access by enabling marginalized voices to engage with and influence wider audiences, offering opportunities for female leaders to challenge entrenched norms that have historically limited their roles in traditional church settings.

9.4. Theme 4: Perception on Content of Leaders' Discourse

This section explores how digital platforms shape community perceptions of the topics and teachings shared by religious leaders, revealing a balance between admiration and critique. Using mediatization theory, the analysis highlights how digital spaces enhance positive engagement with meaningful and relevant content while also exposing leaders to critical feedback based on their experience and the alignment of their messages with the audience expectations. This dynamic underscores the complex relationship between authority and audience perceptions in online religious discourse.

9.4.1. Sub-Theme 4.1: Appreciation for Insightful and Relevant Content

Many community members' expressed gratitude for content that resonated with their spiritual and personal lives. For example, C63 described a leader's discourse as, *"truly amazing and worth every moment of my time"*, emphasizing the value placed on engaging and transformative teachings. Similarly, phrases like those by C37, *"Wonderful"! Thank you for this deep counsel"* reflect gratitude for content that offers spiritual guidance, indicating that community members often see these discussions as both relevant and transformative. This aligns with mediatization theory's notion that media shift authority by fostering relatability and prioritizing leaders who connect with their audiences. Such interactions highlight how digital platforms amplify impactful discourse, enabling leaders to extend their influence.

9.4.2. Sub-Theme 4.2: Critique Based on Leaders' Inexperience

While supportive overall, some comments expressed reservations, particularly regarding the leader's experiential qualifications on specific topics such as marriage. For instance, C12 suggests that a presumably celibate leader's insights on marriage lacked practical grounding, *"You don't have right to about marriage when you are not married"*. This

critique reflects an expectation that certain life experiences may be necessary to lend authority and relatability to specific discussions, especially those that touch on personal and familial matters.

9.4.3. Sub-Theme 4.3: Alignment with Doctrinal Expectations

Certain comments revealed the followers' expectations for doctrinal consistency in leadership discourse, highlighting how digital platforms can simultaneously empower and constrain religious leaders. For instance, C05 stated, "*He's right. He's just preaching the scripture and common sense*". This comment reflects varying expectations around doctrinal alignment, where members assess the content of the leaders' discussions based on its adherence to scriptural or religious principles, suggesting that some followers gauge the validity of teachings by their alignment with traditional religious doctrines.

9.5. Theme 5: Support for Increased Visibility of Female Leaders

This theme examines the community's varying responses to the increased visibility of female leaders in religious spaces, showcasing a dual dynamic of support and resistance. While many followers' express admiration and encouragement for women in leadership roles, others voice reservations framed through doctrinal concerns. This interplay highlights both the progress toward inclusivity and the lingering influence of traditional gender norms in religious contexts.

9.5.1. Sub-Theme 5.1: Positive Reinforcement

Supportive comments often celebrate female leaders' contributions, reflecting pride and encouragement for their growing visibility. For instance, comments like those by C45, "*More grace, my role model*", and C136, "*Woman of God u too much God bless you*", convey admiration and affirmation for female leaders' roles in faith communities. These expressions demonstrate not only respect for the individual leaders but also broader acceptance of expanding female representation in religious leadership.

Such affirmations highlight a shift toward inclusivity, as female leaders are increasingly recognized for their influence and ability to inspire. Mediatization theory supports this trend, suggesting that digital platforms democratize access to leadership by amplifying marginalized voices. These platforms enable female leaders to connect with their communities in ways that transcend traditional hierarchical barriers, fostering a sense of empowerment and acceptance among their followers.

9.5.2. Sub-Theme 5.2: Resistance

Despite the evident support, resistance to female leadership remains, often expressed through concerns tied to doctrinal interpretations. For example, C110 stated, "*God bless your ministry beloved. It's better you know your limit*". While the initial phrase acknowledges the leader's contributions and conveys goodwill, the latter part imposes perceived boundaries informed by traditional doctrines.

This comment encapsulates the tension between celebrating female leadership and enforcing limits based on conventional gender roles. Such reactions reflect the persistence of patriarchal norms, even within digital platforms that are often seen as spaces of democratization. Mediatization theory provides insights into this phenomenon by illustrating how digital spaces amplify diverse perspectives but also mirror existing societal power structures. Thus, while digital platforms offer opportunities for women to assert leadership, they simultaneously serve as arenas where traditional norms are contested and upheld.

10. Discussion

This study explored the gender dynamics within Christian religious leadership in Nigeria, emphasizing the transformative role of digital platforms in reshaping authority, communication, and influence. Utilizing Hjarvard's (2008) mediatization theory, the findings revealed a dual dynamic in which digital spaces simultaneously empower and constrain female leaders. By analyzing themes from the interviews and community feedback, the study provides a detailed examination of how digital platforms shape communication, authority, and influence, highlighting contrasts with offline church structures.

The participants' journeys into religious leadership reflected deeply ingrained gendered pathways shaped by early religious exposure, parental involvement, and mentorship. Male leaders often follow structured routes including formal theological training, which equips them for leadership roles particularly within mainline, male-dominated denominations. In contrast, female leaders tend to rely on informal pathways, such as ministry-specific education and mentorship, which provide flexibility but lack institutional recognition. Mediatization theory contextualizes these experiences, illustrating how digital platforms create alternative avenues for leadership development. These platforms enable women to bypass some longstanding barriers, but they fall short of fully dismantling entrenched gender biases, underscoring the persistent tension between offline limitations and the evolving opportunities available to female leaders in digital spaces.

The transformation of religious leadership through digital platforms became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the shift to online engagement. Platforms like Facebook and YouTube enabled leaders to maintain visibility and connect with broader, global audiences, aligning with Tsuria and Campbell's (2021) findings on the expanding role of digital media in overcoming physical limitations in religious engagement. For female leaders, this shift offered significant opportunities to bypass patriarchal hierarchies, gaining opportunities to lead and influence independently, as noted by Barker (2005) and Chiluwa (2012). However, while these platforms have expanded leadership reach, female leaders continue to face challenges including harassment, societal biases, and difficulty achieving equal visibility compared to their male counterparts, reflecting the persistence of gender-based disparities in digital spaces.

Gender dynamics in Christian religious leadership are multifaceted, with digital platforms offering female leaders increased opportunities for expression and leadership while offline structures continue to reinforce traditional roles. Digital platforms challenge patriarchal norms by decentralizing authority and amplifying diverse voices, creating new avenues for women to assert leadership and challenge societal expectations. However, as Lang (2020) notes, male dominance persists in offline church settings, often relegating women to supportive roles. Despite the progress facilitated by digital spaces, full gender equality remains elusive, as societal and cultural expectations continue to influence perceptions of female leadership, even online. The mediatization framework explains this duality, illustrating how digital media operates as a semi-independent institution that both disrupts and reflects entrenched societal structures.

Authority and influence, which are traditionally defined by rigid hierarchies in offline church settings, become more decentralized in online environments. Digital platforms offer leaders, particularly women, the opportunity to bypass institutional barriers (Oyewole 2017). While Campbell (2007) describes digital authority as fluid, the female participants in this study reported difficulties in maintaining their influence due to challenges like gender-based harassment and technical limitations specific to digital spaces. This contrast highlights that although digital platforms provide more equitable access to leadership roles, they do not fully eliminate the cultural biases that shape perceptions of female authority (Chiluwa 2012).

Overall, digital media have significantly transformed the dynamics of Christian religious leadership in Nigeria, creating both empowering and limiting spaces for female leaders. According to mediatization theory, digital platforms are reshaping access to authority by enabling women to assert leadership roles without the need for institutional gatekeepers (Hjarvard 2016). The findings of this study strongly support this theory, aligning with Bekmurzaev (2018), and demonstrate that while digital media provide leaders with greater influence, they also expose the persistence of traditional biases. This highlights the dual role of digital platforms in both challenging and reinforcing patriarchal norms.

11. Conclusions and Implications

This study illuminates the evolving dynamics of Christian religious leadership in Nigeria, showing that while digital platforms provide significant opportunities for female leaders, they are not a panacea for entrenched gender biases. As digital spaces continue to grow in importance, they offer a democratizing force, but conventional perceptions of gender and authority often persist. Female leaders benefit from the expanded visibility and the chance to connect with global audiences, underscoring the transformative potential of digital engagement. However, challenges such as online harassment and societal expectations highlight the need for broader cultural shifts within religious communities to foster genuine equality.

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, religious institutions may consider formalizing support for digital ministry initiatives, particularly those led by women, to leverage the inclusivity that digital platforms can offer. Second, religious communities and leaders may need to confront and address gender biases both online and offline, fostering environments where leadership is based on capability rather than gender. This approach can strengthen the inclusivity of digital ministries, supporting a future where both male and female leaders can thrive equally in both online and offline religious spaces.

This study offers a valuable perspective on the gender dynamics of Nigerian Christian leaders in digital religious spaces, but several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study's reliance on qualitative data from a limited sample of Nigerian Christian leaders and community comments may have restricted the generalizability of the findings across different geographical contexts. Additionally, as the participants already had established digital presences, the study may not have fully captured the experiences of leaders who were less active online. Finally, as digital platforms continually evolve, future shifts in platform policies, user behaviors, or societal attitudes may impact how gender dynamics play out online, potentially altering the implications of this study over time.

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