



Faith in Transition: How Digital Technology is Shaping Christian Doctrine Today

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Abstract

This study interrogates the transformative role of digital technology in the formulation, dissemination, and reception of Christian doctrine in the contemporary era. It critically evaluates the dual dynamics of opportunity and disruption: the capacity of digital platforms to broaden the reach and contextualization of Christian teachings, and their simultaneous tendency to destabilize traditional ecclesiastical authority and doctrinal coherence. Situated within the frameworks of media theory and theological inquiry, the research employs a qualitative methodology encompassing the analysis of live-streamed sermons, digital Bible applications, and faith-oriented social media practices. The findings demonstrate that digital technologies significantly enhance accessibility, stimulate interactive modes of engagement, and particularly appeal to younger demographics. Conversely, they contribute to the decentralization of authority, promote individualized hermeneutics, and engender risks of doctrinal dilution. The discussion foregrounds the mediatization of religion, arguing that digital technologies operate not as neutral instruments but as constitutive environments that actively shape theological discourse and practice. The study recommends a critical appropriation of digital platforms by Christian institutions, emphasizing the necessity of balancing accessibility with theological rigor, reaffirming communal interpretative authority, and equipping younger generations with digital discernment. It concludes that digital technology should be understood not as an ancillary tool but as a defining context in which Christian doctrine must be articulated, embodied, and transmitted in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Digital technology, Christian doctrine, Media theory, Mediatization of religion, Ecclesiastical authority, Digital theology*

Introduction

Christian doctrine has always been shaped by the means through which it is communicated. From oral traditions in the early church to the printed Bible after the Reformation, each technological innovation has altered how believers engage with faith. In the twenty-first century, the rapid rise of digital technology has introduced an unprecedented shift, with platforms such as Bible applications, online sermons, streaming services, and social media becoming central avenues for doctrinal engagement (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero, & Kurlberg, 2019).

This digital turn has created a paradox. On one hand, technology democratizes access to Scripture and theological resources, breaking geographical and denominational barriers. It provides new opportunities for faith formation, especially among youth who are digital natives. On the other hand, it also fragments ecclesial authority, fosters individualized interpretation, and risks reducing complex doctrines into easily consumable but often superficial content (Megwas, Ihechu, Benson-Eluwa, & Osuagwu, 2025).

The problem this paper addresses is the tension between the accessibility offered by digital media and the potential erosion of traditional doctrinal integrity. As Christian communities increasingly migrate online, questions of authenticity, authority, and faith transmission become urgent. The purpose of this study is to examine how digital technology is reshaping Christian doctrine in contemporary society. Specifically, the paper also analyzed the opportunities and risks digital platforms present for doctrinal teaching. Explore how doctrine and interpretation are negotiated in online faith spaces. Recommend strategies for church leaders to engage digital media without compromising doctrinal coherence.

Theoretical Framework

This work anchored on the use of Media Theory, particularly mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2023), argues that media are not just neutral tools for delivering messages—they actively shape the way people think, act, and believe. When applied to Christianity, this means that digital platforms don't simply transmit doctrine; they also reshape the way doctrine is experienced, interpreted, and lived out. For example, in the past, most Christians received doctrine from the pulpit or catechism classes, under the guidance of church authority. Today, many young people encounter theology first through Instagram devotionals, TikTok clips, YouTube sermons, or Bible app notifications. Media theory helps us see that these platforms have their own "logic": Brevity and virality complex doctrines get shortened into quick, catchy messages. Personalization algorithms feed believers content that matches their preferences, which can

reinforce selective or fragmented interpretations of Scripture. Participatory culture everyone with a smartphone can comment, remix, or “teach,” which shifts doctrinal authority from clergy alone to influencers and peer networks. This is not only a challenge but also an opportunity. On one hand, doctrines like salvation, sin, or grace risk being oversimplified into slogans. On the other hand, digital media also allow Christians to contextualize faith in real life linking biblical truths to issues like mental health, justice, and identity in ways that resonate deeply with young believers (Darmawan et al., 2024; Megwas et al., 2025).

Media theory reminds us how communication affects live stream sermon feels different from hearing the same sermon in person; a Bible verse on app feels different from reading the same verse in a leather-bound Bible. Neither is wrong, but each changes how people receive and interpret doctrine. Ultimately, media theory challenges the church to recognize that technology is no longer just a background tool it is now part of the environment where faith is formed. To keep doctrine alive and meaningful, leaders must learn not only to use digital media but also to understand its power to reshape how people live out their faith.

Literature Review

The relationship between Christian doctrine and digital technology has become a growing area of academic inquiry in theology, media studies, and sociology. Recent scholars highlights both the potential of digital platforms to enrich doctrinal teaching and the risks of fragmentation, superficiality, and loss of ecclesial authority. The following review is structured around five themes: digital theology and mediatization, youth engagement, authority and individualization, cultural shifts, and risks of digital faith.

Digital Theology and Mediatization

The field of digital theology embrace the intersection of theology and digital innovation, examining how online platforms not only transmit religious messages but also shape theological reflection itself. Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and Kurlberg (2019) argue that digital theology must be understood as a discipline where digital culture actively transforms Christian thought and practice. Similarly, Hjarvard’s (2025) mediatization theory contends that media increasingly absorb religious functions, such as ritual and teaching, and recast them according to media logic. Applied to Christianity, this implies that doctrine communicated through memes, live streams, or apps is unavoidably shaped by the digital formats that carry it.

Youth Engagement and Digital Discipleship

A growing body of research highlights the significance of digital platforms in reaching young Christians. Darmawan et al. (2024) found that digital discipleship initiatives in Indonesia



helped sustain youth faith formation during and after the pandemic, though they also introduced distractions and superficial engagement. In Nigeria, Megwas et al. (2025) reported that Facebook and YouTube were the most used platforms for accessing faith-based teaching, demonstrating how digital spaces have become central to doctrinal exposure. Globally, gamified devotionals, interactive Bible apps, and storytelling platforms have been found to resonate strongly with audiences, aligning with their preference for participatory learning (Bocala-Wiedemann, 2022).

Risks of Digital Faith and Mental Health Concerns

Digital platforms open new possibilities for faith transmission, they also present risks. BibleAnalysis.org (2023) highlights that heavy social media use among Christian youth often leads to spiritual distraction, anxiety, and a weakened sense of community. Similarly, global studies on digital media use and mental health warn of addictive patterns, reduced interpersonal skills, and shallow engagement with complex ideas (Wikipedia, 2025). For doctrine, this implies that while accessibility is enhanced, depth and coherence may be undermined if teaching is reduced to snippets of consumable content.

The reviewed studies collectively suggest that digital technology is not a neutral tool but a transformative environment. It democratizes doctrinal access, particularly empowering youth engagement, yet it simultaneously decentralizes authority and risks diluting theological depth. The literature leaves open the practical question of how church leaders might balance these opportunities and challenges, a gap this paper seeks to address.

Methodology

The study adopted an interpretive qualitative approach, which is appropriate for exploring meaning-making processes in digital religious spaces. Rather than seeking to quantify usage patterns, the research aimed to uncover how doctrine is being reshaped through digital technologies and how these changes influence authority, authenticity, and communal faith practices.

Data Sources

Data were collected from three main categories of digital Christian content produced from: Online sermons and live streams from large and small churches, focusing on how core doctrines (e.g., salvation, grace, eschatology) are explained in digital contexts. Bible applications and devotional platforms, including YouTube Version, Bible Project, and AI-driven tools offering daily study or theological commentary. Faith-based social media content, drawn from

platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, with emphasis on accounts that explicitly engage doctrinal themes.

Findings

The thematic analysis revealed six major findings that demonstrate how digital technology is shaping the teaching, interpretation, and practice of Christian doctrine. Each is discussed below.

1. Accessibility and Interactivity

One of the most striking findings is the way digital platforms have expanded access to Scripture and theological resources. Bible applications such as YouVersion provide translations in multiple languages, devotional plans, and tools for study that were previously confined to theological institutions or physical libraries. Similarly, streaming services and online sermon archives enable believers across the globe to access preaching from diverse denominational traditions. This accessibility is accompanied by interactivity. Digital platforms encourage users not only to consume content but to comment, share, remix, and even co-create theological material. Young people in particular are drawn to gamified Bible apps and interactive storytelling tools that turn doctrinal learning into participatory experiences (Bocala-Wiedemann, 2022). These forms of engagement have democratized theological education, making it more immediate and widely available than ever before.

2. Fragmentation of Authority

While accessibility has expanded, it has also led to the fragmentation of doctrinal authority. Traditionally, church leaders, theologians, and councils have functioned as custodians of Christian teaching. However, in the digital environment, individuals with no formal training can amass large audiences by sharing personal interpretations of Scripture on platforms such as YouTube or TikTok. As a result, authority is becoming more decentralized. Many believers now look to digital influencers, bloggers, or charismatic online preachers rather than local pastors for doctrinal guidance. This shift reflects broader cultural trends in which institutional authority is questioned and individuals prefer to curate their own sources of truth (Aduragba, Cristea, & Phillips, 2022). The danger is that core Christian doctrines may be reshaped or even distorted by popular voices rather than established theological traditions.

3. Individualized Interpretation

Closely related to authority fragmentation is the rise of personalized interpretations of doctrine. Bible apps increasingly allow users to select themes that match their felt needs, such as anxiety, relationships, or finances. AI-driven platforms now provide tailored devotionals, generating interpretations based on user prompts. While this personalization makes Scripture appear more

relevant to daily life, it risks turning doctrine into a consumer-oriented product. Instead of engaging with the whole counsel of Christian teaching, individuals may focus only on what affirms their personal preferences. This trend can undermine the communal and corrective role of doctrine, fostering selective interpretations that may stray from orthodoxy.

4. Doctrinal Dilution and Superficiality

The study found clear evidence of doctrinal dilution in digital spaces. Social media often reduces complex theological concepts into memes, short reels, or inspirational quotes. For instance, doctrines such as the Trinity, atonement, or eschatology are sometimes simplified into catchy slogans that lack theological depth. Although these bite-sized teachings capture attention, they often sacrifice nuance and leave audiences with partial or distorted understandings of doctrine. Moreover, algorithms designed to maximize engagement tend to prioritize emotional or sensational content over careful theological exposition. This leads to a form of digital theology that is wide in reach but shallow in depth (Megwas et al., 2025)

5. Opportunities for Contextualization

Despite the risks, digital media also create new opportunities for contextualizing doctrine in ways that resonate with contemporary life. For example, online sermons during the COVID-19 pandemic often integrated themes of hope, resilience, and justice into traditional doctrinal frameworks (Darmawan et al., 2024). Social media discussions also allow theology to be applied directly to pressing social issues such as identity, climate change, and mental health. This contextualization is especially powerful among youth, who often perceive traditional sermons as disconnected from their lived realities. Digital platforms provide flexible spaces where doctrine can be reinterpreted in culturally relevant ways without abandoning its essential truths. If carefully guided, such contextualization can strengthen the relevance and vitality of Christian teaching.

6. Mental Health and Distraction Risks

Finally, the findings revealed that heavy engagement with digital platforms can produce negative consequences for faith and doctrine. Christian youth, in particular, report experiences of distraction, anxiety, and spiritual shallowness due to constant exposure to fragmented digital content (BibleAnalysis.org, 2023). The pressure to maintain online presence often displaces time for prayer, meditation, and communal worship. Moreover, the formative nature of social media may encourage believers to showcase spirituality for likes and shares, rather than pursuing deep doctrinal understanding. Such dynamics can weaken the seriousness with which doctrine is engaged and foster an environment of comparison rather than communion.

In summary, digital technology is a double-edged sword for Christian doctrine. It expands access, enhances interactivity, and contextualizes theology, yet it simultaneously fragments authority, promotes individualized interpretation, dilutes doctrinal coherence, and introduces risks of superficiality and distraction. These findings highlight the urgent need for intentional, critical engagement by church leaders and theologians.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrated that digital technology has become more than a tool for transmitting Christian doctrine; it has become a shaping environment that reconfigures the very conditions under which doctrine is received, interpreted, and practiced. To fully grasp these dynamics, media theory especially the concept of mediatization provides a critical lens.

Mediatization and the Transformation of Doctrine

Stig Hjarvard's (2025) theory of mediatization suggests that media are not neutral carriers of information but active cultural forces that transform the institutions and practices they mediate. In the case of Christianity, this means that when doctrine moves into digital spaces, it is inevitably reshaped by the logic of those media. For example, social media algorithms prioritize brevity, emotional resonance, and visual appeal, leading to the simplification of complex doctrines into catchy, shareable formats. This corresponds directly with the finding on doctrinal dilution, where theological nuance is sacrificed to meet the demands of digital visibility.

Authority and the Logic of Media Platforms

Media theory also helps explain the fragmentation of authority. Traditionally, doctrinal authority rested within structured hierarchies such as church councils, seminaries, and clergy. In digital spaces, however, authority is tied to visibility, virality, and engagement metrics rather than theological training. Influencers and charismatic personalities may gain more doctrinal influence than established theologians simply because their content circulates more widely. This shift reflects the way media logic redefines legitimacy: authority now flows from popularity rather than institutional endorsement.

Personalization and Media Individualism

The rise of individualized interpretation aligns with broader media culture trends of personalization and consumer choice. Digital platforms are designed to give users tailored experiences through algorithms, filters, and customizable apps. Applied to Christian doctrine, this encourages believers to approach theology as a menu of options, selecting what fits personal needs or preferences. While this enhances relevance, it risks undermining the collective and corrective dimension of doctrine that has historically bound Christian communities together.



Accessibility as Mediatized Democratization

On a positive note, media theory helps us see that digital platforms democratize doctrinal access. Just as the printing press decentralized Scripture from ecclesiastical elites in the sixteenth century, digital media makes theological resources broadly available today. However, this democratization is mediated by technological structures meaning that the form, tone, and framing of doctrine are deeply influenced by the design of apps, platforms, and algorithms. Accessibility, therefore, is inseparable from the shaping power of the medium itself.

Contextualization and Media Hybridity

The finding that digital spaces allow for greater contextualization of doctrine reflects what media theorists call hybridity the blending of global and local forms of communication. Online sermons and social media discussions often weave doctrinal teaching with contemporary social issues, enabling faith to engage directly with the lived realities of audiences. Media theory highlights that this contextualization is not accidental but inherent to the flexibility of digital platforms, which allow doctrine to circulate across diverse cultural contexts and be reinterpreted accordingly.

Media-Induced Risks: Distraction and Superficiality

Finally, the risks of mental health struggles and distraction observed in this study can also be illuminated by media theory. The constant flow of notifications, short-form content, and the formative culture of social media fragment attention and foster superficial engagement. This resonates with concerns in media studies that digital environments produce shallow modes of processing information, which, when applied to faith, result in diminished doctrinal depth. In light of media theory, the findings suggest that digital technology is not simply reshaping how doctrine is communicated, but also what doctrine becomes in digital environments. Mediatization reveals that the medium itself is formative: social media logic tends to prioritize emotional appeal, personalization, and rapid circulation, all of which profoundly alter the authority, coherence, and practice of Christian teaching. At the same time, these same dynamics provide new pathways for democratization, contextualization, and relevance, particularly among youth

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, this study proposes several recommendations for church leaders, theologians, and Christian communities seeking to navigate the opportunities and challenges of digital technology in relation to doctrine.

1. Embrace Digital Platforms Critically



Church leaders should not reject digital media outright but engage it with discernment. Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Bible apps can be powerful tools for expanding access to doctrine. However, leaders must recognize the shaping power of media logic and ensure that core teachings are not compromised by oversimplification or sensationalism.

2. Reinforce Doctrinal Depth alongside Accessibility

To counter the risk of doctrinal dilution, churches should pair digital teaching with structured opportunities for deeper study such as hybrid Bible classes, digital discussion groups, and interactive theological webinars. This approach balances accessibility with depth, ensuring that believers are not left with superficial understandings of complex doctrines.

3. Reaffirm Communal Authority Structures

Given the fragmentation of authority online, church institutions should create credible digital presences that communicate doctrine clearly and authentically. Seminaries, denominations, and local churches can collaborate to publish doctrinally sound resources on digital platforms, thereby reclaiming theological authority in online spaces dominated by influencers.

4. Equip Youth for Digital Discernment

Since younger generations are most engaged with digital platforms, churches should incorporate digital literacy into discipleship training. Teaching believers how to critically assess online doctrinal claims helps foster resilience against misinformation, shallow interpretations, and prosperity gospel distortions prevalent in digital spaces.

5. Contextualize Doctrine without Compromising Core Beliefs

Digital media's strength lies in its ability to integrate doctrine with real life issues. Churches should use this potential to connect theology to social justice, mental health, and cultural concerns, while safeguarding the integrity of central Christian doctrines. This balance preserves doctrinal coherence while keeping faith relevant.

6. Prioritize Ethical Use of Technology

Church leaders must model healthy engagement with digital platforms. Encouraging intentional digital practices such as setting boundaries for screen time, cultivating silence, and emphasizing offline community ensures that technology enhances rather than diminishes spiritual well-being.

Conclusion

This study has examined how digital technology is reshaping the teaching, interpretation, and practice of Christian doctrine in contemporary contexts. Guided by media theory, particularly the concept of mediatization, the findings reveal that digital platforms both expand access to Scripture and encourage creative contextualization while simultaneously fragmenting authority, fostering individualized interpretations, and risking doctrinal dilution. In other words, technology is not a neutral tool but a formative environment that directly influences the content, form, and authority of Christian teaching. To respond to these shifts, the study recommends that church leaders and theologians should adopt a critical constructive approach to digital engagement. By combining accessibility with doctrinal depth, reaffirming communal authority, equipping youth with digital discernment, and contextualizing doctrine without compromising its core, churches can harness the strengths of digital technology while safeguarding theological integrity. Ultimately, the challenge and opportunity of the digital age lie not in resisting change but in ensuring that Christian doctrine continues to be taught, lived, and communicated authentically in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

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