

MEDIATISED WORSHIP: EXPLORING MEDIA'S INFLUENCE AND ROLE IN CHURCH PERFORMANCES THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE

Adeyemi Oluwadamilare Oresanya
Performing Arts Department,
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-iwoye,

Abstract

Media's influence has transformed human interaction and institutional practices across the globe, including religious worship. This study examines the dynamic role of media in contemporary church performances, using The Experience, a prominent Nigerian gospel music concert, as a case study. Drawing on a descriptive research method to specifically analyse The Experience, the paper explores how media technologies have reshaped African Christian worship, transitioning from traditional, static liturgies to vibrant, multisensory, and participatory events. Findings reveal that media serves not only as a conduit for communication but as a scenic, symbolic, and spiritual tool within church performances. Ultimately, the study argues for the responsible integration of media into religious settings, one that enhances spiritual expression while safeguarding sacred values.

Keywords: Media; Church performance; Digital Worship; *The Experience*; Religious Communication

Introduction

Since the dawn of the post-industrial era, media has emerged as a critical force in shaping social, political, and religious life. As a system of technologies and communicative practices, media facilitates interaction, shapes perceptions, and constructs realities (McLuhan, 1964; Couldry, 2012). Its growing presence in religious contexts, particularly in African Pentecostal and charismatic movements, has spurred both innovation and controversy. In this age of digital convergence, churches are increasingly adopting media tools to extend their reach, enhance worship aesthetics, and promote communal belonging. This paper focuses on the intersection of media and church performances, with particular emphasis on *The Experience*, an annual gospel music concert hosted by House on the Rock Church in Lagos, Nigeria. The concert draws massive crowds and global viewership through a hybrid of in-person and virtual platforms, a rich site for analysing media's functions in religious expression.

In this study, "media" encompasses the full spectrum of communicative channels, print, digital, broadcast, traditional, and social, each serving to amplify the spiritual and performative dimensions of worship. As Stoltzfus (2020) explains, media refers to "any channel of communication... from printed paper to digital data," capable of reaching and influencing audiences across diverse settings. These platforms enable churches to transcend geographic and temporal boundaries, especially in the wake of global disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic (Campbell, 2021). The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to examine the benefits and concerns surrounding media's role in church settings; second, to illustrate how *The Experience* employs various media forms not just for communication, but as scenic, participatory, and spiritual devices. Through this, the research contributes to the growing field of media theology and performance studies by contextualising technological innovation within contemporary African Christianity.

Arguments For and Against Media in Church Activities

The incorporation of media into religious worship has stirred significant debate within theological, cultural, and communication circles. While some argue that media compromises the sanctity of

worship by introducing secular aesthetics, others contend that it enhances spiritual experiences and facilitates evangelism in a digital age. This section examines both sides of the debate to expatiate a balanced understanding of media's role in church performances.

Skepticism and Concerns

Critics of mediatised worship often frame their concerns around moral purity, spiritual distraction, and theological dilution. Cachila (2018) notes that while media particularly social media enables communication and outreach, it can also engender “secret sin” by creating anonymity, distraction, and a culture of self-promotion. In her view, unchecked media usage in churches can distort the authenticity of worship, replacing sacred focus with entertainment-driven aesthetics. The argument suggests that the church's growing media presence may unintentionally cultivate consumerist spirituality, where visual stimulation overshadows introspection and reverence. Moreover, traditionalists worry that media's embrace may erode doctrinal fidelity and liturgical simplicity. Comiskey (1985) highlights the unease many church leaders feel toward media technologies, asserting that the rise of mass media has led to “an overconfidence in human power,” displacing the dependence on divine guidance. Such critiques frame media not just as a technological tool but as a theological challenge; an invitation to reassess the boundaries between worship and performance.

Support and Innovation

Conversely, proponents argue that media is not inherently secular but contextually functional; it becomes either redemptive or corrupting based on how it is used. Mateus (2017) challenges the tendency to scapegoat media for society's moral decline. She observes that “terrible things happened long before the modern media were invented and that restricting media from the church does not safeguard sanctity but may limit outreach and adaptability. Media, when integrated thoughtfully, can extend the church's prophetic voice to spaces unreachable by traditional means. Furthermore, media allows for multi-directional communication, enabling congregants not just to receive messages but to engage, respond, and co-create meaning. Bailey and Storch (2007, p.15) argue that traditional churches often rely on “one-way communication” that renders audiences passive. In contrast, contemporary worshipers, especially digital natives, thrive in participatory cultures where interaction deepens connection. They note that “although the one-way communication has been conservative and accepted, the new generation prefers engagement, participation, and visibility”. Thus, media serves as both a mirror and a megaphone, amplifying voices and spiritual encounters in dynamic ways.

Kimaru (2019), in her study of church communication in Norway, adds that social media and other digital tools allow for the personalisation of faith experiences. From live streamed sermons to interactive prayer sessions, media has enabled churches to remain relevant and relational, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 lockdowns. These innovations underscore media's potential not only as a tool of evangelism but as a sacred interface for spiritual transformation.

Nigerian Pentecostal Media Aesthetics

To fully appreciate the role of media in church performances such as *The Experience*, it is important to situate the conversation within the distinct cultural and spiritual framework of Nigerian Pentecostalism. Over the past few decades, Nigerian Pentecostal churches have become masters of performance, spectacle, and digital adaptation. These churches do not just use media; they have cultivated a media aesthetic that is uniquely African, vibrantly expressive, and spiritually immersive. This aesthetic combines music, dance, image, sound, light, and narrative in ways that appeal to both emotion and imagination. As Obadare (2018) observes, Nigerian Pentecostalism is not merely about doctrine, it is a full-bodied performance of power, success, and divine encounter. Churches such as Living Faith Church, Coza, House on the Rock, Christ Embassy, and the Redeemed Christian Church of God have embraced media technologies not only as tools for

evangelism, but as platforms for theatrical theology, where messages are not just preached but staged with grandeur. Adogame (2013) explains that African Pentecostal movements often utilise media to construct what he calls the "public face" of the church. This face is highly curated, glossy magazines, edited worship videos, international streaming, and coordinated branding, all contribute to how churches assert religious authority in the public square. This is evident in *The Experience*, where media is used to announce, dramatise, and memorialise worship in ways that are both spiritually intense and visually spectacular. This performance of faith is not a shallow show. On the contrary, it reflects what Wariboko (2011) describes as "the Pentecostal principle": the belief that the Spirit operates in immediacy, freedom, and creative flow. Media aesthetics in Nigerian churches are therefore not just decorative; they are spiritual strategies, evoking the presence of the divine through sensory richness. The lighting, projections, musical crescendos, and spontaneous camera zooms are not distractions from worship; they are integral to how worship is felt and embodied.

Moreover, Nigerian Pentecostal media aesthetics are rooted in indigenous performance traditions. Praise songs often draw on Yoruba call-and-response; Igbo dance movements, and Pidgin slogans, localised expressions that resonate deeply with the audience. Adesanmi (2015), though known for cultural criticism, aptly observed that public performance in Nigeria often blends seriousness and spectacle, ritual and play. Churches have inherited and amplified this tradition, using media to frame the sacred in culturally resonant ways.

Importantly, these aesthetics also function transnationally. As Ukah (2016) notes, Nigerian churches have expanded their media strategies to reach diasporic communities across Europe and North America. Through live streams, digital devotionals, and global worship conferences, these churches create spiritual proximity for Nigerians abroad. In this context, *The Experience* becomes both a local and global event; a yearly performance of Nigerian Pentecostal modernity and its mastery of the media age. The aesthetics of Nigerian Pentecostal media are not mere embellishments. They are theological, cultural, and performative tools that shape how worship is experienced, remembered, and shared. As this paper will further explore through *The Experience*, these aesthetics play a powerful role in constructing the atmosphere, message, and impact of contemporary church performances in Nigeria.

The Experience: A Paradigm of Mediatised Worship

The Experience is not merely a musical concert; it is a transcontinental worship phenomenon. Hosted annually by House on the Rock Church in Lagos, Nigeria, this event exemplifies how digital, traditional, and symbolic media converge to transform worship into a multisensory, trans-cultural experience. With its diverse lineup of gospel artists from Nigeria, South Africa, the United States, and beyond, *The Experience* creates a liminal space where spiritual, cultural, and technological worlds meet. Its unique format, free, open-air, and heavily publicised, allows it to reach tens of thousands physically, and millions virtually through broadcast and streaming platforms. According to Afolayan and Nwaka (2021), Nigerian mega-churches like House on the Rock have leveraged digital platforms not only for outreach but to rebrand African Pentecostalism as globally relevant and aesthetically powerful. In this regard, *The Experience* is both spectacle and sanctuary, a testament to how media can extend the spatial and temporal limits of religious gatherings.

Theologically, the event collapses traditional notions of sacred space. Instead of being confined to a cathedral or altar, worship unfolds across digital screens, camera lenses, and social networks. As Campbell and Tsuria (2021) note, "religion online" now exists not only as a virtual representation of offline practices but as an authentic site of spiritual engagement. This redefinition of worship geography allows *The Experience* to cultivate a community that is dispersed yet connected, transient yet spiritually rooted. Moreover, the deliberate use of multiple media genres, flyers, billboards, radio jingles, TV ads, social media campaigns, and live streams, demonstrates a

sophisticated understanding of how to construct spiritual anticipation through sensory buildup. These strategies reflect a broader trend in what Hoover (2006) calls “mediated religion,” where media no longer merely reports on religious life but becomes constitutive of religious meaning itself.

Media and the Contemporary Society: Between Communication and Culture

Media is no longer a neutral channel; it is a powerful agent of cultural transmission, shaping how societies imagine, remember, and believe. In contemporary society, its role extends beyond information dissemination to influence identity formation, collective memory, political participation, and, as this paper argues, spiritual engagement. As Bartley (2016, p.1) asserts, “media has become a huge part of our individual lives... its role in the world stays beyond any question”. Its ubiquity permeates every sphere: governance, education, business, and religion reflecting what Castells (2009) describes as a “network society,” where power is exercised through flows of information across interconnected platforms. From a cultural perspective, media serves as both archive and mirror. Altheide and Snow (1979) use the term “media logic” to explain how media formats influence the structure and content of social life, including religious rituals. In this light, media is not simply a tool used by churches; it reshapes how churches conceive of time, space, and participation. For instance, the use of countdowns, thematic hashtags, pre-event trailers, and post-event highlights in *The Experience* reflects a media logic that synchronises worship with the rhythms of digital engagement.

Media also plays a significant role in cross-cultural transmission. Through digital documentation, broadcasting, and archiving, church performances become accessible across linguistic, national, and generational divides. This aligns with Gelfgren and Hutchings (2013), who argue that digital media serves as a “repository of religious memory,” storing sermons, songs, and testimonies that transcend their original moment. Yet, the influence of media in society is not unidirectional. It both shapes and is shaped by societal values. In Africa, where oral traditions and communal performances are central to knowledge production, media becomes a modern griot, preserving, projecting, and sometimes challenging cultural and religious values (Ukah, 2016). In *The Experience*, this duality is visible: while the aesthetics are global (LED screens, stage lighting, and projection mapping), the affective core remains deeply Nigerian, infused with Yoruba praise chants, Igbo worship styles, and Pentecostal prayer rhythms. Finally, media's value lies not only in its technological affordances but in its capacity to humanise distant experiences. Through live streamed worship, virtual choirs, and real-time testimonies, digital media makes the abstract tangible, allowing participants to feel emotionally and spiritually involved regardless of location. As Meyer (2009) contends, media in religious practice often produces what she calls “aesthetic formations,” where spiritual atmospheres are mediated through sound, image, rhythm, and emotion.

Media and Religion

The relationship between media and religion in the African context is not a recent invention; it is an evolving synergy. Nigerian churches, particularly Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, have embraced media as a theological tool, one capable of extending the pulpit, amplifying the prophetic voice, and sanctifying the digital space. Where early missionaries used tracts and radios, today's churches employ live streams, Instagram devotionals, WhatsApp prayer chains, and YouTube sermons. As Obadare (2018) observes, Pentecostal churches in Nigeria are deeply entangled with media logic, not simply to attract attention, but to legitimise spiritual authority. Media here is not a servant to theology; it is theology-in-practice. Adogame (2013) expands this further by suggesting that Nigerian churches use media to mediate the sacred in public spaces. Through music videos, televised services, and glossy digital designs, the spiritual becomes aesthetic and accessible. Media enables what he terms the “spectacularisation of religion,” where worship becomes a visual

testimony and a social force.

This visibility does more than build membership. It constructs spiritual citizenship. As Ukah (2016) argues, Nigerian Pentecostalism uses media to develop a transnational identity, linking Lagos with London, Accra with Atlanta, through synchronised worship experiences. *The Experience* exemplifies this by bringing together artists and audiences across borders, unified through a mediated spiritual atmosphere.

These dynamics show that religion and media in Nigeria are not opposites, they are co-creators of a new liturgical ecology. The screen becomes a site of spiritual encounter; the camera, a prophetic lens; the comment section, a space of testimony. Media and religion, once thought to exist in tension, have in recent decades become deeply intertwined. Media has moved from being a mere auxiliary tool for churches to becoming a critical platform for faith transmission, identity formation, and global religious interaction (Campbell, 2010). Particularly in African Christian contexts, media technologies are not simply vehicles for gospel dissemination, they are constitutive of how modern religiosity is expressed and experienced. Historically, religion functioned as a major organising force in people's lives, structuring time, morality, and community. With the rise of media culture, many of these roles are increasingly negotiated through screens and networks (Lövhelm & Lynch, 2011). Television broadcasts, radio evangelism, podcasts, social media devotionals, and live streamed services have redefined the spiritual landscape. Harvard Divinity School (as cited in Mateus, 2017) observes that media now performs many social functions once reserved for institutional religion: delivering moral frameworks, spiritual advice, and communal rituals. This convergence, however, raises theological and cultural questions. Do media dilute religious authenticity or amplify its reach? Does the platform alter the message? As Couldry (2012) argues, media is not a neutral vessel; it shapes perception, behavior, and authority. In this sense, the medium affects the theology. Churches must therefore engage with media critically, balancing innovation with integrity.

In African Pentecostalism, the fusion of media and religion is particularly visible. Nigerian churches, for instance, have adapted media not just for communication but for spiritual warfare, prosperity gospel promotion, and global branding (Ukah, 2016). Media becomes both a spiritual weapon and a cultural performance. In this setting, the pastor is often not just a preacher but a media personality, using sound, image, and narrative to evoke transformation. Moreover, media serves an epistemological function, it makes invisible things visible. Through media, divine presence is made perceptible: a sermon becomes replayable; a prophecy can go viral; a worship session can be archived for generations. As Meyer (2010) asserts, media materialises the spiritual by shaping how people see, feel, and imagine the divine. Therefore, rather than being viewed as a threat, media in religious settings should be understood as a cultural artifact with theological implications. It demands discernment, not dismissal.

Media and the Experience

The Experience exemplifies the mediatisation of religion in action. It is a holistic fusion of spiritual fervor, cultural expression, and digital performance. From the moment publicity begins on social media, in churches, on television, and via billboards, *The Experience* demonstrates the performative power of media in creating religious anticipation. The event is saturated with media: digital countdowns, live stream broadcasts, interactive hashtags, live feeds, stage lighting, 360° screens, and multi-angle camera shots. These elements are not merely decorative, they are central to how the worship experience is perceived, felt, and shared. Saltz (2019) notes that “media becomes a mirror,” reflecting the performer's action and engaging the audience in a reciprocal dynamic of spiritual performance. In *The Experience*, media enables participants both physically present and virtually connected to enter a shared affective space.

Print and traditional media also play key roles. Flyers, banners, branded merchandise, and

newspaper adverts help in spreading the cultural visibility of the event. They ground the spiritual in the material, making the sacred encounter both recognisable and marketable. As Hoover (2006) describes, the mediatisation of religion often involves the blending of religious meaning with market logic and popular culture aesthetics. Crucially, the most transformative aspect of media at *The Experience* is digital interactivity. Live stream chats, on-screen scripture prompts, real-time camera focus on worshippers, and online testimonies create a feedback loop between the stage and the audience. The worshippers are not just spectators; they become participants in a mediated ritual. This aligns with Campbell's (2021) idea of "networked religion," where digital technologies create religious publics that are fluid, decentralised, and relational. Media, in this case, becomes the invisible scaffolding of *The Experience*, structuring time, enhancing space, and scripting meaning. It turns a live concert into a transmedia worship encounter, accessible from homes, devices, and hearts across the world. The performance is no longer limited to the altar; it lives in the cloud, in memory, and in collective spiritual imagination.

Media as Scenery

In *The Experience*, media does not merely communicate information, it constructs an immersive environment. One of the most striking uses of media in the concert is its role as scenery, transforming the physical venue into a spiritual landscape through digital backdrops, large 360-degree screens, and dynamic visual projections. These audiovisual elements substitute for traditional stage design, enabling even the furthest audience member to feel visually and emotionally connected to the unfolding worship.



Figure &2. 360 3D Screen from *The Experience*



This aligns with Chielens (2020), who observes that in contemporary performance settings, “media no longer exists as background; it becomes the terrain on which meaning is staged”. For the thousands gathered in Lagos and millions watching online, the digital scenery creates a unified field of spiritual engagement, simulating intimacy in a massive public space. Moreover, these visual elements are not static. They respond dynamically to the shifts in music, lighting, and message. During a patriotic moment, for instance, the Nigerian flag or an international symbol may fill the screen, signaling to the audience that a significant thematic or spiritual transition is occurring. For many in the crowd who cannot physically see the stage due to its scale or their distance, media becomes their only visual interface with the performers and their message. As Auslander (2008) suggests, media in live performance “blurs the boundary between presence and representation.” In *The Experience*, this blurring enables media to serve as a theological echo chamber, reflecting and amplifying divine themes, gestures, and moods. The congregation is not just witnessing worship; they are swimming in it, visually, aurally, and spiritually.

Media as Props

Media also plays the role of props, not in the traditional theatrical sense of objects handled by actors, but as interactive devices that support and enhance performance. The microphones, in-ear monitors, stage lighting, Teleprompters, LED time clocks, and live stream equipment all constitute a digital set of props that performers interact with seamlessly.



Figure & 4. Media as props. Image from YouTube



These media props facilitate communication not just with the audience, but also among performers, technicians, and producers. For instance, a small wireless earpiece allows the music director to signal transitions, tempo changes, or spiritual cues. Similarly, the stage timer regulates the flow of performances, ensuring the concert's rhythm aligns with its sacred pacing. As Saltz (2019) explains, “media props can function as both extensions of the body and containers of intent.” They become instruments through which divine expression is shaped. When a worship leader lifts a wireless mic and shouts “Hallelujah!” the prop becomes more than a tool, it becomes a transmitter of spiritual power. This interpretation aligns with Schechner's (2006) idea of “restored behavior” in performance: every movement, gesture, and object becomes part of a larger symbolic system that audiences instinctively read and respond to. In this sense, media props serve both functional and symbolic purposes. They actualise technological precision while embodying ritual significance.

Media as a Mirror

Perhaps the most philosophically profound role of media in *The Experience* is its function as a mirror. Through live-feed videos, high-definition projections, and multi-angle camera coverage, media reflects the performers back to the audience and in doing so, reflects the audience to themselves. This recursive function enables worshippers to see, feel, and interpret the spiritual atmosphere collectively.



Figure . Image from YouTube.

Saltz (2019) contends that “media, when used as a mirror, has no agency of its own, but simply follows the performer's actions. Yet what it reflects back is ourselves processed, transformed, and intensified.” At *The Experience*, this mirror function allows worshippers to witness not just the performance on stage, but their own participation hands lifted, tears falling, faces glowing with devotion captured in real time on giant screens. This creates a powerful loop of affective resonance. Adogame (2013) contends that African Pentecostalism thrives on the public visibility of faith. The presence of live-feed visuals, ecstatic gestures, and crowd shots in *The Experience* aligns with this ethos of performative spirituality. The audience does not just see the worship, they see themselves worshipping. This visual feedback affirms participation, encourages sincere emotional release, and

strengthens a spiritual community that spans physical and virtual spaces. Moreover, media mirroring in African worship settings reflects what Wariboko (2011) calls the “aesthetic ethic” of Pentecostal performance where beauty, intensity, and flow are not just preferences but spiritual imperatives. Seeing oneself on screen shouting or kneeling becomes a moment of spiritual affirmation and symbolic testimony. From a theological perspective, this mirroring can be likened to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 3:18 “we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed.” The media mirror in *The Experience* becomes a modern metaphor for spiritual reflection and transformation. Moreover, this mirroring is not limited to the physical venue. Online participants watching via YouTube or embedded church platforms see the worship and fellow viewers' comments, testimonies, and virtual responses. The spiritual atmosphere becomes mirrored across digital space, reinforcing a sense of communal encounter.

Media as Audience

Finally, media functions not just as a tool or space but as an audience. Through real-time chatboxes, emoji reactions, tweet threads, and interactive platforms, media enables an invisible yet present congregation to bear witness and respond to the live performance. In this digital ecosystem, the screen is not a barrier but a portal.

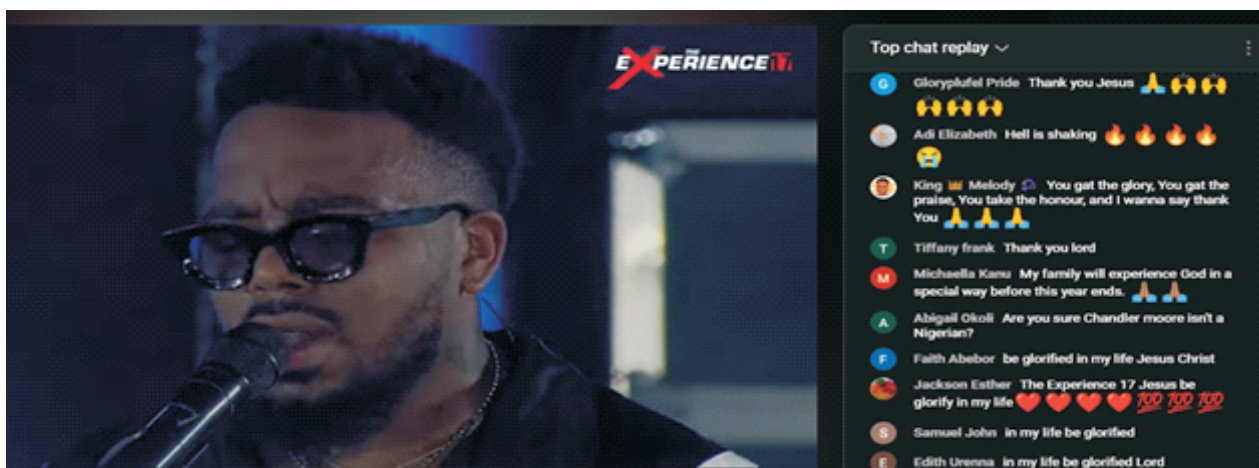


Figure 6. Image from YouTube.

The notion of media-as-audience highlights how online participants become spiritually active agents not merely viewers. They testify, intercede, shout “Amen” in comments, and join the praise, making the online space feel sacred. Campbell (2021) terms this “participatory media religion,” where the audience is co-creator of meaning, not just a receiver. Importantly, this mediated audience provides affective feedback to the performers. When thousands of online viewers flood the live stream with fire emojis or worship declarations, it boosts the spiritual atmosphere, making it feel transcontinental and transcendent. For many worshippers, particularly those in diaspora or under lockdown, this mediated audience is their only church. Thus, media completes the spiritual circuit: it constructs scenery, extends props, reflects mirrors, and responds as audience. In *The Experience*, these functions merge to create a new genre of mediated ritual performance, one that fuses theology, technology, and theatre into a unified act of worship.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the evolving role of media in contemporary Christian worship through a focused analysis of *The Experience*, one of Africa's most iconic gospel music concerts. By

examining media as scenery, props, mirror, and audience, we see that media is not a passive addition to religious events but a transformative agent in the architecture of worship. In *The Experience*, media constructs affective atmospheres, facilitates spiritual intimacy, extends performative reach, and enables diverse publics to encounter faith in dynamic and personalised ways. While critics raise valid concerns about the secularisation and distraction that media may bring into sacred spaces, this study affirms that media, when used intentionally, can cause a holy atmosphere rather than dilute spiritual expression. Far from replacing traditional worship, media create new formats for storytelling, embodiment, and participation. It allows churches to communicate their vision, archive their experiences, and reach both local and global audiences in ways unimaginable in previous generations.

Moreover, this study contributes to conversations in media theology, performance studies, and African religious culture. It urges scholars and practitioners alike to consider media not just as a technological tool, but as a theological lens, one that shapes how faith is seen, felt, and lived. As religious institutions continue to engage with digital technologies, the challenge remains to balance innovation with discernment, ensuring that media serves the message, not the other way around. Future research can further explore the intersection of media and liturgy, the ethics of digital worship, and how mediatised performances are reconfiguring religious authority and community. In a post-pandemic world marked by hybrid worship, the questions raised by *The Experience* are more urgent than ever.

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