

Research Article

Church Music as a Media for Proclaiming the Gospel and Discipleship in the Digital Ecosystem: A Contextual Theological Perspective

Samuel Elkana^{1*}, Henry Sutanto², Donalia Reynaldo³

¹⁻² STT Kerusso Indonesia Bekasi, Indonesia; e-mail: lp3m@sttkerussoindonesia.ac.id

* Corresponding Author: Samuel Elkana

Abstract: This study examines the role of digital church music as a medium for evangelism and discipleship within the digital ecosystem. It employs a mixed methods approach using a sequential explanatory design, in which quantitative data collection is followed by qualitative exploration. Quantitative data were gathered through an online survey of at least 200 respondents to measure the intensity of digital worship music consumption, perceived gospel understanding, faith reflection, and spiritual engagement. Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 15–20 key informants and digital content analysis of worship songs, service videos, and social media interactions. The findings indicate that digital church music contributes to strengthening gospel understanding, encouraging faith reflection, and expanding discipleship practices through online spaces. A moderate positive correlation between music consumption intensity and spiritual engagement suggests that music functions as a contextual medium for faith formation. This study highlights the importance of adaptive theological and pastoral strategies for church music ministry in the digital era.

Keywords: Digital Church Music; Discipleship; Evangelism; Faith Reflection; Spiritual Engagement

1. Introduction

The development of digital technology in the last two decades has brought significant transformation in various areas of life, including religious practices and church services. The presence of the internet, social media and digital music platforms has changed the way humans access, consume and interpret music. For the church, this change is not only related to the technical aspects of media use, but also touches on theological, missiological and pastoral dimensions. Church music, which has long been seen as a liturgical tool, now has broader potential as a medium for preaching the Gospel and making disciples in the digital ecosystem (Hawn, 2020).

In the Christian tradition, music has served as an expression of faith as well as an effective means of catechesis. Spiritual songs not only express experiences of faith, but also shape people's theological understanding. In the digital era, this function is expanded because church music can cross boundaries of space and time through digital platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, and online church applications (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Thus, music is not only part of worship, but also a mission instrument capable of reaching audiences across cultures, generations and geographies.

However, the use of church music in a digital context does not always run smoothly. A number of studies show that churches often experience delays in integrating digital technology creatively and theologically. Campbell (2022) notes that many churches' digital practices are still emergency-adaptive in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, not yet becoming established theological strategies. This raises a fundamental question: how can church music be positioned not just as online spiritual entertainment, but truly as a medium for preaching the Gospel and a means of discipleship?

A number of relevant studies have underscored the importance of music in the context of digital missions. Howard (2021) emphasizes that digital spiritual music has the capacity to

Received: July 16, 2025

Revised: September 10, 2025

Accepted: November 5, 2025

Published: December 31, 2025

Curr. Ver.: December 31, 2025



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors.

Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY SA) license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

create new communal spaces for Christians, even though they are not in the same physical location. This shows a theological shift, where faith fellowship is no longer limited to church buildings, but can be realized in digital spaces.

On the other hand, Teare (2020) found that Christian youth were more easily involved in faith practices when digital media, especially music, was used as an entry point. Digital spiritual music is able to bridge the gap between formal church traditions and expressions of faith that are relevant for the digital native generation. Thus, church music in the digital ecosystem has the potential to strengthen the contextual and transformative dimensions of discipleship.

Furthermore, Wilson and Campbell's (2023) research highlights the importance of a contextual theological approach in understanding the role of digital music. Contextual theology asserts that the Gospel must be preached in language, symbols, and mediums that are understood by a particular community. In a digital context, music becomes an effective cultural symbol to convey the Gospel message in a relevant way. This opens up space for the development of digital liturgical practices that not only move traditional practices to online spaces, but also formulate new forms of Gospel preaching that are suitable for the digital ecosystem.

Gap Analysis (Newness and Urgency of Research) Although various studies have reviewed the relationship between music, digitalization and religious practices, there is a gap that needs to be filled. First, most research emphasizes aspects of church digital communication in general, not specifically on church music as a theological medium for preaching the Gospel and discipleship (Campbell, 2022; Howard, 2021). Second, existing research still focuses on the phenomenon of digital music use, but does not link it to a contextual theological framework that enables the church to understand the relevance of the Gospel in the digital era.

Apart from that, the urgency of this research is strengthened by the phenomenon of increasing consumption of digital spiritual music after the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Global Christian Media report (2023), there will be a significant spike in the use of spiritual music streaming platforms of up to 65% in 2021–2023, but there have not been many academic studies that have explored the pastoral and missiological implications of this trend. Thus, research is needed that not only describes phenomena, but also formulates in-depth theological perspectives.

This research is novel because it combines the study of digital church music with a contextual theological perspective. This focus is different from previous research which was more oriented towards digital communication or the sociology of religion. Thus, this research contributes in two domains: first, expanding the study of church music into the digital space as an integral part of the church's mission; second, enriching contextual theology with a digitalization perspective, so that theology is not only present in the local cultural space, but also in the global digital space.

The aim of this research stems from the belief that church music not only functions as a complement to the liturgy, but also as a strategic medium for preaching the Gospel in the digital era. This research is intended to critically analyze the role of church music in the digital ecosystem, especially how music can bridge the Gospel message with the reality of people's lives which are increasingly connected to technology. Through this analysis, the research seeks to reveal how music can be used not only as a means of religious expression, but also as a communicative medium capable of reaching audiences across generations and across cultures.

This research is novel because it combines the study of digital church music with a contextual theological perspective. This focus is different from previous research which was more oriented towards digital communication or the sociology of religion. Thus, this research contributes in two domains: first, expanding the study of church music into the digital space as an integral part of the church's mission; second, enriching contextual theology with a digitalization perspective, so that theology is not only present in the local cultural space, but also in the global digital space.

Ultimately, this research is also directed at formulating a contextual theological perspective that is relevant to the digital era. It is hoped that this perspective can become a new understanding framework for churches in utilizing digital music as part of their mission and discipleship strategy. Thus, the results of this research not only contribute to the development of academic discourse in the fields of Pastoral Theology and Church Music, but also provide practical contributions for churches in responding to the challenges and opportunities offered by the digital ecosystem.

2. Literature Review

Church Music as a Theological Media

Music in the church tradition has a function that goes beyond mere artistic expression. Since the Reformation, music has been understood as an instrument of catechesis and teaching of the faith, because through singing, congregations learn doctrine, remember Biblical narratives, and experience spiritual transformation (Hawn, 2020). In the perspective of liturgical theology, music functions as a medium for congregational participation in experiencing the mysteries of faith. However, developments over time show that church music is not only limited to a liturgical framework, but also plays a significant role in the mission and preaching of the Gospel (Wilson & Campbell, 2023).

Music has symbolic and emotional power that allows the message of the Gospel to be conveyed in a way that touches the heart. Howard (2021) emphasizes that spiritual music, especially that produced digitally, can create new communal spaces, where congregations build a sense of togetherness even though they are separated by physical distance. This confirms the relevance of music as a theological medium capable of presenting the experience of faith in digital space.

Digital Ecosystems and Religious Transformation

Digital transformation has changed almost all aspects of social life, including religious practices. The concept of a "digital ecosystem" refers to the network of platforms, media, and interactions that shape new religious experiences. Campbell and Tsuria (2021) call this phenomenon "digital religion," namely a form of religion that takes place in and through digital media. Church music uploaded on platforms like YouTube, Spotify, or TikTok is not just entertainment, but part of a spiritual practice that expands the experience of faith outside the church building.

Recent studies show that digital spaces are no longer viewed as simply additional means of communication, but rather as a new locus of religious experience (Hutchings, 2022). This indicates that the digital ecosystem is a contextual space that needs to be responded to by theology. Therefore, research on church music in digital contexts must take into account the missiological and pastoral dimensions that emerge from this new space.

Contextual Theology in the Digital Age

Contextual theology emphasizes the importance of understanding the Gospel in the language, symbols and cultural experiences lived in society (Bevans, 2019). In this framework, church music is seen not only as a form of spiritual art, but also as a cultural symbol that can connect the Gospel message with the reality of the people. Wilson and Campbell (2023) assert that the digital space is a "new context" in which contextual theology must take root. Thus, digital church music needs to be understood as an expression of faith that not only adapts to new mediums, but also forms new theological understandings.

Contextual theology in the digital ecosystem requires the church to realize that the Gospel must be communicated through media that are relevant to the digital native generation. In this case, digital spiritual music can function as a "language of faith" that can be understood by a generation that grew up with technology. By integrating music into the digital space, the church not only maintains tradition, but also expands its missiological horizons.

Discipleship in the Digital Age

Discipleship is at the heart of the church's mission. However, the practice of discipleship is often seen as a personal, face-to-face process. Digital change is shifting this paradigm by presenting new possibilities for online discipleship. Teare (2020) suggests that digital music can serve as an entry point for involving young people in the discipleship process. Spiritual songs available online are a source of reflection on faith as well as a means of internalizing Gospel values.

Furthermore, Barna Group research (2021) revealed that young people are more consistently engaged in spiritual practices when discipleship materials are available in interactive digital formats. This is in line with the idea that discipleship is no longer limited to physical spaces, but can take place in a digital ecosystem, where music plays a central role in building a sustainable narrative of faith.

Several recent studies provide important references for this study. Hawn (2020) examined the role of church music in the context of global missions, and found that music can be a cross-cultural bridge in preaching the Gospel. However, this research has not discussed the digital context much. Howard (2021) more specifically highlights the role of music in forming online communities. He found that music was able to build a sense of virtual togetherness, but this research was still descriptive and did not provide a theological analysis.

Furthermore, Teare (2020) focused on Christian youth and found that digital spiritual music had a significant impact on the discipleship process. However, this research places more emphasis on the pastoral aspect, without linking it to a contextual theological

framework. Meanwhile, Wilson & Campbell (2023) emphasize the importance of a contextual theological approach in understanding digital religious practices. However, they have not specifically discussed church music as a research focus.

Thus, there is a gap in the academic literature that combines the dimensions of digital church music with contextual theology and discipleship frameworks. This research seeks to fill this gap by developing an analysis that connects church music, digital ecosystems, and contextual theology as a foundation for the practice of preaching the Gospel and discipleship.

Based on the description above, three main theoretical foundations for this research can be formulated. First, the theory of church music which emphasizes liturgical, missiological and communal functions. This theory provides a basic framework for understanding music as a theological medium. Second, the theory of digital religion which recognizes digital space as a new locus of religious experience. This theory is important for understanding the shift in faith practices to digital spaces. Third, contextual theological theory which emphasizes the importance of communicating the Gospel in a medium that is relevant to culture and societal context. By integrating these three frameworks, the research seeks to build a comprehensive understanding of church music as a medium for preaching the Gospel and discipleship in the digital ecosystem.

Theoretical studies and previous research show that church music has great potential to be a means of preaching the Gospel and making disciples in a digital context. However, a more integrative approach is still needed that connects digital music with a contextual theological framework. This research departs from this need, with the aim of expanding academic understanding while providing a practical contribution to the church in the digital age.

3. Research Method

This research uses a mixed methods approach, namely combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in a complementary manner. This approach was chosen because the research aims not only to describe the phenomenon of digital church music as a medium for preaching the Gospel and discipleship, but also to analyze its impact and application patterns in a more measurable way. In other words, research requires two strengths at once: a deep understanding of the experience of faith, theological meaning, and the dynamics of ministry in the digital space (qualitative depth), and measuring trends, intensity of involvement, and the level of success in implementing digital music in congregational communities (quantitative breadth). Creswell and Creswell (2023) emphasized that mixed methods allow researchers to gain a more complete understanding because quantitative and qualitative data complement each other and cover the limitations of each approach.

The research design used is Sequential Explanatory Design, namely a design carried out in two sequential stages: a quantitative stage then a qualitative stage. In the first stage, the research collected quantitative data through an online survey to measure the extent to which digital church music influences understanding of the Gospel, discipleship practices, and the level of congregational involvement in the digital ecosystem. This quantitative stage serves as an initial foundation that provides an overview of digital spiritual music consumption patterns and correlations between key variables. The quantitative results are then used to determine the direction of the qualitative phase of exploration, especially in identifying aspects that require more in-depth explanation, such as the reasons for congregational involvement, the spiritual meaning that is lived, and the theological context that accompanies musical practice in the digital space.

The second stage is a qualitative exploration through in-depth interviews and digital content analysis. This stage aims to explain, confirm and enrich the quantitative results with experience-based findings and theological interpretations of ministry actors and congregations. Through this design, research does not just stop at statistical descriptions, but also explores motivation, faith experiences, pastoral challenges, and discipleship strategies through digital music. Thus, it is hoped that the research results will be able to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of digital church music in preaching the Gospel and forming congregational faith.

Research was conducted in a digital ecosystem involving churches, spiritual music communities, and various social media platforms. The digital ecosystem in question includes production, distribution and consumption activities of spiritual music in the form of digital songs, worship videos and interaction on social media. The research subjects consisted of three main groups, namely church leaders (pastors, pastors, or liturgy administrators), church music ministers (worship leaders, musicians, and creators of digital spiritual songs), as well as congregations and digital audiences, especially the younger generation who access spiritual music via digital platforms. The quantitative sample was determined at a minimum of 200 respondents using a purposive sampling technique, namely respondents who actively use

digital church music in worship or daily spiritual practices. For the qualitative stage, 15–20 key informants were selected based on their direct involvement in the production or consumption of digital spiritual music and their ability to provide in-depth information according to research needs.

Data collection was carried out through three main techniques. First, an online survey using a questionnaire distributed via Google Forms and church and spiritual community social media channels. The survey instrument includes variables such as frequency of consuming digital spiritual music, level of understanding of the Gospel through music, involvement in digital communities, and perceptions of the experience of faith formed. A Likert scale of 1–5 was used to systematically measure the intensity and perceptions of respondents. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with church leaders, music ministers, and selected congregations. Interviews are semi-structured so that researchers can explore theological experiences, ministry strategies, and pastoral challenges in a flexible but focused manner. Third, digital content analysis was carried out on material such as spiritual songs, worship videos, as well as forms of congregational interaction on social media (for example comments, likes, shares and other forms of engagement). This analysis aims to understand how digital music is produced, distributed, and received, as well as how patterns of Gospel communication and discipleship practices are developed in digital spaces.

Data analysis is carried out according to the type of data obtained. Quantitative data was analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS or Jamovi, including frequency distribution, correlation between variables, and simple regression tests to measure the influence of digital music on the preaching of the Gospel and discipleship. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) through stages of transcription, coding, theme identification, and interpretation based on a contextual theological framework. Data integration is carried out at the final interpretation stage, namely by combining quantitative findings related to engagement trends with qualitative insights regarding the congregation's faith experiences and theological reflections, thereby producing holistic conclusions.

To ensure research quality, validity and reliability are applied to both approaches. In the quantitative aspect, the questionnaire was tested on 200 respondents and reliability was measured through the Cronbach Alpha test with a target of >0.70 and an ideal of ≥ 0.80 . In the qualitative aspect, validity is strengthened through source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking. The research also pays attention to research ethics by implementing informed consent, maintaining the confidentiality of respondents' identities through anonymous codes, and ensuring that data is used for academic purposes. With this plan, the research is expected to produce findings that are valid, reliable, and relevant theologically and practically for developing strategies for preaching the Gospel and making disciples through digital church music.

4. Results and Discussion

Data Collection Process and Research Overview

This research was conducted in January–April 2025 by utilizing the church's digital ecosystem which actively uses the YouTube, Spotify and Instagram platforms as spiritual music distribution media. Data collection was carried out through online surveys and in-depth interviews as part of a mixed methods sequential explanatory design. This approach allows researchers to obtain a quantitative picture of audience engagement patterns, as well as a qualitative understanding of the theological meaning of church music in the congregation's experience of faith.

A total of 217 questionnaires were declared valid and suitable for analysis, with a response completeness rate of 86%. In addition, 18 key informants were interviewed in a semi-structured manner. The composition of respondents reflects the diversity of roles in the church, so that the data obtained provides a relatively balanced perspective between producers and consumers of digital church music.

Quantitative Results: Digital Church Music Consumption Patterns

The results of the descriptive analysis show that the majority of respondents (78%) access digital church music regularly, with a frequency of at least three times per week. A total of 71% of respondents said that digital church music helps them understand the Gospel message more easily, while 69% reported that it encourages personal reflection on the Christian faith.

Correlation analysis indicated a moderate positive relationship between the intensity of digital church music consumption and perceived spiritual engagement ($r = 0.62$; $p < 0.01$). These findings are not intended to demonstrate a causal relationship, but rather provide an indication that digital church music contributes to congregants' religious experiences. These

results are in line with the findings of Campbell and Tsuria (2021) who stated that digital religious practices tend to form repeated and continuous patterns of faith involvement.

Qualitative Results: Music as a Medium for Reflection and Discipleship

Qualitative data from interviews shows that digital church music is perceived as a personal and flexible means of reflecting on faith. Informants revealed that spiritual song lyrics often become material for personal reflection, especially when accessed outside the context of formal worship. This shows that digital church music functions as a medium for non-formal discipleship that takes place in everyday life.

Church leaders and music ministers also highlighted that digital music helps bridge relationships between the church and the younger generation. Music was seen as a “common language” that allowed the Gospel to be communicated without cultural resistance. These findings confirm Teare's (2020) study which emphasizes that digital music can be a gateway to contextual discipleship, especially for digital natives.

Discussion: Church Music in the Framework of Digital Contextual Theology

The findings of this research indicate that digital church music acts as a relevant theological medium in the digital ecosystem, but its effectiveness does not stand alone. In a contextual theological perspective, music functions as a cultural symbol that mediates the Gospel message with the lived realities of the people (Bevans, 2019). The digital space, in this case, is a new context that requires the church to reflect again on its strategy for preaching the Gospel.

In line with Hutchings (2022), this research confirms that digital space can be understood as a locus of religious experience. However, the data also shows that without adequate theological reflection, digital church music has the potential to be reduced to superficial spiritual consumption. Therefore, digital church music needs to be consciously positioned as part of the praxis of discipleship, not just spiritual content.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this research expands the study of church music by placing it in a digital contextual theological discourse. Music is not only understood in liturgical relations, but also as an instrument of mission and faith formation in digital space. In practical terms, churches are encouraged to develop integrated digital music ministries with a clear theological vision and discipleship strategy.

5. Conclusion

This research concludes that digital church music has significant potential as a medium for preaching the Gospel and discipleship in the digital ecosystem. Quantitative findings indicate a positive association between digital church music consumption and congregational spiritual engagement, while qualitative findings emphasize the role of music as a means of contextual reflection on faith. Thus, digital church music can be understood as a theological medium that expands the space of encounter between the Gospel and the lives of people.

Within the framework of contextual theology, digital church music functions as a cultural symbol that allows the Gospel to be experienced in a relevant way by the digital native generation. This research confirms that digital space is not just a tool, but a new context for the praxis of Christian faith. However, the use of digital church music requires theological caution so as not to fall into the logic of entertainment or commodification of faith.

The limitations of this research lie in the scope of respondents which is still limited to the Indonesian context and the use of certain digital platforms. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the cross-cultural context and explore the dynamics of digital church music in various ecclesiastical traditions. Churches are also recommended to develop digital discipleship curricula that explicitly integrate music as a medium for ongoing faith formation.

Author Contributions: The following statements should be used: Conceptualization Samuel Elkana; Methodology: Henry Sutanto; Writing review and editing: Donalia Reynaldo

Funding: This research was funded by STT Kerusso Indonesia, grant number Rp 3.000.000 or US\$180(Rate Rp 16.500)

Data Availability Statement: We encourage all authors of articles published in FAITH journals to share their research data. This section provides details regarding where data supporting reported results can be found, including links to publicly archived datasets analyzed or generated during the study. Where no new data were created or data unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions, a statement is still required.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

References

- Barna Group. (2021). *The state of discipleship*.
- Bevans, S. B. (2019). *Models of contextual theology*. Orbis Books.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.
- Campbell, H. A. (2022). *Digital ecclesiology: A global conversation*. Baker Academic.
- Campbell, H. A., & Tsuria, R. (2021). *Digital religion reconsidered*. Routledge.
- Chow, J. K. (2021). *Worshipping in digital spaces: The theology of online liturgy*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Dyer, J. (2022). *From the garden to the city: The redeeming and corrupting power of technology* (Revised ed.). Kregel Publications.
- Gant, M. (2020). Digital discipleship: Engaging the next generation through screen-based faith. *Journal of Christian Education*, 63(1), 12–28.
- Global Christian Media. (2023). *Digital worship music consumption report 2021–2023*.
- Hawn, S. T. (2020). *Music in global christianity*. Oxford University Press.
- Howard, J. (2021). Digital worship and virtual communities. *Journal of Religion and Technology*, 15(2).
- Hutchings, T. (2022). Creating church online: Ritual, community, and new media. *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 11(2), 145–160.
- Klaasen, J. S. (2023). Religion and cyberspace: The role of the internet in the formation of religious identity. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 9(1), 1–18.
- Lynch, G. (2021). *The sacred in the modern world: A cultural theological approach*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Moko, S. (2022). Contextual theology and the digital turn: A South Asian perspective. *International Review of Mission*, 111(2), 290–305.
- Nekola, A., & Wagner, T. (Eds.). (2021). *Congregational music-making and community in a mediating age*. Routledge.
- Phillips, P. M. (2020). *The pixelated text: Reading the Bible within digital culture*. James Clarke & Co.
- Spadaro, A. (2023). *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the era of the internet*. Fordham University Press.
- Teare, B. (2020). Digital worship and youth discipleship. *Practical Theology*, 13(3), 245–259.
- White, T. J. (2021). *The digital cathedral: Christian ministry in a 21st-century world*. Morehouse Publishing.
- Wilson, J., & Campbell, H. A. (2023). Contextual theology in digital space. *Theology Today*, 79(4), 312–325.