

Christianity, Digital Media and Language Change: The Transformation of Religious Discourse in Kenyan Online Spaces

Rose N Njoroge, Martin Situma

Koitaleel Samoei University College, Eldoret, Riftvalley, Kenya

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.150700109>

Received: 30 July 2026; Accepted: 04 August 2026; Published: 19 August 2026

ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection of Christianity, digital media and language change, focusing on how religious discourse is being transformed within Kenyan online spaces. Globally, the rapid expansion of digital platforms has reshaped how Christian messages are produced, circulated and consumed, leading to significant shifts in religious language, and communication styles. In Kenya, churches increasingly rely on social media, live-streamed services, podcasts and messaging applications to reach diverse audiences, particularly young people, and urban congregations. These digital environments have generated new linguistic forms that blend sacred language with everyday speech, popular culture, and global Christian expressions. Using a qualitative approach informed by sociolinguistics and digital discourse analysis, the study examines sermons, prayers, testimonies, and interactive engagements shared on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and X. Data for this study was drawn from selected Kenyan churches and Christian influencers, and active online followers. The study was guided by Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). The findings indicate that digital Christianity in Kenya is characterized by increased informality, frequent code-switching between English, Kiswahili, and indigenous languages, the use of youth slang, and abbreviated expressions. These linguistic shifts aim to enhance accessibility, immediacy and emotional connection, while also reflecting broader global Christian media trends. The study also reveals tensions between maintaining theological depth and adapting to the fast-paced, attention-driven logic of digital media. While online discourse expands participation and visibility, it raises concerns about doctrinal simplification and generational divides in language use. By situating Kenyan Christian digital practices within global debates on religion and media, this study contributes to understanding how language mediates faith, authority, and identity in contemporary Christianity.

Keywords: Christianity, digital media, language change, multilingual communities, WhatsApp

INTRODUCTION

The growth of digital technologies has fundamentally changed the way people communicate, interact, and share information across the world. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) have become integral to everyday life, providing spaces where people connect, exchange ideas, and build communities. Christianity has not been left behind in this digital transformation. Churches, pastors, and Christian organizations increasingly use these platforms to preach, livestream worship services, conduct Bible studies, provide pastoral care, and engage with believers beyond the traditional church setting (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). As a result, Christian religious discourse is no longer confined to physical places of worship but is increasingly shaped within digital environments characterized by interaction, immediacy, and multimedia communication.

Across the world, scholars have shown that digital media are reshaping both religious practice and language use. Herring (2001, 2004) argues that communication in digital environments develops unique discourse patterns that

differ from traditional face-to-face interactions. Similarly, Crystal (2011) notes that internet communication has introduced new linguistic features such as abbreviations, emojis, hashtags, and internet slang, all of which continue to influence contemporary language use. Within digital religion studies, Campbell (2013) and Hutchings (2017) observe that online platforms have transformed religious authority, worship practices, and community formation by creating interactive spaces where believers actively participate rather than passively receive religious messages. Campbell and Tsuria (2021) further argue that digital media have become central to modern religious life, influencing how faith is expressed, interpreted, and negotiated in online communities.

In Africa, the increasing availability of mobile phones, affordable internet services, and social media has significantly influenced religious communication. African churches are increasingly embracing digital platforms for evangelism, online worship, discipleship, fundraising, and community engagement. According to Musa and Lando (2022), digital media have expanded opportunities for churches to reach wider audiences while also transforming traditional patterns of religious leadership, participation, and interaction. Consequently, digital spaces have become important arenas where African Christians express their faith, build relationships, and negotiate religious identities.

Within East Africa, language has always been central to Christian communication because of the region's rich linguistic diversity. Topan (1992) points out that Kiswahili has historically served as an important language for evangelization and theological teaching across East Africa, enabling Christian messages to reach people from different linguistic backgrounds. With the rise of digital communication, these multilingual practices have become even more visible. Churches and Christian communicators now combine English, Kiswahili, and local languages in online sermons, devotional messages, and social media interactions to communicate effectively with diverse audiences.

The Kenyan context reflects these broader developments. Over the past decade, rapid growth in internet access, smartphone ownership, and social media use has transformed how churches and believers communicate. Many churches now livestream services, organize online prayer meetings, conduct virtual Bible studies, and share daily devotional messages through digital platforms. Christian influencers and ordinary believers also contribute to online religious conversations by posting testimonies, biblical reflections, and motivational messages. Ondondo (2024) observes that churches in Kenya deliberately use English, Kiswahili, indigenous languages, and code-switching to communicate with linguistically diverse congregations while promoting inclusion and unity. These multilingual practices demonstrate how language continues to evolve alongside digital technologies in the Kenyan religious landscape.

Statement of the problem

Despite the growing body of research on digital religion and online communication, relatively little attention has been given to the ways digital media are transforming Christian religious discourse and language use in Kenyan online spaces. Existing studies have mainly focused on digital worship, online ministry, or the role of technology in religious practice, while the linguistic dimensions of online Christian communication remain underexplored. There is therefore a need to examine how language choice, code-switching, emerging digital linguistic features, religious discourse and participation are shaping Christian communication within Kenya's multilingual digital environment.

Against this background, this study examines Christianity, digital media, and language change in Kenyan online spaces. Guided by Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), the study explores how churches, pastors, Christian influencers, and believers use language across digital platforms to communicate religious messages and construct meaning. In doing so, it contributes to the growing scholarship on digital religion, sociolinguistics, and computer-mediated communication by demonstrating how digital technologies are reshaping Christian discourse and language practices within the Kenyan context.

General Objective

The general objective of this study is to examine how digital media platforms are transforming Christian religious discourse in Kenya, with particular attention to language change, communication practices, and meaning-making in online Christian spaces.

Objective of the Study

To analyze patterns of language choice, code-switching, emerging linguistic features, religious discourse, and participation, in digitally mediated Christian communication in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine how digital media are shaping Christian religious discourse and language use in Kenyan online spaces. It used digital discourse analysis and content analysis to explore how churches, pastors, and believers communicate, share their faith, and engage with one another across digital platforms. This approach was appropriate because it allowed for a deeper understanding of the language choices, communication patterns, and interactions that define Christian engagement in Kenya's online communities.

The study used purposive sampling to select Christian digital content that was relevant to the research objectives. Data was collected from widely used platforms in Kenya, including Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and X. The materials analyzed included online sermons, devotional messages, social media posts, captions, comments, and livestream discussions shared by churches, Christian influencers, and online fellowship groups. Digital texts reviewed were between 100-150. They provided a broad picture of how Christian communication is practiced and experienced in Kenya's digital spaces.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns in the data and grouping them into key themes, including language choice, code-switching, emerging linguistic features, religious discourse, and participation. To further examine how language is used in digital spaces, the study was guided by Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) (Herring, 2004), which provided a framework for understanding how Christians communicate, interact, and construct meaning through digital media.

The findings were compared with previous studies on digital Christian discourse in Kenya, other African countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Uganda, and Tanzania, as well as selected international studies. The comparison focused on areas such as multilingualism, code-switching, religious identity, audience participation, biblical language, and persuasive communication.

This comparison helped the study identify which patterns were common across different contexts and which were more specific to Kenya. Particular attention was given to Kenya's multilingual setting, especially the use of English, Kiswahili, and indigenous languages, to determine how language choice and audience interaction shape Christian communication in Kenyan digital spaces.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study used Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) which is an interdisciplinary approach that examines how people communicate, interact and create meaning through digital technologies. Developed and expanded by Herring (2001, 2004), CMDA focuses on language use in digital environments such as social media platforms, online forums, and messaging applications. It recognizes that online communication has unique

features because it combines written language with elements of spoken and visual communication, including emojis, hashtags, images, hyperlinks, and other interactive tools (Herring, 2004; Androutsopoulos, 2006).

Unlike traditional discourse analysis, which mainly focuses on spoken or written texts, CMDA considers how digital environments influence the way people communicate and interpret messages. It examines aspects such as language choice, code-switching, participation, identity construction, interaction patterns, and emerging digital expressions (Herring, 2001). This allows researchers to explore not only the content of online messages but also how people engage with one another and create shared meanings through digital interactions (Jones, Chik, & Hafner, 2015).

In this study, CMDA provides a useful framework for understanding how Kenyan Christians use digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) to share religious messages and develop online faith communities. It helps examine how churches, pastors, and believers adapt their communication practices through the use of multiple languages, code-switching, emojis, hashtags, and informal expressions. For example:

“God bado anafanya miracles, usikate tamaa.”
(God is still performing miracles; do not lose hope).

This expression illustrates how Kenyan Christians combine English and Kiswahili to communicate religious ideas in a way that feels familiar and meaningful to their audiences. Through CMDA, such language choices can be understood as reflections of cultural identity, audience connection and the everyday multilingual practices of Kenyan society. Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis also helps explain how digital platforms have changed participation in religious communication. Unlike traditional church settings where messages often flow mainly from the preacher to the congregation, online spaces allow believers to actively participate by commenting on sermons, sharing testimonies, requesting prayers, and engaging in discussions. This interactive nature of digital communication relates to boyd’s (2014) concept of networked publics, where online platforms provide spaces for people to connect, interact, and form communities around shared beliefs and interests.

Additionally, CMDA recognizes that digital communication involves multimodal forms of meaning-making, where text interacts with images, audio, videos, and visual symbols. In Christian online communication, for example, a Bible verse may be accompanied by worship music, prayer images, emojis, or hashtags to strengthen its emotional and spiritual meaning (Kress, 2010). This demonstrates that religious messages in digital spaces are not only communicated through words but also through a combination of different digital resources. For this research, CMDA is valuable because it helps explain how digital media are transforming Christian communication in Kenya. It shows that online religious discourse is not simply a transfer of traditional church practices into digital spaces; rather, it is a changing form of interaction where believers negotiate faith, language, identity, and community through technology (Herring, 2013; Androutsopoulos, 2015). Through this perspective, CMDA provides insight into how digital platforms are creating new ways of expressing and experiencing Christianity within the Kenyan context.

DISCUSSION

Discussion for this study was done in themes as follows:

Theme 1: Language Choice

Language choice plays a significant role in how Christian messages are communicated in Kenyan online spaces. Rather than using one language consistently, churches, pastors, and Christian content creators choose languages based on who they want to reach, the platform they are using, and the purpose of the message. The frequent use

of English, Kiswahili, Sheng, and indigenous languages reflects Kenya's multilingual nature and helps make Christian messages accessible to people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

English is commonly used for formal sermons, Bible teachings, church announcements and leadership messages. It is particularly preferred when addressing urban congregations, educated audiences, or viewers beyond Kenya. English often conveys a sense of formality and theological depth.

Illustration 1 (English)

"Join us this Sunday as we explore God's purpose for your life. Come expectant and leave transformed."

Another example is:

"God's grace is sufficient for you. Keep trusting Him through every season."

Kiswahili is the most inclusive language because it is widely understood across Kenya. Churches frequently use Kiswahili to reach people from different ethnic backgrounds and to ensure that religious messages are accessible to a broader audience.

Illustration 2 (Kiswahili)

"Karibu ibada ya Jumapili. Mungu ana mpango mzuri kwa maisha yako."
(Welcome to Sunday's service. God has a good plan for your life.)

Another common example is:

"Usikate tamaa. Mungu bado anatenda miujiza." (Do not lose hope. God is still performing miracles).

Sheng has become an increasingly popular language among urban youth, especially on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Christian communicators use Sheng to make sermons and devotional messages sound more natural, relatable, and engaging to younger audiences.

Illustration 3 (Sheng)

"Guys, msiskip fellowship leo. Kuna word kali sana."
(Guys, don't miss today's fellowship. There is a powerful message.)

Another example is:

"God ako na wewe, usijistress." (God is with you, so don't worry).

Beyond English, Kiswahili, and Sheng, indigenous languages play an important role, particularly in church groups and fellowships serving specific ethnic communities. Using local languages not only strengthens cultural identity but also allows biblical teachings to be communicated in a language that members understand best.

Illustration 4 (Kikuyu)

"Ngai nĩ mwega ihinda ciothe." (God is good all the time).

Illustration 5 (Dholuo)

"Ruoth obed kodi e kinde duto." (The Lord be with you always).

Overall, it is demonstrated that language choice in Kenyan digital Christianity is intentional and audience-centered. Communicators select languages that their audiences can easily understand and relate to. English is often used for formal teaching, Kiswahili promotes wider inclusivity, Sheng connects with younger generations and indigenous languages preserve cultural identity while strengthening community ties. This flexible use of language illustrates how Kenyan Christians are adapting religious communication to the realities of a multilingual and digitally connected society, making Christian discourse more accessible, engaging, and relevant to different groups of believers.

Theme 2: Code-Switching

The findings indicate that code-switching is a common and natural feature of Christian communication in Kenyan online spaces. Churches, pastors, and believers often move between English, Kiswahili, and Sheng within the same message to communicate more effectively with their audiences. Rather than being random, this practice helps make Christian messages sound more conversational, relatable, and easier to understand, especially among young people who regularly use more than one language in their daily interactions.

Illustrations

"God bado anafanya miracles, usilose hope." (God is still performing miracles; don't lose hope).

"Prayer sio last option, ndio first weapon." (Prayer is not the last option; it is the first weapon).

"Keep trusting God, breakthrough yako iko karibu." (Keep trusting God; your breakthrough is near).

"God ako na wewe, don't give up." (God is with you; don't give up).

"God's grace ni free favour yenye huwezi earn." (God's grace is free favour that cannot be earned).

These examples demonstrate how code-switching allows Christian communicators to blend the clarity and theological vocabulary of English with the familiarity of Kiswahili and Sheng. By doing so, they make religious messages more engaging, culturally relevant, and accessible to Kenya's multilingual online communities. Code-switching has become an important communication strategy that strengthens audience connection while reflecting the everyday language practices of many Kenyan Christians.

Theme 3: Emerging Linguistic Features

The findings show that digital media have influenced not only where Christians communicate but also how they communicate. Churches, pastors, and believers are increasingly incorporating emojis, hashtags, abbreviations, internet slang, and digital expressions into their online messages. These features make religious communication livelier, engaging and better suited to the fast-paced nature of social media, while also encouraging greater interaction among online audiences.

Illustrations

"Tonight tunakesha kwa maombi 🙏🔥 . Don't miss!"
(Tonight we have an overnight prayer meeting. Don't miss it!)

"PTL! God has done it again. #FaithOverFear #JesusSaves"
(PTL = Praise the Lord.)

"GM family 🙏. God bless you all."
(GM = Good Morning.)

"GBU" – God Bless You

"IMO God amesema..." – In my opinion, God has said...

"Stay connected to Jesus. He never goes offline."

These examples illustrate how digital language has become part of everyday Christian communication in Kenya. Emojis add emotional expression, hashtags help spread messages across social media, abbreviations make communication quicker, and digital metaphors make biblical teachings easier to relate to in a technology driven world. Overall, these emerging linguistic features demonstrate how Kenyan Christians are adapting their language to communicate faith in ways that are meaningful and engaging within today's digital environment.

Theme 4: Religious Discourse

Digital media have changed the way Christian religious messages are shared and experienced in Kenya. Unlike traditional church settings, where communication often moved mainly from the preacher to the congregation, online platforms create opportunities for believers to respond, ask questions, share testimonies, and engage in spiritual conversations. This has made religious discourse more interactive, personal, and community-focused.

Illustrations:

Pastor: "If you believe God will make a way, type 'Amen' in the comments."

Responses: "Amen 🙏", "Nimepokea!", "Glory to God!", "Hallelujah!"

Another example is:

"Share your prayer request below and our prayer team will stand with you in faith."

Responses:

"Pray for my exams."

"Remember my family in prayer."

"Pray for my business."

These examples show that digital platforms have transformed Christian communication into a shared conversation rather than a one directional message. Believers are no longer only listeners but also active participants who contribute their experiences, seek spiritual support, and encourage one another. Through these online interactions, digital spaces have become important platforms for building Christian communities and expressing faith in new ways.

Theme 5: Participation

Digital media has created new opportunities for participation in Christian communities by allowing believers to take part in religious activities even when they are not physically present in church. Platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok enable Christians to join online prayers, respond to sermons, share personal experiences, and engage in Bible discussions. This has made Christian involvement more flexible and accessible to people across different locations.

Illustrations

“We are live for tonight’s prayer meeting. Join us and share your prayer requests.”

Responses:

“I’m watching from Mombasa 🙏.”

“Pray for my family.”

“Amen, standing in faith.”

Another example:

“Today’s sermon blessed me. I learned that God’s timing is perfect.”

Responses:

“Thank you for sharing.”

“This message spoke to me.”

“God bless you.”

These examples demonstrate that digital platforms have transformed believers from being only listeners into active participants in religious conversations. Through online engagement, Kenyan Christians can share faith experiences, support one another and maintain spiritual connections beyond the physical boundaries of the church.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that digital media has changed the way Christian faith is communicated and experienced in Kenyan online spaces. Churches, pastors and believers are increasingly using English, Kiswahili, Sheng, and indigenous languages to reach different audiences. This has enabled Christian messages easier to understand and more inclusive. The study also found that code-switching has become a common feature of online religious communication, helping to present biblical teachings in ways that are more natural and relatable to everyday conversations. In addition, the widespread use of digital platforms has made religious discourse more interactive by giving believers opportunities to comment on sermons, share testimonies, post prayer requests and participate in online discussions. Overall, the study suggests that digital media has created vibrant and multilingual spaces where Christian communication is more engaging, participatory, and responsive to the linguistic and cultural diversity of Kenyan society.

REFERENCES

1. Androutsopoulos, J. (2006). Introduction: Sociolinguistics and computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 10(4), 419–438.
2. Androutsopoulos, J. (2015). Networked multilingualism: Some language practices on Facebook and their implications. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 19(2), 185–205.
3. boyd, d. (2014). *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. Yale University Press.
4. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
5. Campbell, H., & Evolvi, G. (2021). Contextualizing current digital religion research on emerging technologies. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 3(1), 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.251>
6. Campbell, H., & Osteen, S. (2022). Religious communities and the social shaping of technology in digital contexts. *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 11(2), 123–140.
7. Campbell, H. (2023). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. Routledge.

8. Crystal, D. (2011). *Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide*. Routledge.
9. Hepp, A. (2020). *Deep mediatization*. Routledge.
10. Herring, S. C. (2001). Computer-mediated discourse. In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, & H. E. Hamilton (Eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (pp. 612–634). Blackwell Publishers.
11. Herring, S. C. (2004). Computer-mediated discourse analysis: An approach to researching online behavior. In S. A. Barab, R. Kling, & J. H. Gray (Eds.), *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning* (pp. 338–376). Cambridge University Press.
12. Herring, S. C. (2013). Discourse in Web 2.0: Familiar, reconfigured, and emergent. In D. Tannen & A. M. Tester (Eds.), *Discourse 2.0: Language and New Media* (pp. 1–25). Georgetown University Press.
13. Jones, R. H., Chik, A., & Hafner, C. A. (2015). *Discourse and Digital Practices: Doing Discourse Analysis in the Digital Age*. Routledge.
14. Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. Routledge.
15. Mukhongo, L. L., & Nyaga, D. (2022). Digital religion and youth engagement in Kenyan Christianity. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 14(3), 389–405. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00056_1
16. Musa, B. A., & Lando, A. L. (2022). Religion and online community in African contexts. In H. A. Campbell & P. H. Cheong (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Religion*. Oxford University Press.
17. Ondondo, E. A. (2024). Language and the church in Kenya: Unity, diversity or unity in diversity? *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*.
18. Topan, F. M. (1992). Swahili as a religious language. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 22(4), 331–349.
19. United Nations. (2023). *The Sustainable Development Goals report 2023*. United Nations Publications.