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Revitalising Rural and Township Youth Ministry in South Africa through Digital Innovation

Ożywianie duszpasterstwa młodzieży wiejskiej i miejskiej w Republice Południowej Afryki poprzez innowacje cyfrowe

Abstract: This article explores the potential of digital innovation in revitalising rural and township youth ministry in South Africa, acknowledging the challenges churches face in engaging their youth in the evolving digital landscape. The study advocates for integrating digital platforms to complement physical interactions, emphasising the need for strategies resonating with digitally connected youth. Public theology is introduced as a paradigm encouraging the intertwining of faith with societal needs. While recognising the promise of digital engagement, the article addresses unique challenges in rural areas, proposing solutions such as community access points and partnerships for inclusivity. The collaborative model envisions a hybrid approach, blending physical and virtual interactions through a game-like platform. The methodology involves a comprehensive literature review and cross-sectional analysis of successful digital engagement initiatives, informing a dynamic model. In conclusion, the article argues that embracing digital innovation and public theology can bridge traditional and tech--savvy preferences, fostering a vibrant youth community with spiritual growth and meaningful societal impact.

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Abstrakt: Przedmiotem badań przedstawionych w niniejszym artykule jest potencjał innowacji cyfrowych w odniesieniu do ożywiania duszpasterstwa młodzieży wiejskiej i miejskiej w Republice Południowej Afryki w perspektywie stojących przed kościołami wyzwań w zakresie angażowania młodzieży w rozwijającą się rzeczywistość wirtualną. Badania prowadzą do wniosku, że platformy cyfrowe powinny być rozwijane jako uzupełnienie bezpośrednich kontaktów i należy opracować strategie działań odpowiadających młodzieży funkcjonującej w wirtualnej rzeczywistości. W analizie wykorzystano teologię publiczną jako paradygmat wskazujący na przenikanie się wiary z potrzebami społecznymi. Odnosząc się do zjawiska zaangażowania cyfrowego młodzieży, w artykule omówiono wyjątkowe wyzwania na obszarach wiejskich w tym względzie i zaproponowano rozwiązania, takie jak punkty dostępu dla społeczności i partnerstwo na rzecz inkluzji społecznej. Model współpracy przewiduje podejście hybrydowe, łączące interakcje fizyczne i wirtualne za pośrednictwem platformy przypominającej grę. Metodologia obejmuje kompleksowy przegląd literatury i przekrojową analizę udanych inicjatyw zaangażowania cyfrowego, tworząc model dynamiczny. Podsumowując, w artykule dowodzono, że wykorzystanie innowacji cyfrowych i odwołanie do teologii publicznej mogą pokonać barierę między duszpasterstwem tradycyjnym oraz zorientowanym na wykorzystanie technologii, wspierając tętniącą życiem społeczność młodzieżową, zapewniającą rozwój duchowy i mającą znaczący wpływ społeczny.

Słowa kluczowe: duszpasterstwo młodzieży wiejskiej i miejskiej; innowacje cyfrowe; zaangażowanie cyfrowe; teologia publiczna; krajobraz duszpasterstwa młodzieży.

1. Introduction

In the rapidly evolving digital landscape (Ozoda, 2023), rural and township churches in South Africa face intricate challenges in engaging their youth (Landman, 2016). While the primary focus of this article centres on addressing youth disengagement in South African townships and rural areas, it is advanced that youth in other settings could also benefit from the proceeds, as youth disengagement represents a global phenomenon (Cannister, 2022; Vaughn, 2016). The concern for conducting the study arises from a growing realisation that if young people continue to disengage from the church, it

will struggle to cultivate future leaders and fulfil its mandate to nurture and support youth through their challenges (Hanna, 2020). Beyond this concern, youth are considered pivotal assets within the church and community, engaging in diverse activities, including innovation, evangelism, music ministry, and leadership development, ensuring continuity and growth (Amankwa & Awuku-Gyampoh, 2022). It can thus be argued that the church must intensify efforts to nurture and care for the youth.

Noting that the world is progressing towards a digital economy, innovation arises from the necessity for digital control in nearly all aspects of contemporary life (Lusweti & Omieno, 2023). Although there is some scepticism on digital incorporation in rural and township areas, Kiviaho and Einolander (2023) reveal a predominantly positive impact through enhanced services and new opportunities facilitated by digitalisation and remote working. This study thus examines the potential of integrating digital platforms and technologies into youth ministry, exploring virtual spaces to complement physical interactions. By embracing digital innovation, South African rural and township churches, alongside global youth ministries, can reinvigorate their strategies for effectively engaging and inspiring young individuals. In a country like South Africa, the youth grapple with numerous challenges, especially in rural and township areas, including limited family support, educational barriers, financial constraints, societal expectations, and health disparities. Crucial then is the necessity of collaborative efforts among stakeholders to establish an equitable and inclusive environment supporting the holistic development of the young (Ntsanwisi, 2024). The evolving youth ministry landscape requires innovative strategies resonating with digitally connected youth (Shapiro, 2018). Public theology emerges as a compelling paradigm, encouraging youth to weave their faith with societal needs (Ozoda, 2023). To this end, digital engagement serves as a means to foster interaction and connection. The church, commanded by Christ through the teachings of the Bible, is best positioned to train and support young people, preparing them to become capable leaders for the future. While digital engagement offers promise (Herring, 2021), unique challenges in rural and township areas necessitate addressing issues of limited digital access due to technological and data constraints (Correa & Pavez, 2016). Proposed solutions include community access points and partnerships for inclusivity (George et al., 2012).

The collaborative model envisions a hybrid approach blending physical and virtual interactions. This entails a game-like platform allowing online gatherings (Lamphere-Englund, 2024), mirroring digital habits while rewarding physical attendance. The methodology involves a comprehensive literature review and cross-sectional analysis of successful digital engagement initiatives, informing a dynamic model. In short, digital innovation offers challenges and opportunities for revitalising youth ministry. Embracing public theology and leveraging digital spaces can bridge traditional and tech-savvy preferences, cultivate a vibrant youth community, foster spiritual growth, and create meaningful societal impact.

2. Methodology

This article employs a comprehensive literature review, analysing various studies on the use of technology within youth ministry and beyond. Denney and Tewksbury (2013) offer that a literature review is a thorough synthesis of existing research on a specific topic, revealing the current understanding while highlighting gaps and providing the foundation for a new study to address unanswered questions. Thus, a robust and adaptable model can be formulated by drawing insights from successful digital engagement initiatives within and outside religious contexts. The methodology also includes a cross-sectional analysis of existing literature, offering a holistic view of how digital innovations can enhance youth engagement, spirituality, and community involvement. Cross-sectional studies are effective in providing insights; however, care is needed that, when applied to analytical studies, researchers should interpret the results with expertise in the specific field, exercising caution and employing common sense (Zangirolami-Raimundo et al., 2018). From a definition perspective, technology encompasses tools, systems, and methods used to solve problems or achieve goals, often involving the application of scientific knowledge (Wahab et al., 2011). The term 'digital' refers to using technology to store, process, and transmit information in a format consisting of discrete elements (digits) (Gorenšek & Kohont, 2019).

3. Literature review

3.1. The shifting landscape of youth ministry

In the contemporary era, traditional approaches to engaging youth in religious contexts face significant challenges, as highlighted by Youniss et al. (2002), who emphasise the impact of globalisation, information-communication technology, and immigration on the younger generation. They advocate for a reciprocal relationship between generations, urging community leaders to provide resources and genuine hope for youth as they shape the future. In South African townships and rural areas, the impact of globalisation and information communication technology (ICT) intersects with existing challenges, accentuating the urgency for community leaders to provide tangible support and hope for youth navigating complex realities (Geza et al., 2022). The trend of youth disengagement from traditional religious institutions, as highlighted by Kinnaman and Hawkins (2016), is particularly pertinent in this context, compounded by poverty, unemployment, and social fragmentation (Tshishonga, 2019). The urgency of this dropout problem is underscored by recognising diverse trajectories, including returns to active church engagement and sustained faith during the transition to adulthood (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2016). Muller (2020) further delves into the decline in religiosity among Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, specifically noting a significant decrease in church attendance and a rise in scepticism or atheism, emphasising the need for a nuanced understanding rooted in the unique challenges posed by the contemporary world. Muller's (2020) exploration of declining religiosity among Generation Z resonates deeply, reflecting the need for tailored approaches sensitive to South African youth's cultural and socioeconomic dynamics. In tandem, Hunt's (2019) proposition for reshaping digital discipleship aligns with the imperative to integrate indigenous wisdom and contextual theology into youth ministry efforts, recognising the intersectionality of technology, spirituality, and social realities in township and rural contexts. The shift towards individualistic salvation and the pressing need to address broader societal concerns necessitates innovative approaches that resonate with today's youth. The evolving landscape of youth engagement in the Philippines challenges assumptions about a collectivist society, exploring the emergence of individualism among the youth

influenced by modern technology and education (Iverson & Dervan, 2019). This prompts reflection on potential parallels in South African youth ministry, where societal shifts may impact religious beliefs and practices. Meanwhile, persistent challenges in achieving inclusive education for children with disabilities in South Africa highlight the need for structural changes and effective policy implementation (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). These challenges resonate with the imperative in youth ministry to move beyond policy intentions and comprehensively engage diverse groups. In this context, 'Youth Participation and Community Change' advocates for recognising empowered youth as positive contributors to community development, offering interdisciplinary insights that align with the transformative potential of engaged youth in religious and spiritual contexts (Checkoway, 2006). A compelling approach to addressing contemporary challenges in theology and engaging with diverse communities involves embracing the concept of public theology. Public theology challenges the notion that theology is solely the domain of institutional Christianity, advocating for a broader understanding that encompasses both academic discourse and public engagement, highlighting the role of diverse voices such as artists, novelists, and philosophers in facilitating dialogue between theological discourse and public discourse, ultimately serving as an expression of believers' longing for spiritual connection beyond traditional religious structures (Van Aarde, 2008). Ongaro and Tantardini (2023) demonstrate that religion, faith, and spirituality play significant roles across various levels of public administration, highlighting their influence on individual behaviour, organisational dynamics, and broader governance structures, with implications for understanding and shaping public policy and management, particularly pertinent to South African township and rural contexts. Opuni-Frimpong (2023) advocates for a responsive Christianity in Ghana, emphasising the church's role in promoting social justice and national transformation, grounded in Christian beliefs and values, with a focus on public theology as a catalyst for the church's engagement in socioeconomic challenges, drawing from interviews and library research to identify pathways for national transformation amidst ethnocentrism, religious conflicts, moral decay, and political instability. The article's call for a responsive Christianity and engagement in social justice and transformation resonates with the imperative for South African township and rural youth to navigate socioeconomic challenges, suggesting that

public theology can catalyse the church's involvement in addressing issues such as economic disparities, educational barriers, and social inequalities affecting these communities. Overall, public theology is inclusive and plays a role in bridging theological discourse with broader societal concerns.

Despite promoting public theology because of its inclusive nature and its role in society, there are potential tensions or criticisms surrounding the intersection of Christianity with elements outside the traditional religious sphere. Serrano (2023) underscores civil religion as a contentious topic among scholars, scrutinising its impact on political orientation and polarisation in the US while asserting its profound integration into both secular and religious domains of American life, advocating for ongoing exploration to grasp its effects on national identities and political landscapes. Kratochvíl (2023) critiques the view that the study of religion and politics is not as varied as it could be because it depends too much on politics; Western social science tends to ignore religion, and it follows what other areas of study do. Contrastingly, Sessions and Williams (2024) emphasise the need for more vital interdisciplinary collaboration between religious ethicists and academic community engagement scholars. They highlight historical intersections and pressing ethical questions related to the mission of higher education, neoliberalism's influence, and biases connected to white Christian hegemony, in order to address these challenges through diverse but pertinent religious perspectives. While some may question the efficacy or relevance of public theology in addressing youth disengagement, especially in digital contexts, this study argues that the overarching goal remains the same: to empower and support young people in their spiritual and personal development. By bridging these perspectives, the study aims to foster greater inclusivity, engagement, and positive outcomes for youth in these communities.

Pearson (2023) suggests that treating young people as public theologians, considering their faith within the community context, offers a promising avenue. Expanding on this viewpoint, Ruth Wivell, as cited by Pearson in 2023, advocates for a unique feminist lens within public theology. She underscores the significance of adopting a decentred Christology that prioritises embodied experiences and therapeutic witness (Pearson, 2023). Furthermore, Wivell emphasises the need to transition from speaking to listening when interacting with the disenfranchised. Aziz (2022) contends that youth ministry, particularly in evangelical contexts, must evolve from focusing on individual

salvation to embracing public theology and engaging with diverse faith expressions to remain relevant globally. Graham (2014) explores the resurgence of religion in the West, advocating for a renewed apologetics that prioritises societal well-being over the church's survival and encourages Christians to speak truth to power, advocating for the marginalised. Paeth (2016) delves into how public theology grapples with challenges like pluralism and globalisation, emphasising the necessity for a response grounded in theological and moral engagement; however, various approaches, including confessional, apologetic, and synthetic, offer promising possibilities along with potential risks like ossification and dissolution. In conclusion, these perspectives collectively highlight the transformative potential of public theology in addressing complex contemporary issues and fostering authentic engagement with diverse communities. Thus, this perspective could be a compelling approach to effectively address modern theological challenges and engage with diverse communities, emphasising the importance of a more inclusive and accessible digital youth ministry.

The evolving landscape of digital integration in various domains, from education to youth ministry, is evident in a series of studies relevant to youth's unique challenges and opportunities in townships and rural areas of South Africa. Agnor's (2018) investigation highlights the positive impact of social media on evangelical youth ministries, emphasising its role in strengthening the community and indirectly enhancing discipleship. The preceding investigation could inspire strategies to leverage digital platforms for community building and discipleship among South African youth. Hill's (2022) emphasis on hybrid ministry could highlight the importance of bridging virtual and physical spaces to reach youth in remote areas with limited access to traditional resources. Marta's (2019) focus on reconfiguring classrooms and Buckingham's (2008) examination of digital media's pervasive integration underscore the need for innovative spaces and digital dimensions in education and youth ministry. Chauhan et al.'s (2021) study in Southeast Asia reveals the challenges of digital inequalities and the deficiency in essential skills, prompting considerations of inclusive approaches to youth ministry that address disparities in access to technology and essential skills, arguably extending to contexts such as townships and rural areas. Battista's (2024) examination of digitisation in religious spheres could encourage exploration of how digital platforms can be harnessed to cultivate collective faith

experiences and redefine sacredness within South African youth communities. These studies provide valuable insights and frameworks for developing culturally sensitive and inclusive digital youth ministry initiatives in South African township and rural contexts.

3.2. Challenges and solutions in digital engagement

3.2.1. Challenges

Navigating the intersection of digital innovation and challenges in rural and township areas is crucial for effective strategies in youth digital ministry. Kunene (2012) underscores the challenges youth in townships face, including limited resources, income, information, and digital skills, affecting their effective Internet use for employment opportunities. Further challenges, such as crime, poor network coverage, and expensive data bundles, resonate with barriers identified in youth digital ministry, emphasising the need to address socio-economic factors and enhance digital access and skills. Dalvit et al. (2014) highlight mobile phone usage in Keiskammahoek, a town in South Africa, revealing interest in networked activities despite poverty, contributing to discussions on the 'data divide' and implications for digital inclusion in youth ministry. Phokeer et al. (2016) identify some telling mobile data patterns in South African townships. Despite the limited availability of public free Wi-Fi and high mobile data costs, township users exhibit significant mobile data usage. Such usage characteristically involves updating mobile applications, addressing challenges such as lack of awareness and technological and general illiteracy. These findings suggest some scope for network and application design in youth ministry, while addressing digital access challenges. Noruwana et al. (2018) explore ICTs' impact on empowerment, emphasising contextualisation and human capacity enhancement, guiding the implementation of youth digital ministry strategies in similar contexts. Appio et al. (2019) call for a comprehensive understanding of Smart Cities initiatives, offering insights through a hybrid framework and proposing a research agenda, providing a foundation to inform digital youth ministry strategies.

The challenges of digitisation persist on various fronts, encompassing parental, community, and church apprehensions. Sentwa (2018) sheds light on

the hindrances children face in informal settlements in Cape Town, noting that despite having access to digital resources like cell phones, the need for more guidance from parents limits the educational potential of these tools. The apprehension among parents and teachers about young people's engagement with digital technologies poses a significant barrier to incorporating them into an educational framework. Campbell (2023) explores the challenges churches encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic in adopting digital media, focusing on issues such as internet accessibility, digital literacy, generational gaps, and resistance to change, emphasising the theological implications of the observed digital divide. Finnell's (2023) study reveals differing struggles between smaller and larger churches in adopting technology post-COVID-19, underlining resource limitations for smaller congregations and the positive integration of technology by larger ones. Hung's (2022) narrative review delves into the relationships between digitalisation, parenting styles, and children's mental health, aiming to recommend inclusive digital transformation policies. Gottschalk's (2019) critical examination of technology's impact on children's well-being highlights the need for more research, emphasising the complexity of the relationship and advocating for evidence-based guidelines that consider both risks and benefits. In conclusion, these studies underscore the multifaceted challenges and reservations surrounding digitisation in various contexts, emphasising the importance of inclusive policies, education, and nuanced approaches.

3.2.2. Solutions for overcoming challenges in youth ministry and community engagement

Innovative solutions such as community access points and collaboration with local organisations show promise in addressing the challenges of digital access and inclusion in rural and township contexts. Sept's (2020) holistic approach, informed by rural digitalisation projects in Germany, offers a systematic framework for supporting intelligent villages, highlighting the potential of digital technologies for rural development. Lusweti and Omieno's (2023) exploration of Kenyan innovation hubs emphasises the importance of government support in bridging the digital divide, suggesting a model that could be adapted for rural and township youth ministry to provide access to

digital resources and foster economic growth and innovation. In rural and township ministry contexts, establishing innovation hubs similar to those in Kenya could provide access to digital resources, mentorship, and support for local entrepreneurs and innovators, fostering economic growth, innovation, and community development while bridging the digital divide.

Additionally, Storozhuk et al. (2023) illustrate the potential of digital innovation to address social exclusion, particularly in conflict-affected regions like Ukraine, indicating its relevance for advancing public theology and community engagement. The preceding initiative underscores the potential for digital innovation to foster social cohesion and inclusivity, suggesting its role in advancing public theology and community engagement in marginalised areas. Hackathons, as explored by Falter et al. (2023), offer a collaborative approach to digital innovation, potentially addressing challenges faced by rural and township youth in South African churches by fostering the development of innovative digital strategies. Thus, the church community could unite, including youth members, leaders, and possibly external experts, to brainstorm, collaborate, and develop innovative digital strategies and tools to engage young people more effectively.

Furthermore, initiatives such as Auroral, as presented by Gómez-Carmona et al. (2023) with a focus on ICTD, highlight the importance of sustainable digital solutions tailored to rural contexts and offer insights for improving digital engagement in youth work. By promoting economic growth and digitalisation, Auroral seeks to bridge the digital divide between rural and urban areas, potentially offering insights and strategies for enhancing digital engagement and innovation in rural and township youth ministry in South Africa. Andersen and Wellen's (2023) exploration of virtual mentoring and de Ayala López and Santamaría (2019) study on social networks underscore the value of digital content creation and mentorship programs within the church community.

Moreover, addressing mental health challenges among youth, as advocated by McGorry et al. (2022), and promoting ICT capacitation in schools, as proposed by Mkhize and Davids (2021), further emphasise the role of digital resources and infrastructure in supporting holistic youth development. Finally, García Fernández and Peek's (2023) examination of the Smart Village concept highlights the potential for enhanced digital infrastructure to foster community resilience and connectivity, offering opportunities for rural and

township youth ministry to promote spiritual growth and community development.

In addressing the concerns of the church body and parents, Musya (2024) emphasises the importance of safeguarding safety and privacy. Critical practices include obtaining parental consent, thoroughly screening mentors, establishing clear guidelines for conduct, using secure communication tools, providing mentor training, monitoring platform activity, and implementing a reporting process for incidents or concerns. Ultimately, prioritising safety and privacy is essential for the well-being of all participants in online mentorship programs. In addition, Hill (2022) emphasises the importance of presence, improvisation, and strategic engagement, which was particularly evident during the pandemic. Parents can also get involved through different initiatives – Novianti et al.'s (2023) systematic review examines internet-based parenting interventions, focusing on their study methodologies, content delivery techniques, and emerging themes, revealing that these interventions primarily utilise visually engaging content to transmit information and support parents, with positive user responses suggesting their potential for further development, particularly in early childhood education and developmental psychology.

Through a multifaceted approach that combines technological innovation, policy advocacy, and community collaboration, digital engagement emerges as a valuable tool for revitalising youth ministry and fostering a sense of community. It ultimately contributes to the holistic development of youth in rural and township contexts.

3.3. Innovative strategies for digitally connected youth: showcasing success stories in youth ministry

Life Church is renowned for its innovative technology-driven approach, offering digital platforms and apps, including the Church Online Platform, which allows churches to stream services, engage in community-building through chat and prayer features, and quickly upload sermons for streaming in under an hour, facilitating growth and engagement for attendees (Life Church, 2024). The innovative digital platforms and apps developed by Life Church, such as the Church Online Platform, offer valuable tools for rural

and township youth ministry by providing accessible ways to stream services, engage in community-building activities, and upload content easily, thereby facilitating digital engagement and growth within these communities.

Caouette (2020) highlights the vast potential of incorporating video gaming into ministry to deeply connect with youth, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, by providing practical, hands-on discipleship opportunities and meeting youth where they are. Township and rural youth ministries can benefit from this approach by leveraging the popularity of video games among young people to foster meaningful connections, promote teamwork and problem-solving skills, and demonstrate real-life applications of spiritual virtues, ultimately building stronger relationships and trust within the community. By embracing gaming as a tool for ministry, churches can bridge the gap between traditional gatherings and online engagement, creating inclusive spaces for youth to explore, connect, and grow spiritually.

In North Central Mindanao, Adventist youth leaders and secretaries embraced digital technology, organising a two-day seminar on Youth Leadership Training that emphasised media evangelism and resulted in the success of a media evangelism campaign during the Pandemic (Adventist News, 2022). In collaboration with the Communication Department and Hope Channel South Philippines, the above-mentioned initiative empowered youth through innovative approaches, contributing to the church's establishment as a faith-based broadcasting network in the Philippines. The convention aimed to open the youth's potential in utilising media for gospel spread, emphasising the importance of nurturing a mindset for effective digital ministry among young people. This initiative demonstrates the effectiveness of empowering youth through innovative digital ministry approaches. Township and rural youth could benefit from initiatives like the one described by gaining skills in digital media and technology, empowering them to engage in meaningful outreach and communication efforts within their communities.

Clark (2020) explores the integration of digital technology in churches to enhance visitor experiences, addressing challenges through multimedia guides and augmented reality. Case studies of St John the Baptist, Little Missenden, and Westminster Abbey illustrate successful applications of digital technology in enhancing storytelling and interpretation, showcasing how technology can effectively address specific challenges and enhance en-

gagement in different church settings. These examples suggest that youth ministry, including in rural and Township South Africa, could innovate by developing mobile-accessible, app-free multimedia tours with creative storytelling, augmented reality, and customisable elements to engage young visitors, emphasising language accessibility, inclusivity, and real-time crowd management.

Next Ventures, highlighted by Wiest (2023), supports emerging church leaders through collaboration with Venture Partners, showcasing diverse projects like The Brook, Zero Hour Ministries, Nerd Culture Ministry Collective, and Digital Discipleship. The multifaceted investment in leaders shaping the church's future globally includes initiatives spanning young professional disciple-making movements, addressing challenges of faith among youth, and engaging with marginalised nerd culture. Zero Hour Ministries, for instance, addresses the challenge of young people leaving the Christian faith, focusing on Gen Z through training and deployment strategies, resulting in significant impact.

Cai (2016) discusses technology integration in church operations, emphasising its role in enhancing efficiency, communication, and donation. The article highlights the digitalisation of the donation process, showcasing the benefits of donor flexibility, visibility, retention, and potential uplift in giving amounts. It raises questions about the potential downsides and ethical considerations of the rapid digital expansion into religion, emphasising the need for churches to invest in quality software programs to grow and engage their membership bases.

In conclusion, these successful digital projects in youth ministry, visitor experience enhancement, church leadership support, and technology integration underscore the vast opportunities and benefits of embracing digital transformation. They showcase the potential for increased engagement, innovative approaches, and efficient operations while prompting critical reflections on potential challenges and ethical considerations in the ever-evolving landscape of digital ministry. The above could provide rural and township South African youth valuable opportunities for personal growth, leadership development, and active participation in shaping their local contexts.

3.4. Utilising digital space: building a collaborative model

3.4.1. Examination of how virtual spaces can complement physical interactions

The proposed collaborative framework for revitalising youth ministry through digital engagement, derived from the literature review, integrates physical and virtual interactions. Taking inspiration from Life Church (2024), the proposed model involves the development of a multi-purpose app tailored for young people, enabling them to connect with their peers and the church community. This app could serve several functions, including facilitating communication between young people and church leaders, providing access to resources such as Bible study materials and devotionals, organising virtual events and activities for youth groups, offering a platform for prayer requests and support, enabling online mentorship programs, and fostering community engagement through discussion forums and social features.

In addition, the model suggests a blend of physical and virtual interactions, leveraging a game-like platform to align with young people's digital habits while incentivising attendance at physical church gatherings. To further justify the incorporation of gamification, Joubert and Schoeman (2015) delve into the growing interest in integrating digital game elements in higher education, driven by the surge in gamification amid the COVID-19-induced shift to e-learning. Through a systematic literature review on the Web of Science database, the research identifies benefits, including achieving educational goals, assessing learner strengths and weaknesses, improving student learning, and boosting motivation. It also uncovers challenges such as managing virtual classrooms, sensory pattern mismatches, repetitive activity boredom, difficulty levels, time constraints, and negative emotions like nervousness and frustration, offering insights into the nuanced landscape of gamification in higher education. These findings guide the potential application of gamification strategies to enhance engagement and learning experiences in youth ministry.

The model draws inspiration from success stories such as the Adventist youth initiative in North Central Mindanao (Adventist News, 2022), the integration of digital technology in churches for visitor experiences (Clark, 2020), and the diverse projects supported by Next Ventures (Wiest, 2023).

The Adventist Youth initiative demonstrates the potential impact of combining digital technology with physical events, emphasising the importance of fostering a mindset for effective digital ministry among young people (Adventist News, 2022). Clark's (2020) exploration of digital technology in churches provides insights into how multimedia guides and augmented reality can address challenges and enhance engagement, offering a practical application for youth ministry. Wiest's (2023) discussion of Next Ventures highlights the support for emerging church leaders, showcasing innovative projects like Zero Hour Ministries, which directly address the challenge of youth leaving the Christian faith.

Additionally, Cai's (2016) examination of technology in church operations provides a broader context, emphasising the benefits of donor flexibility and visibility while raising ethical considerations. The proposed model aligns with the overarching theme in the literature, stressing the need for churches to embrace digital transformation for increased engagement, innovation, and efficient operations. Thus, the collaborative model proposes a thoughtful synthesis of the insights gained from the literature, aligning with the successful digital projects discussed and emphasising the potential opportunities and challenges in the evolving landscape of digital ministry.

3.4.2. Bridging the virtual-physical gap in rural and township South Africa

The proposed model for revitalising rural and township youth ministry in South Africa through digital innovation envisions the creation of a dynamic game-like platform tailored to the tech-savvy youth demographic. This interactive space serves as a hub for spiritual exploration, discussion, and collaboration, offering a virtual environment where young individuals can seamlessly connect with their peers, share thoughts, and engage in meaningful conversations about faith within the familiar context of their digital landscape. The platform incorporates gamification elements inspired by modern gaming culture to enhance its appeal. Participants can embark on digital quests or challenges related to biblical teachings, encouraging individual spiritual growth and collective participation. As they navigate this virtual realm, accumulating points and achievements, the platform becomes

a vibrant digital representation of their spiritual journey. However, the innovation extends beyond the digital realm to bridge the gap between the virtual and physical worlds. Points earned online translate into tangible rewards or special recognitions during physical church gatherings, fostering a sense of continuity and making the transition from online engagement to physical attendance rewarding and anticipated.

The proposed model for township and rural youth ministry in South Africa leverages digital innovation to address digital access challenges, offering a dynamic game-like platform accessible via low-cost devices and optimised for data efficiency. The platform engages youth by incorporating gamification elements and interactive quests, motivating consistent participation and fostering a sense of belonging within the digital community. Integration with physical church gatherings ensures inclusivity and data cost savings when the youth attend physically. Additionally, community service projects inspired by online discussions empower youth to accomplish a tangible impact in their local communities. At the same time, synchronised virtual prayer sessions and collaborative events enable participation regardless of digital access, providing a holistic platform for spiritual growth and community engagement. The church could also take a proactive approach by providing Wi-Fi access for the youth to utilise when needed, extending its utility beyond spiritual activities to include practical uses such as completing school homework. This dual benefit encourages regular physical attendance at church while also supporting the educational needs of the youth in the community.

To address the issue of public theology, the platform could ensure that faith-based discussions, collaboration, and spiritual exploration are openly accessible to the community. By integrating digital platforms with physical church gatherings and community service projects, the model facilitates conversations about faith that extend beyond the confines of traditional church settings, engaging youth in meaningful dialogue about their beliefs and values. Additionally, the model encourages the application of Christian principles in real-world scenarios through interactive quests and challenges related to biblical teachings, promoting the practical expression of faith in daily life. Through these initiatives, the model empowers youth to actively shape their communities according to Christian values, promoting a public theology emphasising social justice, compassion, and community engagement.

Interactive events synchronising both worlds further enhance collaboration. Virtual prayer sessions could precede physical gatherings where collective prayers are visually represented or celebrated. Additionally, youth ministries can organise community service projects inspired by online discussions, creating a tangible impact reflecting the unity forged in the digital space. This model transcends conventional youth ministry boundaries by seamlessly blending digital and physical dimensions. It transforms engagement into a holistic experience, where every interaction contributes to individual spiritual growth and the collective strength of the church community. Through this innovative approach, the digital divide problem in South Africa can be addressed by providing accessible and engaging digital platforms for youth in rural and township areas, fostering inclusivity and connectivity within the church community.

4. Conclusion

The innovative strides made in this article represent a pioneering effort to revolutionise rural and township youth ministry in South Africa and beyond, leveraging digital spaces to bridge gaps, foster spiritual growth, and promote public theology. By embracing the principles of public theology and harnessing the power of digital platforms, this approach addresses the pressing issue of the digital divide while catering to the preferences of today's tech-savvy youth.

The proposed model envisions a harmonious blend of digital engagement and physical interactions, offering a dynamic game-like platform that resonates with youth's digital habits and promotes seamless integration between virtual and physical realms. Through gamification elements and tangible rewards for physical participation, the model makes spiritual exploration engaging and interactive, nurturing a sense of community and individual growth.

Additionally, the article draws from successful case studies and diverse initiatives to amplify engagement, encourage innovative approaches, and streamline operations within youth ministries. As we embark on this digital transformation journey, the model serves as a compass, offering a strategic

path to enhance engagement, foster spiritual growth, and overcome challenges while respecting the core values of faith.

Furthermore, this approach acknowledges the transformative potential showcased in various initiatives, from Adventist youth leaders embracing digital technology for media evangelism to integrating multimedia guides in churches for enhanced visitor experiences. By incorporating these insights, the proposed model bridges traditional methods with digital innovation, providing a holistic framework for youth ministries to thrive in an ever-evolving digital era.

In conclusion, this comprehensive approach will significantly benefit various aspects of youth ministry, including spiritual exploration, community building, and societal impact, from digital initiatives. By embracing the opportunities presented by digital transformation while respecting the core values of faith, this model paves the way for a vibrant and inclusive future, ensuring that rural and township youth ministries remain relevant and impactful in the digital age.

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