

## Negotiating Faith in Hybrid Spaces: Digital Catholic Practices among Youth in Eastern Indonesia

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines how Catholic youth in Paroki Santa Maria Assumpta (St. Mary of the Assumption Parish), Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia, integrate digital media into their religious life within a majority-Catholic yet infrastructurally limited context. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations involving 20 participants, including youth, a parish priest, a parish council leader, and leaders of the basic ecclesial communities. Thematic analysis revealed five major patterns: (1) digital engagement as an extension of faith, (2) negotiations between tradition and innovation, (3) community and belonging in hybrid spaces, (4) youth agency and creative religious expression, and (5) challenges and limitations of digital practices. The findings highlight how young Catholics perceive online platforms as natural extensions of devotion, while parish leaders stress the importance of safeguarding sacramental integrity and communal bonds. Rather than replacing tradition, digital practices reframe faith through hybrid forms that blend accessibility, creativity, and community participation. The study contributes theoretically by extending discussions on digital religion into peripheral, non-Western contexts and practically by offering insights for the Catholic Church to develop adaptive pastoral strategies for digital generations.

**KEYWORDS:** Catholic Youth, Digital Religion, Hybrid Faith Practices, Pastoral Adaptation.

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, rapid advances in digital technology have transformed nearly every aspect of human life, including the way people work, learn, communicate, and build social relationships (Kaewkitipong et al., 2023). One important consequence of this transformation is the reconfiguration of religious experience and expression. Religious practices are no longer confined to physical spaces such as churches, mosques, or temples. Online platforms have opened new avenues for worship, catechesis, and devotional participation, challenging traditional notions of faith communities and broadening the boundaries of religious engagement (Indriyani & Khadiq, 2023).

Indonesia, a country known for its high religious diversity, provides a compelling context in which to explore these dynamics. With approximately eight million Catholics, representing a small minority of the population, the Catholic community contributes significantly to education, social services, and interreligious dialogue (Panigoro, 2025). Yet, the adoption of digital technologies across the archipelago has been uneven, shaped by differences in infrastructure and socio-cultural conditions (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020). In regions such as East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), a province in eastern Indonesia with a strong Catholic presence, the Church remains a central locus of both social and religious life. However, limitations in internet access and digital resources continue to shape how believers engage with religious practices in the digital environment (Humeira & Sarwono, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in this trajectory. Restrictions on physical gatherings compelled parishes across the country, including those in NTT, to transfer liturgies, catechesis, and pastoral activities to online platforms (Ganiel, 2021). What began as a temporary adjustment has produced long-term consequences, reshaping patterns of community participation and religious identity (Przywara et al., 2021). Digital platforms have expanded access, especially for younger generations with higher digital literacy, yet concerns remain regarding the dilution of sacramental meaning, the weakening of communal bonds, and the rise of individualized spirituality detached from direct pastoral guidance (Huygens, 2021).

Despite growing global discussions on the intersection between religion and digital media (Golan, 2023; Saud et al., 2023), studies in Indonesia remain limited and are often concentrated in urban contexts (Aunul & Handoko, 2022). Very little in-depth research has been conducted on how Catholic youth in non-metropolitan or peripheral regions experience and negotiate

digital religious practices (Upenieks, [2022](#); Kretzler et al., [2023](#); Village & Francis, [2022](#)). Addressing this gap is essential to better understand how cultural background, infrastructural constraints, and community dynamics influence the integration of digital practices into religious life (Hunt, [2020](#)).

This study focuses on Catholic youth in St. Mary of the Assumption Parish, located in Kupang, the capital city of East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. It seeks to examine how they integrate digital media into their faith practices, community participation, and spiritual identity. By situating the analysis in a non-metropolitan context, the research aims to contribute theoretically by extending the discourse on digital religion to geographically peripheral settings, and practically by offering insights for the Catholic Church in developing adaptive pastoral strategies that respond effectively to the digital generation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has reshaped not only economic and social systems but also the ways in which people understand and practice religion (Wahid, [2024](#)). Faith traditions that were once rooted primarily in face-to-face rituals and physical sacred spaces are increasingly expressed through digital platforms. The concept of digital religion underscores this transformation, highlighting how online environments have become integral to contemporary religious experience (Al-Zaman, [2022](#)). Rather than replacing traditional practices, digital religion creates new opportunities for reinterpreting spiritual life in ways that reflect the affordances and constraints of technological change (Basir et al., [2025](#)).

The rise of online religious practices illustrates how faith communities adapt to digital realities. Livestreamed worship services, digital catechesis, online devotional groups, and religious applications enable believers to participate in spiritual life regardless of time or location (Campbell, [2025](#)). These practices broaden access for those who are geographically distant or physically constrained, expanding the reach of religious institutions. At the same time, they prompt reflection on questions of authenticity, presence, and the meaning of communal belonging in virtual settings (Amit, [2025](#)). The shift toward digital worship challenges traditional assumptions about sacred space and encourages new theological and pastoral reflections (Bahal et al., [2023](#)).

Many scholars describe this development as a hybrid religious ecology, where online and offline experiences are interwoven rather than separate (Siuda, [2021](#)). Believers increasingly move fluidly between digital and physical forms of engagement, integrating livestreamed liturgies with in-person worship or combining online reflection with local community service (Sabaté Gauxachs et al., [2021](#)). This hybridity fosters creativity and agency in spiritual expression, while simultaneously raising tensions. The decentralization of religious authority, the diversification of spiritual voices, and the potential fragmentation of community identity represent both opportunities and challenges for institutional religion in a digitally mediated world (Andok, [2024](#); Missier, [2025](#); Saidin & Azrun, [2024](#); Ait Hadi et al., [2024](#)).

In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation with significant Christian and Catholic minorities, digital platforms have become central to religious expression. Social media, messaging applications, and online streaming are used extensively for sermons, catechesis, and devotional practices. These developments reflect broader global patterns but take shape in uniquely Indonesian ways, influenced by cultural values of communal belonging and religious plurality (Purnama et al., [2022](#)). Yet, most research on digital religion in Indonesia has concentrated on metropolitan centers such as Jakarta or Surabaya, producing an urban-focused picture. The experiences of faith communities in peripheral and rural areas remain underexplored, leaving important questions about digital religiosity in less connected contexts unanswered.

The Catholic Church, representing about eight million adherents across Indonesia, plays a vital role in education, healthcare, and interfaith dialogue (Binawan, [2023a](#)). East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), a province in eastern Indonesia, is one of the country's Catholic heartlands, with Kupang as its provincial capital. In this region, the Church is not only a center of worship but also a key social institution, deeply embedded in cultural life. However, infrastructural constraints such as uneven internet access and limited technological resources shape how local communities engage with digital religion. This intersection of strong Catholic identity and limited connectivity creates a distinctive context for examining how faith is expressed in hybrid ways.

Millennial and Generation Z Catholics in Indonesia represent the digital generation whose lives are deeply intertwined with media technologies (Novak et al., [2022](#)). Their religious engagement is marked by visual culture, interactivity, and the participatory affordances of platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp. These young believers not only consume but also actively create and circulate religious content, ranging from homilies and reflections to prayers and devotional videos. This



participatory culture offers rich opportunities for spiritual creativity, yet it also raises pastoral concerns. The tendency toward individualized spirituality and reliance on online networks can weaken sacramental participation and communal bonds, challenging the Church to reimagine pastoral strategies for digital natives.

Despite the growing global scholarship on digital religion, studies on Catholic communities in Indonesia remain limited and tend to privilege urban contexts. Little is known about how Catholic youth in peripheral regions, such as Kupang in East Nusa Tenggara, negotiate the intersection of tradition and digital innovation in their everyday faith (Mónika, 2021). Most existing studies rely on quantitative surveys that cannot fully capture lived experiences or the complexities of digital faith practices (Nilan & Wibowanto, 2021). Addressing this gap is essential for enriching the global literature on digital religion by incorporating perspectives from the Global South. Furthermore, such inquiry offers practical insights for the Catholic Church in developing pastoral strategies that resonate with the digital generation while remaining faithful to communal and sacramental traditions (Mattes et al., 2025).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine how digital media is integrated into the religious life of Catholic youth at St. Mary of the Assumption Parish, Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. As the provincial capital, Kupang presents a distinctive context where Catholicism, alongside Protestantism, is culturally dominant, yet technological infrastructures remain uneven. The case study design was selected to capture the depth and complexity of participants' lived experiences.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in perspectives and roles. A total of 20 informants were involved, consisting of 15 Catholic youth, 1 parish priest, 1 parish council leader, and 3 leaders of the basic ecclesial communities (see table 1).

**Table 1. Participant Categories**

Participant Group	Number of Participants	Characteristics / Role
Catholic Youth	15	Aged 18–30; active in parish activities; engaged in online religious practices
Parish Priest	1	Responsible for liturgy, catechesis, and pastoral guidance
Parish Council Leader	1	Represents lay leadership; oversees parish programs and community life
Leaders of the basic ecclesial communities (BECs)	3	Lead small faith communities; coordinate local religious gatherings
Total	20	Diverse perspectives across generational and leadership roles

The inclusion of both young parishioners and parish leadership allowed for a holistic understanding of digital religious practices across generations and roles within the Church.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observation between March–April 2025. Interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with participants' consent and conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, with translations verified for accuracy. Observations of liturgical and community activities, both online and offline, provided contextual insights.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis framework, facilitated by NVivo coding software. Credibility and trustworthiness were ensured through triangulation of data sources, member checking with participants, and peer debriefing among research colleagues. Ethical approval was obtained from Institute for Research and Community Service, STIPAS Archdiocese of Kupang, and informed consent was collected from all participants. The overall research process is summarized in the flow of research design (figure 1).

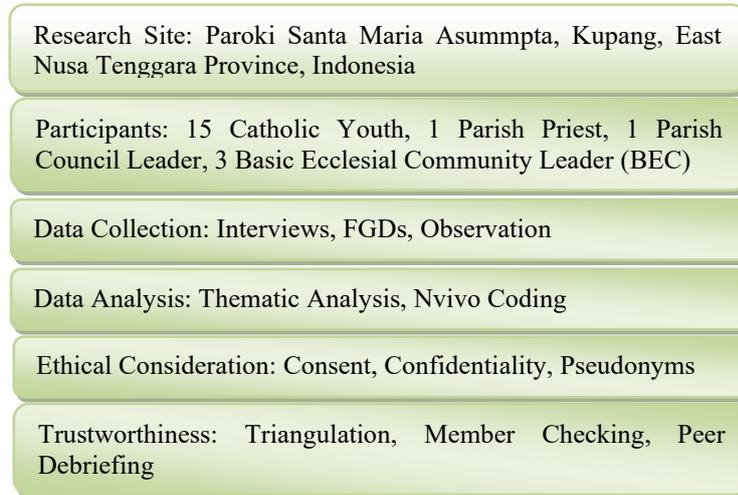


Figure 1. Flow of Research Design.

## FINDINGS

Through thematic coding in NVivo, five major themes emerged from the data: (1) digital engagement as an extension of faith, (2) negotiating tradition and innovation, (3) community and belonging in hybrid spaces, (4) youth agency and creative religious expression, and (5) challenges and limitations. These themes reflect both opportunities and tensions in the integration of digital media within the religious life of Catholic youth in Kupang.

### Theme 1: Digital Engagement as an Extension of Faith

Most youth respondents described digital platforms as natural extensions of their faith practices. Thirteen out of fifteen young participants highlighted the role of livestreamed Masses, Instagram prayers, and WhatsApp groups as daily spiritual resources. One youth explained, *“I always join the online rosary at night; it makes me feel connected even if I cannot go to church.”* The parish council leader also noted how online activities extended participation for those in remote areas.

### Theme 2: Negotiating Tradition and Innovation

Youth respondents (9/15) and the parish priest emphasized the tension between maintaining sacramental integrity and embracing digital innovation. As the priest noted, *“Digital media helps us reach the faithful, but the Eucharist cannot be fully replaced by a screen.”* Similarly, the leaders of the basic ecclesial communities stressed that while online practices help sustain prayer groups, they should not replace communal gatherings in the neighborhood. This theme highlights an ongoing negotiation between doctrinal tradition and the practical needs of accessibility.

### Theme 3: Community and Belonging in Hybrid Spaces

Ten youth, the parish council leader, and the leaders of the basic ecclesial communities emphasized the importance of hybrid communities that blend online and offline presence. One council leader explained, *“Even when youth join prayer groups online, they still want to gather physically afterward. The two are connected, not separate.”* These findings suggest that online platforms foster belonging but do not substitute in-person communal bonds.

### Theme 4: Youth Agency and Creative Religious Expression

Eleven youth respondents reported creating and sharing religious content on social media, from short TikTok videos to Instagram reflections. A youth participant said, *“We want to share our faith in our own style, with music or videos that inspire friends.”* This demonstrates how digital tools empower youth agency, allowing them to reinterpret Catholic identity in personalized ways. The parish priest acknowledged these efforts, seeing them as complementary to the parish’s pastoral mission.

### Theme 5: Challenges and Limitations

Despite enthusiasm, 12 youth, the parish priest, and one leader of the basic ecclesial communities emphasized significant challenges. These included unstable internet connections, distractions from secular content, and concerns about superficial engagement. The priest remarked, *“We must guide the youth so that their online faith does not become only a trend without depth.”* This indicates the need for pastoral strategies to balance accessibility with spiritual depth.

To provide a clearer overview of these thematic patterns, the distribution of responses across different groups of informants is presented in table 2.

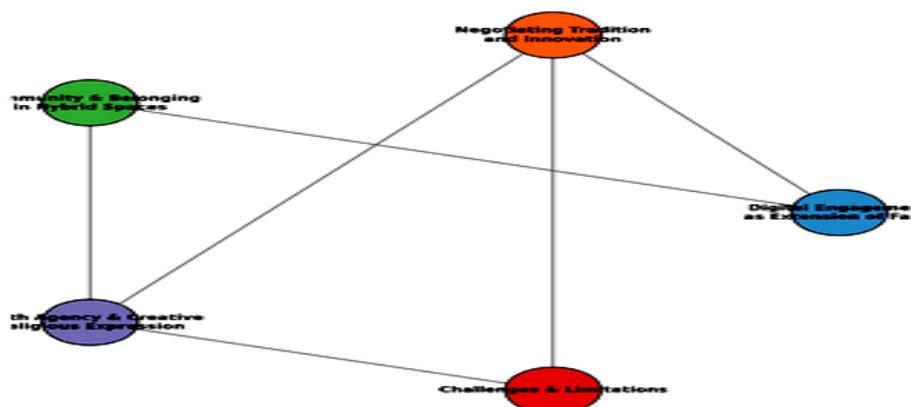
**Table 2. Distribution of Themes Across Informants**

Theme	Youth (n=15)	Parish (n=1)	Priest	Parish Leader (n=1)	Council	BEC (n=3)	Leaders	Total Mentions
Digital Engagement as Extension of Faith	13	0		1		0		14
Negotiating Tradition and Innovation	9	1		0		3		13
Community and Belonging in Hybrid Spaces	10	0		1		3		14
Youth Agency and Creative Religious Expression	11	1		0		0		12
Challenges and Limitations	12	1		0		1		14

As shown in table 2, youth respondents were the primary drivers of themes related to digital engagement, creativity, and challenges, while the parish priest most strongly emphasized the balance between tradition and digital practices. The parish council leader, on the other hand, focused on community and belonging, while the leaders of the basic ecclesial communities emphasized the role of hybrid practices and the risk of weakening neighborhood-level faith gatherings. The inclusion of both young parishioners and parish leadership allowed for a holistic understanding of digital religious practices across generations and roles within the Church.

The findings presented above illustrate five central themes that emerged from the voices of Catholic youth, the parish priest, the council leader, and the leaders of the basic ecclesial communities in Kupang. These themes reveal not only patterns of digital engagement but also the tensions, opportunities, and cultural specificities that shape how faith is practiced in hybrid spaces. To situate these results within broader scholarly conversations, the following discussion interprets the findings in light of existing literature on digital religion and highlights their theoretical and practical implications.

To synthesize the five emergent themes, figure 2 presents a conceptual model that illustrates how Catholic youth in Kupang negotiate digital practices in relation to tradition, community, creativity, and challenges.



**Figure 2. Flow of Research Design**

As shown in figure 2, digital engagement functions as the initial entry point, intersecting with tradition and innovation, while also sustaining community belonging. Youth creativity emerges from this hybrid ecology, yet these processes are consistently shaped by challenges related to connectivity, sacramental depth, and pastoral guidance. This synthesis provides the basis for the subsequent discussion, where the findings are interpreted in light of global debates on digital religion.



## DISCUSSION

This study highlights how Catholic youth at St. Mary of the Assumption Parish, together with the parish priest, parish council leader, and the leaders of the basic ecclesial communities, are actively negotiating the role of digital media in their religious lives, a phenomenon also noted in studies of youth digital culture and faith practices in non-Western contexts (Ilbury, 2022; Gondwe, 2024). By drawing on multiple perspectives, the findings offer a nuanced account of how faith is sustained, adapted, and reimagined in a majority-Catholic community in Eastern Indonesia. This contributes not only to understanding local practices but also to broader debates on digital religion in non-Western contexts.

The findings reveal that digital engagement functions as an extension of faith, where online platforms become integral to sustaining prayer, devotion, and communal communication (Díez Bosch et al., 2017). Unlike settings where digital practices develop outside institutional control, in Kupang they remain deeply embedded within parish and community structures, reflecting broader adolescent patterns of digital religious behavior (Purwaningtyas et al., 2024). This demonstrates that Catholic youth are not disengaging from the Church but rather reshaping their participation in ways that combine online accessibility with offline sacramental life.

At the same time, the interplay between tradition and innovation underscores an important negotiation. The parish priest emphasized the need to preserve sacramental integrity, while youth experiment with integrating digital devotions into their everyday routines, similar to processes of digital discipleship identified elsewhere (Darmawan et al., 2024). Leaders of the basic ecclesial communities also expressed concern that online activities might weaken neighborhood prayer groups if not carefully balanced, echoing comparative insights into youth religiosity in other Catholic contexts (Žuro et al., 2024). Far from replacing tradition, these practices reframe it in forms that resonate with younger generations while remaining rooted in local community life.

The social dimension of faith also becomes evident in how community and belonging are sustained in hybrid spaces. Digital platforms enable young people to maintain solidarity and communication even when physical gatherings are limited. The parish council leader together with the leaders of the basic ecclesial communities highlighted that hybrid practices foster belonging but cannot substitute in-person communal bonds, a concern consistent with studies on youth participation in Catholic settings and the role of education in shaping online/offline religiosity (Casavecchia et al., 2024; Kraner, 2023). This suggests a collaborative form of digital ecclesiology, where clergy, lay leaders, and grassroots communities work together to maintain cohesion across platforms.

Youth creativity emerges as another defining feature. Far from being passive consumers of religious content, Catholic youth in Kupang act as digital missionaries who create, share, and innovate. Their activities often align with parish mission, demonstrating that creativity does not necessarily signal rebellion against authority but can instead deepen participation in communal faith (Canales, 2021). This combination of respect for hierarchy and innovative expression reflects the distinctive cultural embeddedness of Catholic youth identity in Kupang, which resonates with the historical negotiation of Church authority in Indonesia (Binawan, 2023b).

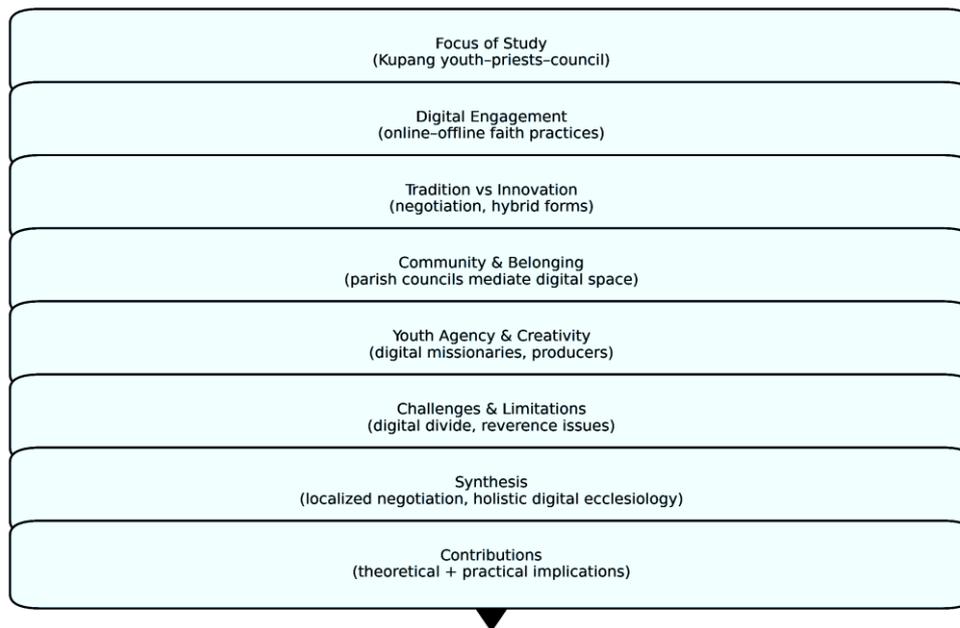
Nevertheless, challenges remain. Limited internet access, uneven technological literacy, and concerns about reverence in digital worship were repeatedly raised. The parish priest, together with one leaders of the basic ecclesial communities, underlined that digital faith needs guidance to avoid becoming superficial (Foley, 2021). Youth themselves recognize that online prayer cannot replace the sacramental depth of in-person worship, which reflects wider concerns about embodiment in digital practices during COVID-19 (Isetti, 2022). These limitations highlight the importance of pastoral guidance and infrastructural support to ensure that digital practices remain enriching rather than diminishing.

Overall, the study shows that digital Catholicism in Kupang is not a mere replication of global trends but a localized negotiation that balances tradition, innovation, and community needs, consistent with arguments on the mediatization of religion and comparative research on streaming practices in worship (Hjarvard, 2008; Roso, 2023). The intergenerational dialogue between youth, the parish priest, the council leader, and leaders of the basic ecclesial communities illustrates a holistic model of digital ecclesiology that is both participatory and context-specific.

Theoretically, this research broadens understandings of digital religion by centering a majority-Catholic, non-Western perspective that is often underrepresented in global scholarship. Practically, it suggests that parishes in contexts similar to Kupang can harness the creativity of young people while offering pastoral guidance to safeguard sacramental life (David et al., 2023). This

balance of innovation and tradition offers lessons for the wider Church, especially in regions of the Global South where digital religious change is unfolding within strong ecclesial frameworks.

As illustrated in figure 3, the discussion moves from the specific findings of digital practices among Catholic youth in Kupang toward broader implications for digital ecclesiology and pastoral practice in non-Western contexts.



**Figure 3. Logical Flow of the Discussion**

As illustrated in figure 3, the discussion begins with the study’s focus on Catholic youth, priests, and parish councils in Kupang as key actors negotiating digital practices. Digital engagement emerges as the entry point, linking online and offline expressions of faith. The model then highlights the negotiation between tradition and innovation, the role of parish councils in mediating community and belonging, and the creative agency of youth as digital missionaries and content producers. These processes are shaped by challenges such as the digital divide and concerns over sacramental reverence. Taken together, the synthesis demonstrates a localized and holistic form of digital ecclesiology, which ultimately generates both theoretical and practical contributions for understanding digital religion in non-Western contexts.

This study contributes to the growing scholarship on digital religion by foregrounding perspectives from a majority-Catholic yet peripheral context in Eastern Indonesia. Theoretically, it demonstrates that digital Catholic practices in Kupang are not mere replications of Western or urban patterns but constitute a localized negotiation where tradition, innovation, and community needs are continuously rebalanced. This highlights the importance of incorporating Global South contexts into broader theories of digital religion and hybrid ecclesiology, thereby expanding existing frameworks that are often shaped by Western-centric assumptions. Practically, the findings suggest that parishes can harness the creativity and agency of young people in producing digital religious content, while at the same time providing pastoral guidance to safeguard sacramental depth and communal cohesion. Such insights offer a pathway for the Catholic Church in Indonesia, as well as comparable contexts in the Global South, to develop adaptive pastoral strategies that remain faithful to tradition while engaging effectively with digitally native generations.

**CONCLUSION**

This study has shown how Catholic youth in Kupang, together with parish priests and council leaders, creatively integrate digital media into their religious life. Rather than replacing parish traditions, digital practices are reinterpreted as hybrid expressions of faith that bridge online and offline spaces while preserving communal and sacramental integrity. Such dynamics underline the need to understand digital Catholicism not as a rupture from tradition but as a localized negotiation shaped by cultural and ecclesial contexts.



The findings extend current understandings of digital religion by highlighting perspectives from a non-Western, majority-Catholic setting that is rarely represented in global scholarship. They also offer practical implications: parishes can support youth-led creativity in digital platforms while guiding its alignment with ecclesial values, thus fostering intergenerational collaboration and community resilience.

At the same time, the study recognizes persistent challenges, particularly technological inequality and concerns over liturgical reverence. Addressing these issues requires both pastoral innovation and infrastructural support. Future research may compare experiences across different Indonesian regions or other Global South communities, thereby deepening insight into how diverse Catholic contexts are navigating the digital turn in religious life.

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