

Digital Mediation and the Spectrum of Touch: Classifying Proxy and Vacuum Healing in the Online Prayer Economy of Nigerian Pentecostalism

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Abstract- Recent studies estimate that over 70% of urban Nigerian Pentecostals have participated in digital healing services since 2020, reflecting a nationwide surge in online religious engagement (Kingsley et al., 2025; Ojo, 2021). Yet the nature of these digital encounters, whether mediated by ritual touch or ambient faith, remains deeply contested. This study classifies and analyzes two dominant modalities: ‘proxy healing,’ in which worshippers touch screens as material conduits for divine power, and ‘vacuum healing,’ in which healing is received without physical contact through attentive participation in livestreamed prayer. Drawing on a three-month digital ethnography of more than 50 major Nigerian Pentecostal online prayer services (including NSPPD, RCCG, MFM, and Streams of Joy), analysis of more than 1,500 online testimonies, and in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 45 worshippers (23 from Abuja, 22 from Kaduna), this article reveals sharp generational and urban–rural divides: 60% of younger, urban, and digitally fluent participants favored vacuum healing for its accessibility and immersive experience, while 70% of older or less digitally literate respondents preferred proxy healing for its ritual continuity and embodied contact. Participant narratives highlight both the resilience of Pentecostal materiality and the innovative adaptation of ritual authority to digital platforms. These findings advance scholarship on African digital religion by showing how platform logics, demographic dynamics, and local theological debates are reshaping charismatic mediation, community formation, and authority in Nigeria’s rapidly evolving online prayer economy.

Keywords: *Digital Religion, Pentecostalism, Proxy Healing, Vacuum Healing, Nigeria, Online Prayer.*

I. INTRODUCTION

On a humid Monday morning in Lagos, Ada unlocks her smartphone and tunes into the New Season Prophetic Prayers and Declarations (NSPPD) livestream, led by Pastor Jerry Eze. The YouTube comments fly by as Pastor Eze declares, “Right now, chronic illnesses are vanishing, receive your healing, wherever you are!” Ada, who has suffered from chronic back pain, lifts her hands in faith, eyes closed, but does not touch her phone. Later, she testifies in the comments: “I felt warmth all over me as Pastor prayed, no touch, just God’s power.”

Elsewhere in Port Harcourt, Chinedu joins a Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) online deliverance session. The presiding pastor instructs, “Lay your right hand on your device as a point of contact; the anointing is flowing through the screen.” Chinedu presses his palm against his tablet, convinced that the screen has become a conduit for divine power. He soon shares a testimony of healing from persistent ulcers, attributing it to the moment of digital touch. These vignettes, situated in Nigeria’s vibrant and globally influential Pentecostal sphere, illuminate a pivotal yet under-theorized divergence in digital healing practices. One model, which this paper terms “vacuum healing”, frames divine power as flowing through screens without the need for touch—faith and attention are sufficient. The other, “proxy healing”, insists on the screen as a sacred object, a digital relic that must be touched to mediate the “anointing.” This distinction is more than a procedural variation; it reflects competing theologies of mediation, divergent phenomenologies of embodiment, and contrasting strategies for negotiating Nigeria’s booming online prayer economy.

Nigeria is home to the largest Pentecostal population in Africa and to one of the most digitally connected religious publics in the world (Ukah, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the migration of religious practice online, catalyzing new forms of charismatic mediation, global prayer networks, and digital economies of faith (Obadare, 2022; Adedibu, 2021). Yet, as this article contends, the digital turn is not merely the translation of offline rituals onto new platforms but a site of innovation, contestation, and theological reengineering.

Building on Ayivor's (2026) comparative typology of vacuum versus proxy healing in Ghanaian Pentecostalism, this paper adapts and extends the framework to the Nigerian context. Through digital ethnography of leading online prayer services (including NSPPD, RCCG Holy Ghost Service, MFM, Streams of Joy), analysis of over 1,500 testimonies, and critical reading of pastoral discourses, this study demonstrates that the proxy–vacuum divide is a defining fault line in Nigeria's digital religious field. It challenges prevailing assumptions in material religion and media studies by showing how Nigerian Pentecostalism actively negotiates the materiality and mediation of divine power in a digital age.

Situating Digital Mediation and the Spectrum of Touch in Nigerian Pentecostalism

The rapid digitization of Nigerian Pentecostalism has generated both continuity and rupture in longstanding debates about ritual mediation, charismatic authority, and the materiality of religious experience. To situate the classificatory spectrum of proxy and vacuum healing within broader scholarly discourse, this literature review critically engages work on material religion, digital media, and African Pentecostalism. In particular, it highlights how digital platforms not only extend the reach of healing rituals but also introduce new modes of engagement, dispute, and authority formation—prompting a re-examination of how touch, presence, and power are conceptualized and enacted in contemporary Nigerian Christianity."

i. Material Religion and the African Charismatic Sensorium

The study of material religion has emphasized that religious experience is constituted not only through belief, but through objects, bodies, and sensory practices (Keane, 2007; Meyer, 2012; Morgan, 2021). In African Pentecostalism, the logic of 'points of contact', anointed oil, handkerchiefs, water, and, more recently, media devices, has been foundational for the mediation of divine power (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013; Hackett, 2015). Nigerian churches such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), and Christ Embassy have long ritualized the use of material objects for healing and deliverance (Ukah, 2007; Marshall, 2009).

This emphasis on material mediation, however, has created analytical blind spots. Much of the literature presumes that Pentecostal power must be made tangible through touch or objects (Meyer, 2015; Ojo, 2010). Yet, as recent digital innovations show, charismatic mediation is neither static nor uniform. The emergence of online prayer economies disrupts these assumptions and requires new typologies attentive to both continuity and rupture in sacred materiality (Obadare, 2022; Ayivor, 2026).

ii. Pentecostal Media, Digital Religion, and the Nigerian Context

The global expansion of Pentecostalism has always been entwined with media innovations, from radio and television evangelism to satellite crusades and, most recently, livestreamed prayer sessions (Ukah, 2016; Marshall, 2016). Nigerian Pentecostalism, in particular, is characterized by its entrepreneurial use of media technologies to extend charismatic presence, foster community, and generate economic flows (Ojo, 2010; Adedibu, 2021).

Scholars such as Ukah (2020), Hackett (2015), and Obadare (2022) have documented the rise of the Nigerian digital prayer economy, highlighting the strategic use of platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram Live) for ritual, testimony, and the collection of offerings. However, these studies often treat online healing as a single field, without distinguishing between competing modes of

mediation, touch-based (proxy) and touchless (vacuum). This paper addresses that gap by theorizing a comparative typology that draws on both Nigerian and pan-African cases.

iii. Gaps and Innovations: Toward a New Typology

The question of how divine power crosses the digital threshold, whether through tactile engagement with the device or through faith and attention alone, has not been systematically examined in the Nigerian context. By adapting Ayivor's (2026) distinction between vacuum and proxy, this paper provides a new analytic lens for understanding how Nigerian Pentecostalism is negotiating the boundaries of materiality, technology, and charismatic authority in a rapidly digitizing society.

Recent scholarship underscores the profound impact of digital media on Pentecostal authority, doctrinal discourse, and public religious life in Nigeria. Kingsley, Whyte, and Enyindah (2025) demonstrate that social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X have become primary arenas for doctrinal engagement, public confrontation, and the negotiation of charismatic authority among Nigerian Pentecostal pastors. Their qualitative content analysis of doctrinal disputes between leading pastors reveals that social media not only democratizes religious communication, enabling lay participation and broader access, but also amplifies public conflicts, challenges traditional ecclesiastical hierarchies, and reshapes perceptions of legitimacy and truth within the faith community. The authors conclude that "social media has transformed religious engagement among Nigerian Christians. It has facilitated rapid debates, activism, and viral soundbites. However, it has nurtured visual spirituality, identity performance, and emotional participation" (Kingsley et al., 2025, p. 148). This dynamic, in which digital platforms serve both as pulpit and battleground, is crucial for understanding the spectrum of digital mediation, from healing practices to public theological debates, discussed in this article.

Relatedly, Akinwumi (2019) introduces the concept of "miracle-marketing" to capture how televised and digitally mediated miracle sessions serve as a form of social currency, reformulating power, shaping

hierarchies, and constructing new religious publics. Her critical discourse analysis of miracles, media, and authority demonstrates that Pentecostal megapastors use miracle-marketing not only to legitimate their charismatic authority but also to renegotiate social and political relations, especially in the context of Nigeria's weak secular institutions (Akinwumi, 2019, pp. 2–5, 24–27). This perspective reinforces the importance of attending to the economic, symbolic, and political dimensions of digital healing modalities classified in this article, and situates the spectrum of proxy and vacuum healing within broader processes of power, legitimacy, and public imagination in Nigeria's online prayer economy.

Theoretical Framework

This section develops the classificatory typology of proxy and vacuum healing, mapping these practices along a continuum of digital mediation in the Nigerian context. The conceptual distinction between "proxy healing" and "vacuum healing" was originally theorized by Samora Harry Ayivor (2026) in his digital ethnography of the online prayer economy of Ghanaian Pentecostalism. Ayivor defines "proxy healing" as a touch-based, mediated practice in which physical contact with a device is required to transmit spiritual power, and "vacuum healing" as a touchless, faith-activated transmission of healing through digital platforms, without the need for tactile engagement (Ayivor, 2026:25). This typology advances the study of digital religion by reframing debates over materiality and mediation, revealing how distinct digital ontologies are constructed among African Pentecostals. In this article, we adopt and adapt Ayivor's framework to the Nigerian context, expanding the typology to analyze how Nigerian Pentecostal ministries, ranging from proxy to vacuum healing, negotiate digital authority, charismatic power, and audience engagement within the nation's vibrant online prayer economy.

Defining Proxy and Vacuum Healing

Proxy Healing refers to digital charismatic practices where the device (phone, tablet, computer) is sacralized as a point of contact. Healing is believed to be transmitted when the believer physically touches the screen at the pastor's instruction, completing a ritual circuit of divine power (cf. Asamoah-Gyadu,

2005; Hackett, 2015). This model extends classical Pentecostal materiality into the digital sphere, treating the device as a modern relic.

Vacuum Healing, by contrast, posits that divine power can flow through digital space without physical contact. Here, the screen is a neutral portal, not a sacred object. Healing is received through faith and attentive participation in the stream, with pastors rarely instructing viewers to touch their devices (see Ayivor, 2026; Obadare, 2022). This model is often associated with ministries like NSPPD, which emphasize mediated immediacy and scalable, borderless charisma.

i. Analytical Layers: Phenomenology, Object, Infrastructure

To systematically classify the spectrum of digital healing modalities in Nigerian Pentecostalism, this study adopts a three-layered analytical framework. This framework, derived from Ayivor (2026) and adapted to the local context, enables a nuanced exploration of how mediation is constructed and experienced across multiple interrelated levels. Each layer is informed by scholarship in material religion, media anthropology, and digital studies, clarifying both the sensory experience and the social implications of online prayer.

ii. Phenomenological Layer (Lived Sensory Experience):

This layer investigates the embodied, affective, and perceptual dimensions of digital healing. Drawing on the work of Meyer (2012) and Keane (2007) on “sensational forms,” it asks: How do participants in Nigerian Pentecostal online prayer perceive and narrate their encounters with divine power? In proxy healing, the focus is on haptic sensation—the felt reality of touch, heat, or electric current upon contact with the device—mirroring the material “point of contact” logic of offline Pentecostalism. In vacuum healing, by contrast, the experience is described in ambient, immersive terms—power “washing over” participants or filling a space, with faith and attentive engagement substituting for physical touch. Analyzing testimonies and pastoral rhetoric at this level reveals not only modes of participation but also the shifting boundaries between body, media, and the sacred.

iii. Object-Oriented Layer (Status and Symbolism of the Device):

Here, the analysis turns to the material and semiotic status of technological objects, especially smartphones, tablets, and computers, in the mediation of healing. Building on the “thingness” of religion (Morgan, 2021) and theories of media as active agents (De Witte, 2013), this layer examines how devices are sacralized, desacralized, or treated as neutral conduits. In proxy healing, the device is transformed into a digital relic, a contemporary extension of anointed objects that requires ritual care and serves as a vessel for the transmission of power. In vacuum healing, the screen becomes a porous, transparent interface, its ideal function is invisibility, channeling divine efficacy without itself becoming a focus of veneration. This contrast reflects deeper theological assumptions about mediation, materiality, and the locus of the sacred in digital practice.

iv. Infrastructural Layer (Platforms, Algorithms, Economic and Social Flows):

The infrastructural layer situates digital healing within the broader technological, social, and economic systems that enable contemporary online prayer. Influenced by studies of the digital attention economy (Caplan & Boyd, 2018; Zuboff, 2019), it explores the role of platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram), algorithms, payment gateways, and community management tools. In proxy healing, infrastructural logic is marked by “ritual friction”, intentional interruptions for touch-based rituals, which limit scalability but enhance tangibility and engagement. In vacuum healing, infrastructural optimization is paramount: frictionless flows, seamless integration of testimony and giving, and maximization of algorithmic visibility and global reach. This layer thus reveals how the classification of mediation is not only a theological or phenomenological matter, but also a function of platform affordances, economic incentives, and the evolving political economy of Nigerian Pentecostalism.

Together, these analytical layers offer a multidimensional framework for mapping the

spectrum of digital healing in Nigerian Pentecostalism. They enable comparison not only of ritual procedures but also of lived experience, material practices, and the complex interplay among faith, technology, and the market in the digital age.

Typology Table: Digital Healing in Nigerian Pentecostalism

Theological Logic	Contagion-based; power flows via physical contact	Ambient/field-effect; power flows via faith/attention
Core Metaphor	Sacred relic/device as conduit	Porous interface/device as portal
Sensory Event	Haptic ritual, touch, “current.”	Audiovisual, ambient, “washing over.”
Physical Requirement	Touch device at pastor’s instruction	No touch required; faith/attention suffice
Testimonial Language	“I touched and felt heat.”	“I was healed as I listened.”
Infrastructural Quality	Ritual friction: action interrupts service flow	Seamless, scalable, platform-optimized
Leading Examples	MFM, RCCG (some branches), Christ Embassy	NSPPD, Streams of Joy, and some RCCG services

This framework enables a fine-grained analysis of how Nigerian Pentecostalism adapts and innovates in the digital age, with implications for theology, ritual, and the future of faith communities.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative digital ethnography (Hine, 2015; Pink et al., 2016) with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Fieldwork focused on four leading Nigerian Pentecostal online prayer services, NSPPD, Streams of Joy International, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), and select branches of RCCG, purposively selected to represent either vacuum or proxy healing modalities. To deepen contextual understanding, the research team

conducted semi-structured interviews and group discussions with 45 worshippers and adherents (23 in Abuja and 22 in Kaduna), selected to represent diversity in age, gender, and digital engagement. Fieldwork spanned April–June 2026 and included observing 50+ livestream sessions, analyzing 1,500+ online testimonies, and engaging in qualitative interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis prioritized pastoral instructions, participant language, digital engagement practices, and first-person experiences of digital healing. All procedures adhered to ethical standards for digital research and in-person qualitative work, with informed consent and anonymization protocols observed (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

Findings were interpreted using the study’s three-layer framework, phenomenology, object, and infrastructure, enabling a comparative and context-sensitive classification of digital healing practices within Nigeria’s Pentecostal online prayer spectrum. This methodology enables a robust, context-sensitive analysis of how Nigerian Pentecostal digital healing practices are innovated, contested, and experienced within the country’s dynamic online prayer economy.

Comparative Analysis

Comparing proxy and vacuum healing within Nigerian Pentecostal online prayer economies provides a unique lens for understanding how digital mediation reshapes not only ritual practice but also the production of charismatic authority and the negotiation of religious legitimacy. Building on Ayivor’s (2026) typology, this section systematically analyzes how each modality, anchored in either material contact or ambient faith, structures the sensory, theological, and infrastructural dimensions of healing. This comparative approach illuminates how Nigerian Pentecostal ministries adapt traditional doctrines of mediation to the affordances and challenges of digital platforms, thereby reconfiguring patterns of participation, economic exchange, and communal experience in the digital era (Meyer, 2015; Hackett, 2015; Kingsley et al., 2025).

i. Proxy Healing: Touch-Based Mediation

Proxy healing, as theorized by Ayivor (2026) and observed in ministries such as Mountain of Fire and

Miracles Ministries (MFM), Christ Embassy, and certain RCCG branches, is rooted in the logic of “contagion” and the material transfer of spiritual power. This approach draws deeply on the African Pentecostal tradition of “points of contact”—anointed oil, handkerchiefs, and physical laying on of hands (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013; Hackett, 2015; Ojo, 2010). The digital adaptation of this logic is not merely a translation; it is a creative re-inscription of ritual certitude into the virtual domain (Meyer, 2010; Marshall, 2009).

a. Phenomenological Layer:

In proxy services, pastors issue explicit instructions: “Touch your screen now as a point of contact”. Interviews with participants reveal that this is not a passive gesture. Mrs. Grace Daniel, 38, Abuja, reported: “When Pastor says, ‘touch your screen and receive,’ I stretch my hand, and it’s like a current flow through me. I felt a burning in my palm, and the pain in my back disappeared instantly.” Such accounts affirm Hackett’s (2015) argument that “media technologies become active agents in the production of religious sensation and conviction” (p. 191). For many, especially older or less digitally native members, touching the device creates a tangible, embodied link with the sacred, a “ritual shortcut” that collapses distance and sustains the Pentecostal sensorium (Keane, 2007; Meyer, 2012). Focus groups in Kaduna affirmed that proxy healing resonates with the familiar logic of prayer camps, crusades, and deliverance services, providing continuity and reassurance amidst rapid social and technological change. Mr. John Yusuf, 46, Kaduna:

“To me, touching the phone is the same as when the pastor lays hands in church. I believe the anointing passes through.”

b. Object-Oriented Layer:

Proxy healing recasts the device as a sacred vessel or digital relic—what Morgan (2021) calls the “thingness” of religious experience. The smartphone or tablet is temporarily set apart, sometimes even reverently cleaned or avoided for secular purposes after prayer (“I don’t use my phone for anything else until after the testimony,” said an Abuja participant). This logic aligns with De Witte’s (2013) analysis of

the “electric touch machine” and the transformation of everyday objects into conduits of supernatural power. The ritual care and temporary sacralization of devices reflect enduring Pentecostal anxieties about mediation, purity, and the transmission of the sacred (Marshall, 2009; Meyer, 2015).

c. Infrastructural Layer:

Proxy healing introduces what Ayivor (2026) calls “ritual friction”—deliberate interruptions in the flow of digital services for haptic engagement. This can intensify the effect and focus, but also limits scalability and multitasking. Offerings and testimonies are typically sequenced after the touch event:

“If God has touched you through your device, seal your miracle with a seed offering.”

This ritual-embedded economic appeal is reinforced by digital payment integrations (Paystack, Flutterwave), linking ritual action to economic flow (Adedibu, 2021; Ukah, 2020). While this model maintains high ritual density and personal investment, it may exclude younger, busier, or more mobile worshippers.

Interaction and Debate:

Participants sometimes debated the authenticity of “virtual touch.” As one focus group member in Kaduna noted: “Sometimes I wonder if people are just following instructions or if miracles really happen. But when my friend was healed after a touch prayer, I started to believe again.” This underscores the importance of community trust, the performativity of testimony (Meyer, 2010; Akinwumi, 2019), and the role of local networks in conferring legitimacy.

ii. Vacuum Healing: Touchless/Ambient Mediation

Vacuum healing, as practiced by NSPPD (Pastor Jerry Eze), Streams of Joy International, and some RCCG services, represents a significant innovation within the digital attention economy (Caplan & Boyd, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Here, the screen functions as a neutral portal, and faith/attention—rather than touch—becomes the main interface for divine power (Ayivor, 2026; Kingsley et al., 2025).

a. Phenomenological Layer:

Vacuum-healing services rarely, if ever, instruct viewers to touch their devices. Instead, pastors invoke an ambient, field-like presence, “Right now, wherever you are, receive your healing!” Blessing Musa, 27, Abuja, described: “I often play the NSPPD prayers in the background while I get ready for work. There was a morning I felt overwhelmed with anxiety, but as Pastor Jerry prayed, I felt peace come over me, even without touching my phone.” Such testimonies echo Meyer’s (2015) work on “mediated immediacy”—the sense of being enveloped by the sacred without physical mediation.

Chidinma Okeke, 31, Kaduna: “During a livestream, I didn’t touch anything. I just closed my eyes, raised my hands, and it was like the room was filled with God’s presence. My mother, who was with me, also felt healed from her headache.”

Focus group discussions revealed that vacuum healing is especially popular among younger, urban, and digitally literate worshippers, who value its flexibility and inclusivity: “I can pray along while driving or cooking—God is everywhere, not just in the touch.” This aligns with Campbell’s (2021) findings on the adaptability of digital religion to multitasking and everyday life.

b. Object-Oriented Layer:

The device here is desacralized, functioning as a transparent interface. Pastors and participants rarely reference the phone or tablet itself. Faith and focused attention are emphasized as the “technology” of reception (Ayivor, 2026; Marshall, 2009).

This is a significant theological shift, reflecting what Morgan (2021) calls “dematerialization”—the screen vanishes as a spiritual object, replaced by the immediacy of broadcast presence and the authority of the spoken word (Meyer, 2012).

c. Infrastructural Layer:

Vacuum healing is optimized for the logic of digital platforms and the attention economy. There are no ritual interruptions, and the flow from worship to

testimony to offering is seamless, maximizing engagement and algorithmic amplification (Caplan & Boyd, 2018). Testimonies are clipped and shared as viral content, “I was healed just by watching NSPPD!” Offerings are framed as spontaneous thanksgiving rather than payment for a ritual act. This model fosters viral growth, global scalability, and economic efficiency but can also create a “platform theology” (Obadare, 2022) that privileges celebrity pastors and algorithmic authority.

Interaction and Debate:

Participants noted the strengths and risks of vacuum healing:

“Sometimes I worry that people are just spectators, not really praying,” said Paul Audu, Kaduna. Others found the ambient model empowering:

“It made me realize you don’t need to be in church or touch anything for God to move.”

Some skepticism was also expressed about the authenticity of viral testimonies, underscoring the need for discernment and doctrinal grounding (Adedibu, 2021; Ojo, 2021).

iii. Synthesis: Mapping the Mediation Spectrum

This comparative analysis demonstrates that proxy and vacuum healing are not merely procedural variations but distinct logics of mediation, authority, and participation (Ayivor, 2026; Meyer, 2015; Hackett, 2015; Kingsley et al., 2025). Proxy healing maintains continuity with material Pentecostal heritage—emphasizing tangible ritual, embodied experience, and personal investment in charismatic authority. Vacuum healing privileges scalable, platform-native engagement and faith as the sole interface, democratizing access but also shifting authority toward digital-savvy leaders and viral networks.

The empirical data show that these modalities are actively negotiated by worshippers:

- Proxy healing is sustained by those who value continuity, ritual density, and tangible signs, more common among older, less digitally native, or rural adherents.

- Vacuum healing is embraced by youth, professionals, and urbanites seeking flexibility, participation, and a sense of ambient spiritual presence.

Both approaches shape new forms of power, belonging, and authenticity in Nigeria's digital prayer economy. As Meyer (2015) and Ukah (2022) conclude, the future of Pentecostal mediation will likely remain a contested spectrum, shaped by ongoing interplay between doctrine, technology, and lived experience.

Table 1. Distribution of Healing Modality Preferences by Demographic Group (Interview and Focus Group Sample, n=45)

Abuja	23	39	61
Kaduna	22	68	32
Youth (18–35 years)	21	29	71
Adults (36+ years)	24	71	29
Female	26	50	50
Male	19	53	47

Note: Proxy healing = touch-based digital mediation. Vacuum healing = touchless, ambient digital prayer. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number and reflect participant preferences in interviews and focus groups.

Discussion

The empirical mapping of proxy and vacuum healing across Nigerian Pentecostal digital prayer economies provides new insight into the lived realities of religious mediation in a rapidly digitizing African context. By systematically linking participant experience, theological innovation, and platform logic, this discussion moves beyond simple description to interrogate how digital technologies are not merely tools for religious dissemination but have become constitutive forces in reshaping charismatic authority, ritual authenticity, and the contours of community itself (Meyer, 2015; Obadare, 2022; Kingsley et al., 2025). The results illuminate not only the persistence of Pentecostal materiality but also the emergence of novel forms of spiritual presence and contestation that are redefining the boundaries of faith, leadership, and collective participation in the digital era.

i. Theological Innovation and the Reconfiguration of Mediation

The comparative analysis reveals that the divergence between proxy and vacuum healing is not simply a matter of ritual preference but signals a major theological and practical reconfiguration within Nigerian Pentecostalism. Proxy healing perpetuates the longstanding material logic of African charismatic Christianity, preserving the centrality of the 'point of contact' and the haptic transfer of power. In contrast, vacuum healing represents a deliberate theological innovation: by removing the need for touch, it elevates faith and attentive participation as the primary medium of divine encounter. This shift resonates with broader Pentecostal and Protestant tendencies toward the interiority of faith, but it is also a strategic response to the affordances of digital platforms.

Vacuum healing's dematerialization of the sacred interface aligns with the pursuit of immediacy and ubiquity in digital religious practice. It transforms the screen from a relic to a window, making the sacred accessible everywhere, anytime—without tactile ritual. This shift is not only theologically significant but also marks a new phase in the evolution of Pentecostal mediation, one that is less reliant on traditional materialities and more attuned to the flows of global digital culture (Ayivor, 2026; Obadare, 2022).

ii. Platform Economies and the Logic of Scalability

The infrastructural contrast between the two regimes is equally profound. Proxy healing's ritual friction, interrupting the service for touch, intensifies engagement and reinforces charismatic authority, but it limits scalability, spontaneity, and algorithmic amplification that digital platforms reward. In contrast, vacuum healing's frictionless flow is optimized for social media logics: continuous engagement, multitasking, and viral testimony. The economic appeal, too, is reconfigured. Where proxy models tie offering to a tangible ritual ("seal your miracle with a seed"), vacuum models frame giving as a spontaneous, faith-driven response to received grace ("if you have been blessed, give thanks now").

Vacuum healing's alignment with platform economies has enabled ministries like NSPPD to achieve massive global reach, with millions of daily viewers and a transnational testimonial ecosystem. This model is likely to further consolidate charismatic authority around media-savvy pastors who master the dynamics of digital attention and affect (Ukah, 2020; Hackett, 2015).

iii. Ritual, Authority, and Community in the Digital Age

These divergent models have profound implications for the social and spiritual fabric of Nigerian Pentecostalism. Proxy healing preserves continuity with the tactile, communal rituals of offline Pentecostalism, fostering embodied participation and tangible markers of divine intervention. It appeals to congregants who value concrete, sensory assurance of God's power. Vacuum healing, by contrast, enables multitasking, global participation, and a sense of continuous, ambient access to the sacred. It potentially shifts authority from local church communities to charismatic digital leaders and their platforms, raising questions about the future of community, discipleship, and accountability in Nigerian Christianity (Obadare, 2022; Marshall, 2016).

Findings from Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

A significant strength of this study is its direct qualitative engagement with worshippers from Abuja and Kaduna. Through 45 in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, participants shared nuanced accounts of their experiences with both proxy and vacuum healing in Nigerian Pentecostal digital prayer.

i. Embodied Power and Proxy Healing

Many participants described proxy healing as an extension of familiar Pentecostal rituals, with a powerful sense of embodied contact. "When Pastor says, 'touch your screen and receive,' I stretch my hand, and it's like a current flows through me. I felt a burning in my palm, and the pain in my back disappeared instantly," testified Mrs. Grace Daniel, a 38-year-old trader from Abuja. Similarly, Mr. John Yusuf (Kaduna, age 46) explained: "To me, touching the phone is the same as when the pastor lays hands

in church. I believe the anointing passes through." Focus group participants in Kaduna especially emphasized the continuity between digital proxy healing and traditional prayer camp practices, noting that "it reassures us that God's power is real, even when we cannot gather physically."

ii. Ambient Presence and Vacuum Healing

Among younger and more digitally active respondents, vacuum healing was praised for its accessibility and spiritual immediacy. "I often play the NSPPD prayers in the background while I get ready for work. There was a morning I felt overwhelmed with anxiety, but as Pastor Jerry prayed, I felt peace come over me, even without touching my phone," recounted Blessing Musa, 27, a software developer in Abuja.

Chidinma Okeke, a 31-year-old teacher from Kaduna, shared: "During a livestream, I didn't touch anything. I just closed my eyes, raised my hands, and it was like the room was filled with God's presence. My mother, who was with me, also felt healed from her headache." Participants noted that vacuum healing allows multitasking and group participation, and is especially embraced by youth and professionals with busy lives.

iii. Negotiating Authenticity, Testimony, and Authority

The discussions revealed a range of views on the authenticity of digital miracles.

"Some of the miracles I see online, I'm not sure they are real. But when I hear someone I know testify, or my pastor confirms it, I believe," said Paul Audu, 45, a civil servant in Kaduna. Others highlighted the value of discernment: "It's important not to be carried away by every viral testimony. We must check if it aligns with scripture and true doctrine," remarked Esther Eze, 34, from Abuja.

iv. Social and Generational Dynamics

The qualitative data suggest that proxy healing is more popular among older worshippers and those less engaged with digital technology, while vacuum healing is favored by younger, urban, and digitally literate participants. Gender, education level, and denominational background also shaped preferences

and openness to digital innovation. These testimonies and perspectives from Abuja and Kaduna reveal that Nigerian Pentecostals actively negotiate the meanings and practices of digital healing within their own contexts. Both proxy and vacuum healing offer genuine avenues for spiritual encounter, but their adoption is shaped by age, digital fluency, tradition, and community trust.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the digital prayer economy of Nigerian Pentecostalism is shaped by a fundamental divide between two ontologies of mediation: proxy healing and vacuum healing. Through a comparative, three-layered analysis, the study has shown that these are not merely procedural variations but competing theological, phenomenological, and infrastructural regimes. Proxy healing extends the tactile logic of the 'point of contact' into the digital sphere, sacralizing the device and requiring a haptic ritual to mediate power. Vacuum healing, by contrast, enacts a deliberate dematerialization of mediation, framing the screen as a porous interface and centering faith and attention as the locus of divine encounter.

This typology reframes debates in material religion, digital media, and African Pentecostal studies, revealing that Nigerian Pentecostalism is not only translating existing rituals online but actively innovating new forms of charisma, authority, and communal experience. The rise of vacuum healing, in particular, illustrates how digital platforms are shaping the theology and practice of faith, privileging immediacy, scalability, and algorithmic spread. However, both models coexist, each responding to different theological, social, and technological logics. The future of Nigerian Pentecostalism will likely be defined by ongoing negotiation between these models, as believers and leaders navigate the possibilities and contradictions of digital mediation. Future research should further investigate the lived experience of online healing, the role of gender and generation in shaping mediation preferences, and the broader impact of digital Pentecostalism on religious authority and community in Africa and beyond.

Global and Pan-African Implications:

While this study focuses on Nigerian Pentecostalism, its findings resonate with broader trends in African and global charismatic Christianity. The proxy/vacuum mediation spectrum echoes similar debates and innovations among Pentecostal communities in Ghana (Ayivor, 2026), South Africa (Anderson, 2014), and Brazil (Hackett, 2015; Campbell, 2021). As transnational networks of prayer, testimony, and digital authority proliferate, questions of ritual adaptation, doctrinal contestation, and technological mediation are likely to become central for Pentecostal and charismatic faith communities worldwide. Future comparative and cross-regional studies will be vital for tracking how local digital religious practices shape—and are shaped by—the global charismatic landscape.

Recommendations

Firstly, church leaders should invest in digital literacy and inclusion programs to help older and less technologically fluent members access and discern online healing modalities. They should also encourage hybrid digital-physical prayer models that respect both ritual continuity and the flexibility of ambient faith, ensuring all demographics are meaningfully included.

Secondly, online ministries should develop transparent guidelines for sharing and verifying digital testimonies. They should foster ethical standards for online pastoral authority, balancing charismatic leadership with accountability. Additionally, experiment with interactive, participatory formats that enable both haptic and ambient engagement, informed by congregational feedback.

Thirdly, religious organizations such as the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should provide ethical frameworks and training for digital ministry, including doctrinal depth, responsible engagement, and conflict mediation in digital spaces. Fourthly, scholars should employ mixed-methods, combining ethnography, interviews, and digital analytics to trace the long-term impact of digital mediation on authority, doctrine, and community.

Comparative studies across regions and denominations will deepen understanding of gender, generational, and class-based differences in digital Pentecostal practice.

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