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Negotiating Tradition and Technology: Worship, AI and Digital Music Among Selected Pentecostal Churches in Ibadan

Abstract

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital music technology in the worship practices of the church in Ibadan, Nigeria, poses a complex dilemma for the church. This study, therefore, focuses on an in-depth examination of the experiences of three selected Pentecostal churches in the incorporation of samplers, loops, tracks, DAWs, and contemporary suno AI in their worship and liturgical practices. While the incorporation of AI technology in the church has revolutionised the production of church music, enabling the church to produce dynamic and high-quality sounds that resonate with the contemporary audience, it has also elicited a sense of ambivalence from church leaders and congregations. On one side, the incorporation of AI technology in church worship has provided an impetus for creativity in church music, enabling the church to incorporate traditional African sounds with contemporary global sounds, thereby enriching the worship experience. On the other side, the incorporation of AI technology in church worship has elicited a sense of concern from church leaders and congregations, who fear that the use of technology in church worship may undermine the liturgical authenticity of the church. Moreover, the incorporation of technology in church worship may undermine the sacred traditions that characterise the worship practices of the church. This study, therefore, highlights the dichotomy that exists in the incorporation of technology in church worship, delineating the challenges and opportunities that the digital age poses for the church.

Keywords: AI, Digital music, Pentecostal Worships, Gospel Music, Ambivalence

Introduction

Significant changes have occurred in the music industry and religious music practices over the last few decades, largely driven by rapid advances in digital technologies. Musical instruments and tools, including personal computers, music software, MIDI controllers, and DAWs, have become more democratised, facilitating the production and editing of high-quality sounds with relative ease, even at the grassroots level. Furthermore, the advancements in electronic musical instruments and tools that facilitate the production of complex musical arrangements signal the beginning of a new epoch in the production and performance of music. These advancements have not remained confined to the secular sphere but have increasingly entered the religious sphere, particularly the Christian sphere. The global Pentecostal movement is particularly receptive to the advancements in religious music practices, as they value the dynamism of music, emotional experiences, and the immediacy of the spiritual.

In the context of Nigeria, the Pentecostal churches have become the epicenter of the use of digital technologies in religious music practices, blending traditional gospel with international music. As observed by Evolvi (2022), the advent of digital media has resulted in the restructuring of Christian liturgical experiences, which is characterised by the infusion of new aesthetic and performance possibilities into the religious sphere. In the city of Ibadan, which is one of the most dynamic cities in Nigeria, the use of digital music technologies is increasingly becoming a part of the religious music practices in the Pentecostal churches. These technologies include backing tracks, samplers, MIDI sequencing, auto-tune, loops, and pre-recorded sound pads, which are used to enrich the quality of the religious experience. As observed, the religious experiences have become spiritually rich and musically relevant to the contemporary pop and gospel sounds that have become the hallmark of the global religious sphere. As Burgess (2020) asserts, the blending of traditional African sounds with the use of modern technologies enhances the quality of the religious experience.

However, this transformation is not devoid of tensions. While digital media have ostensibly empowered worship leaders to attain a high aesthetic, they have also, in turn, invited critical examination of authenticity, spirituality, and the possibility of the transformation of worship into entertainment. There exists a palpable sense of unease in some quarters, where there is an over-reliance on machines, pre-programmed sequences, and AI-generated sounds in an environment

that has historically been characterised by communal and Spirit-led musicality (Campbell & Bellar, 2022). Such tensions are also apparent in Aduloju's (2024) examination of Catholic digital liturgy in Nigeria, where the tension between reverence and innovation is palpable.

The ambivalence seems to have reached an apex in the case of the Pentecostals in Ibadan, the city in question. While some place a strong emphasis on innovation, suggesting that it is a necessity in terms of maintaining cultural relevance and developing spiritual appeal in younger generations, many are also concerned that there may be a loss of the "anointing" or the supernatural spontaneity that has historically been a hallmark of Pentecostal worship. The spontaneous, Spirit-led singing that is intrinsic to the worship identity of the Pentecostals is an issue that is explored by Adejube (2020) in his examination of glossolalia and musical improvisation.

While existing literature has explored the use of digital media within global Christianity and the modernisation of African gospel music (Myrick, 2018; Zukowski, 2012), there seems to be a lack of emphasis on the ways in which Pentecostal churches within Nigeria, particularly within Ibadan, are navigating the ambiguity associated with digital innovation and traditional liturgical practices. While existing literature either lauds digital worship as a necessary modernisation or decries it as an unspiritual innovation, there seems to be a lack of emphasis on the ways in which this ambiguity is being negotiated.

The purpose of this study, therefore, seeks to address this particular issue by seeking to elucidate the ways in which particular Pentecostal churches within Ibadan are incorporating digital music innovation, such as AI technology, while navigating the tension between spiritual tradition and innovation. In this way, the paper seeks to add to the broader discourse on the ways in which African Pentecostal worship is evolving within the digital age.

Nigerian Music and Pentecostalism in the Digital Age

The musical life of Pentecostalism in Nigeria is more than artistic expression. It is a theologically charged, culturally dynamic, and spiritually immersive practice that sits at the heart of worship. As Adams (2022) asserts, Pentecostalism has become a defining feature of the contemporary religious landscape in Nigeria, displacing older liturgical forms and ushering in a worship culture grounded in spontaneity, spiritual intimacy, and performative intensity. Central to this shift is

music—used not merely to accompany worship but as an active spiritual force that animates and mediates divine encounters. Furthermore, music significantly influenced the changing economic environment in Nigeria (Adejube, 2025), with the Church, particularly within the Pentecostal community, being included.

Nigerian Pentecostal churches developed a unique musical culture characterised by exuberant praise sessions, contemporary gospel styles, and an embrace of improvisation and spiritual charisma. Services typically open with high-energy musical sessions where congregants sing, dance, clap, speak in tongues, and even prophesy—what Nweke (2024) refers to as spontaneous musicking. These moments, often labelled as *praise and worship*, are not merely emotive outbursts but structured liturgical acts rooted in Pentecostal theology. As Ajose (2025) critically shows, Pentecostal musicking in Nigeria is often conceived as spiritual warfare: the drumbeat is not just rhythm but an instrument of divine engagement. Through rhythmic intensity and sonic layering, the music becomes a weapon charged with symbolic meanings of battle, resistance, and deliverance.

This ‘theology of sound’ makes Pentecostal music deeply functional. It goes beyond aesthetics to perform spiritual work. Miller, Sargeant and Flory (2013) describe this kind of praise worship as an “electric current” with the potential to ignite supernatural manifestations. The emphasis on music as spiritual power has led Pentecostal churches to abandon many traditional Western hymnody structures inherited from missionary Christianity. The solemnity and rigid arrangements once prized by mainline churches gave way to affect-driven, flexible worship formats centered around contemporary musical expression (Aduloju, 2024). The evolution of this musical culture also reflects broader shifts in Pentecostal philosophy. As Ademiluka (2023) notes, the worship leader in charismatic circles is expected not only to direct musical sequences but to function as a mediator of divine presence—using music, prayer, and even silence to shepherd the congregation into ecstatic encounters with the Holy Spirit. This expectation reinforces the centrality of music in Pentecostal theology and liturgy.

Furthermore, Pentecostal musical practices are not bound by language or convention. Adejube (2020) highlights the multilingual character of Nigerian Pentecostal worship, where English, Yoruba, Igbo, and Nigerian Pidgin are freely combined in songs and prayers. The linguistic plurality fosters inclusivity and engagement, especially among diverse urban congregations like

those in Ibadan. This technique, combined with the prevalent use of music by renowned gospel performers, creates a familiar yet spiritually invigorating environment that surpasses sectarian and ethnic divisions. Beyond language, Pentecostalism and its musical practices have also incorporated elements of secular culture into both liturgical and non-liturgical contexts. Samuel and Adejube (2019) highlight how Saint Janet integrates erotic themes into gospel music, reflecting a complex negotiation between sacred expression and secular influence. Similarly, Ayorinde and Ajose (2022) examine these dynamics, emphasizing processes of meaning-making within Nigerian gospel music.

As Pentecostal worship evolves, it continues to intersect with the digital. The incorporation of digital music technologies such as samplers, MIDI keyboards, digital audio workstations (DAWs), and even AI-generated loops introduced a new dimension to worship music in Nigerian churches. This is particularly pronounced in urban centers like Ibadan, where younger, tech-savvy congregants expect high fidelity production. The aesthetic shift is evident in how worship sessions now mirror live concerts—featuring layered soundscapes, visual effects, and seamless transitions that enhance emotional immersion (Myrick, 2018). While these tools offer new creative possibilities, they also generate theological and cultural tensions. The use of backing tracks and pre-programmed sequences raises concerns about the loss of spontaneity and Spirit-led worship. Ajose (2025) cautions that as Pentecostal churches move toward digital sophistication, they must be careful not to compromise the very sonic and spiritual codes through which warfare, healing, and liberation are enacted. Similarly, Zukowski (2012) and Campbell and Bellar (2022) warn that the church's immersion in the digital realm risks reconfiguring the spiritual experience into spectacle, potentially undermining the embodied, communal essence of Pentecostal worship.

Indeed, while the integration of contemporary Christian music (CCM) styles such as; gospel-pop, rock, and Afrobeat-infused praise is often celebrated for its appeal to younger audiences (Udok & Odunuga, 2016), there remains an undercurrent of ambivalence. Pentecostal churches are faced with the challenge of balancing cultural relevance with spiritual authenticity. For many congregants, musical innovation is welcome only so far as it remains subordinate to the Spirit's leading. Thus, music in Pentecostal worship is not just a cultural phenomenon but a theological battleground where issues of identity, power, and piety are negotiated in sound. Yet, despite the

growing body of work on Pentecostal liturgical practice, the specific question of how AI and digital music technologies are reshaping worship in Nigerian contexts, especially in a city like Ibadan remains underexplored. Most literature either examines Pentecostalism's musical exuberance or explores digital worship in Western contexts, with little attention to how these strands intersect on the ground in Nigerian churches. This study addresses that gap by exploring how Pentecostal churches in Ibadan adopt and interpret AI and digital music technologies, and how they navigate the resulting tension between technological innovation and liturgical tradition.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic research design, well-suited to understanding how digital music technologies such as loops, stems, backing tracks, AI-generated sound and lyrics are integrated into Pentecostal worship settings in Ibadan. Ethnography enabled close observation and immersive participation in worship services, rehearsals, and music production sessions across five purposefully selected churches known for their innovative use of digital tools: Pentecost House, Samonda, Ibadan, RCCG Jesus Embassy, and Celebration Church International, all in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. These churches represent a cross-section of the city's Pentecostal landscape, offering varied yet technologically engaged approaches to music and liturgy. A purposive sampling technique guided the selection, targeting churches with distinct styles and scales of worship known for their advanced sound systems, live band setups, and creative digital engagement.

Data collection combined multiple methods to capture a rich, triangulated view of digital worship practices. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with church leaders, worship leaders, music directors, sound engineers, and instrumentalists, while three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) engaged congregants on their perceptions of digital music in worship. These were complemented by extensive participant observation during live services and rehearsals. Secondary data, including church-produced digital materials and archival audio-visual worship content, were also analysed. Data were examined using musical analysis (via digital audio workstations), textual analysis, and content analysis to trace how digital tools shape composition, performance, and sonic aesthetics. Ethical considerations were addressed as respondents requested anonymity, which was reflected in the debate by using the initial letter of their names. Furthermore, permission was granted by the respondent for the photograph below.



One of the respondents at Pentecost House, Samonda, a keyboardist on keys and using the laptop (Source: Authors' fieldwork)

Findings and Discussion

Embracing Innovation: Benefits and Aspirations

In contemporary Pentecostal churches in Ibadan, the deliberate integration of digital music technologies, particularly Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs), loops, stems, and backing tracks, has initiated a new paradigm in worship music production and performance. This shift represents not merely a technological upgrade but a cultural reimagining of sacred sound, shaped by local aspirations for musical excellence, spiritual depth, and logistical efficiency. Across these three

sampled churches, Pentecost House, RCCG Jesus Embassy, and Celebration Church International, digital innovation is not just welcomed but embraced as a tool for expanding the expressive and sonic possibilities of worship.

One of the most notable benefits of this digital turn is the professionalisation of sound quality within worship environments. As one of the respondents, Mr. O., music director at RCCG Jesus Embassy, explains, his use of LogicPro—an industry-standard DAW—is driven by both personal preference and the desire for excellence. “Technology has brought endless possibilities in terms of music production in church spaces,” he explained, adding that his transition from mobile beat-making apps to laptop-based production allowed for greater sound precision. He uses Logic Pro to create stems and backing tracks tailored specifically for choir ministrations, achieving layered, studio-quality sound during live services. His perspective underscores a central aspiration among church musicians: to deliver high-fidelity music that not only matches but often rivals the polished recordings of mainstream gospel artists. This aspiration aligns with what Folarin, Otunla, and Atowaju (2024) identify as a generational shift in worship engagement, particularly among youths in churches like RCCG, where expectations for sound fidelity, sonic clarity, and musical richness are influenced by global digital culture. In this light, DAWs serve not just as functional tools but as gateways to musical legitimacy and excellence in a highly mediated worship environment.

Supporting this view, Mr. K., the drummer at RCCG Jesus Embassy, emphasised the technical mastery required to create customised backing tracks that blend seamlessly with live instrumentation. “Most times, getting a premade backing track might not be easy,” he noted. “I prefer creating mine from scratch or getting related ones from my colleagues.” His account reveals a behind-the-scenes culture of collaboration and skill-sharing among musicians ~~who are~~ navigating and expanding the boundaries of sound production in worship contexts. The ability to customise these digital elements allows churches to maintain creative control and avoid dependence on generic or ill-fitting materials. Beyond the pursuit of a high level of sound quality, another innovation emerging from these digital practices is the fusion of musical genres, which reflects both local cultural expressions and Pentecostal musical philosophy. African Pentecostalism, as Ajose (2025) argues, thrives on musicking that is spiritually intentional, culturally embedded, and emotionally vibrant. Churches in Ibadan are not simply copying

foreign worship templates; rather, ~~they~~ are experimenting with genre-blending that draws from Afrobeat, highlife, gospel pop, hip-hop, reggae, and traditional African percussion. Through DAWs, these styles can be sampled, looped, and layered in real-time or pre-production, enabling a unique worship soundscape that resonates with Nigerian congregants while remaining globally recognisable.

This genre fusion is particularly significant to Pentecostal theology, which values freedom, spontaneity, and affective participation. By integrating various musical influences, churches foster a sense of inclusivity and familiarity among diverse members. As Ingalls (2008) notes, “praise and worship music” functions as the lingua franca of global charismatic Christianity, but its localisation, particularly in Nigerian contexts, is what gives it power and resonance. The ability to manipulate and mix genres through digital tools allows Pentecostal churches to assert their musical identity while aligning with broader transnational worship trends.

Mr. A. (March, 2025), pianist at Pentecost House in Samonda, provided further insight into the preparatory dimension of this innovation. He emphasised that the use of loops and backing tracks in worship is not merely a performance aid, but a discipline that requires technical rehearsal, sound checks, and synchronisation protocols. “You must ensure optimal sound quality and avoid glitches during service,” he stressed, noting that even a slight disruption can distract congregants and compromise the worship experience. His comment highlights the growing culture of musical professionalism within these churches, where sound engineering and rehearsal routines are becoming as important as spiritual readiness.

This commitment to professionalism intersects with a third critical aspiration: efficiency in performance and rehearsal logistics. Digital music tools made it possible for churches to maintain high-quality musical output without requiring a large team of instrumentalists. As Mr. K. (March, 2025) pointed out, some of the instrumental sounds used in service are generated using digital samplers or AI-generated instrumentals, reducing the burden on human resources. In smaller congregations or midweek services where live musicians may not be available, pre-programmed tracks allow for continuity and consistency in the worship atmosphere. These tools not only reduce operational costs but also enable flexible rehearsals, as choir members can rehearse independently with exported stems before group sessions. This view was echoed by

several respondents who appreciated how technology simplified music preparation and reduced burnout among volunteer musicians.

Indeed, the streamlining of musical labour has proven to be a key driver in digital adoption. Aduloju (2024) observed that Catholic parishes experimenting with digital worship tools appreciated how such technologies reduced the need for constant live rehearsals, allowing for more predictable and efficient liturgical planning. In the Pentecostal context, this is even more pronounced given the frequency and variety of services that require music from early morning devotions to night vigils and youth services. The integration of digital systems allows for scalable worship models that meet high production expectations while maintaining spiritual vibrancy.

From the congregants' perspective, technological advancement often translates into a more immersive and emotionally charged worship experience. Many participants in FGDs described how loops and backing tracks helped set the tone for worship, even before the choir singing. Some referred to the sonic familiarity of digital renditions as enhancing connection to songs they already knew from recordings. Others, like Miss P. (February, 2025) from Pentecost House, offered a more cautious view, suggesting that while technology adds value, it should not replace the spontaneity and "live" energy that define Pentecostal worship. Her concerns reflect Mudau and Tshifhumulo's (2025) insight that technological mediation in Pentecostalism must be handled delicately, lest it erode the participatory spirit and unpredictability that make charismatic worship distinctive.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that even these cautious voices represent a form of critical engagement, not wholesale rejection. Most congregants in this study expressed a nuanced appreciation of the trade-offs involved: while they valued sound fidelity and aesthetic richness, they also desired a worship experience that felt spiritually organic. For many, the aspiration is not just innovation, but integration, a harmonious blending of digital enhancement with Spirit-led spontaneity. As one participant noted, "It's not about removing the Holy Spirit, but about making the atmosphere ready for Him."

Pentecostal churches in Ibadan are actively embracing innovation in music production and performance, not merely out of necessity but from a desire to elevate worship aesthetics, fuse cultural expressions, and streamline logistical demands. These churches are not passive adopters

of Western templates; they are active curators of a hybrid sound, rooted in African musical traditions and propelled by digital possibility. Through DAWs, genre fusion, and rehearsal efficiency, they craft new worship imaginaries that speak to the aspirations of a tech-savvy, spiritually engaged, and musically discerning generation.

Resistance and Concern: Upholding Tradition and Spiritual Depth

While digital innovations such as loops, backing tracks, and DAWs have brought significant advancements to Pentecostal worship in Ibadan, they have also sparked varied forms of resistance. Among pastors, musicians, and congregants alike, concerns persist about the potential erosion of tradition, authenticity, and spiritual depth. These concerns reflect deeper anxieties about how technological mediation may displace human spontaneity and sacred immediacy in a worship context that relies heavily on emotional and spiritual connection.

In an interview with Mr. D, a pastor at one of the participating churches, it became clear that the adoption of digital tools, while useful, is not without theological tension. He articulates his unease with the increasing reliance on programmed sound:

There is a danger that worship becomes a performance, not a spiritual offering. I am not against excellence or innovation, but when worship feels too calculated, too rehearsed, it can become mechanical. In Pentecostal worship, the Spirit should lead, not software. (Mr D/M/RCCG/March, 2025)

His stance is rooted in the Pentecostal focus on spontaneity, Spirit-led guidance, and collective involvement. As Mudau and Tshifhumulo (2025) observe, “technology in Pentecostal spaces tends to reshape not just the form but also the perception of religious experiences,” prompting leaders like Mr. D to question whether what is gained in aesthetics may be lost in spiritual authenticity.

Concerns about spiritual depth were echoed by Ms. B, a middle-aged congregant from the same church, who described her experience during a service:

The music was flawless, almost like a concert. But I didn't feel connected. I missed when worship would take unexpected turns—someone crying, someone breaking into a spontaneous song, tongues, prophecy. Now it's like we're following a set list... even the Spirit must follow the script. (Ms B/F/

Ms. B's reflections highlight a recurring theme in congregational feedback: while digital tools have brought sonic richness and improved delivery, they also impose a degree of rigidity that can suppress spontaneous spiritual expressions. Nekola (2021) supports this notion, suggesting that digital music interfaces tend to prioritise predictability and precision, often at the expense of organic, communal responsiveness.

Additionally, a worship leader from one of the participating churches, Ms. O, articulated the implicit pressure she experienced to prioritise production over presence:

Sometimes I feel like a technician more than a minister. Between triggering the stems, checking levels, syncing visuals—there's little time to actually worship. It's like I'm curating an experience rather than participating in one.

This concern aligns with Bogdan's (2024) analysis that while digital platforms offer new opportunities for evangelism and engagement, they also demand constant performance and curation, potentially reducing worship to spectacle.

He continues by grieving over the diminishing role of live musicians in church worship:

Now, churches don't need full bands. One guy with a laptop can do everything. But you lose the dialogue that happens between musicians during live worship. That spiritual communication between instruments and voices—it's irreplaceable.

His comment underscores how technology can centralise control and reduce musical interactivity, a quality that has traditionally enriched Pentecostal worship environments. Live music, with its improvisational possibilities and human dynamics, is perceived as more spiritually responsive than pre-sequenced loops.

What becomes evident through these accounts is not an outright rejection of technology, but a cautious critique of its role and scope in sacred contexts. The resistance expressed by participants is rooted in a desire to preserve the spiritual and cultural DNA of Pentecostal worship. As Nekola (2021) explains, "The interface between technology and music is not neutral; it carries with it ideologies of control, linearity, and performance." For Pentecostal congregants and leaders who prioritise encounter, unpredictability, and emotional overflow, this linearity can feel stifling. It is also worth noting that resistance is often framed within a historical consciousness of what Pentecostal worship has been. Many older pastors and congregants recall the "days of

revival,” when prayer, music, and the Spirit moved without digital mediation. As Ms. B noted, “We didn’t need software to cry out to God. The instruments weren’t perfect, but the worship was real.” This nostalgic longing suggests that resistance to innovation is not purely technical but also affective—a defense of memory, identity, and embodied participation.

From a broader ecclesiological standpoint, these concerns raise important questions about how the Pentecostal church in Nigeria can navigate the digital turn without compromising its theological foundations. Bogdan (2024) warns that “when the church over-relies on technological mediation, it risks alienating members who seek depth, mystery, and spiritual spontaneity.” This was evident in the data gathered from Focus Group Discussions, where a significant portion of congregants expressed a preference for mixed formats combining live instruments with minimal digital support over fully programmed sets.

This has been found to have greatly impacted not only the quality of sound in worship music but also the efficiency with which worship services are conducted. However, it has also given rise to important discussions, especially from a theological point of view. In the context of Pentecost House, Samonda, it has been found that the worship team often incorporates stems or loops to build upon instrumental layers that may not be feasible with the band. This has greatly helped the church to attain a rich sound, especially in large congregational worship. However, it has also been emphasised by worship leaders that this has to be moderated during spontaneous prayers, prophetic songs, or altar sessions, which may go on for long periods. During such periods, the digital stems are faded out to allow the musicians to respond spontaneously to the perceived movements of the Holy Spirit.

A similar phenomenon, but with a slightly higher level of technological integration, has also been found to exist within the RCCG Jesus Embassy context. In this case, the use of digital media is found to be driven by the expansive production culture that includes lighting, click tracks, and the choreography of musical transitions. In this context, the use of backing tracks and stems is found to have significantly enhanced the precision of the church’s music, particularly with the use of multiple services where the musicians play a rotational role with the worship team. However, the worship leaders point out that the musicians are not only skilled at their technical capabilities but are also able to respond spontaneously to the perceived movements of the Holy Spirit, to prevent the worship from becoming too mechanical.

At the Celebration Church International, the use of digital media in worship appears to be more integrated with the church's overall media culture. In this case, the church is found to have a highly coordinated production team where the use of digital sound design, visual projection, and live band performance is integrated into a cohesive worship experience. In this context, the use of loops and pads is found to be used creatively to sustain the ambient textures during the more contemplative moments of worship. In this context, the worship leaders describe the use of the layers as creating a situation where the "atmosphere is supported but not dominated." However, as is found from the focus group discussions with the church's congregation, while the majority of the younger church members seem to appreciate the immersive audio experience provided by the use of the digital media, the older church members seem to be more apprehensive that the use of technology might potentially dilute the emotional authenticity that is typically associated with the Pentecostal worship experience.

In all the churches, there is an observable pattern of developing hybrid approaches to blended worship that include digital technologies without compromising traditional means of spiritual spontaneity. The use of backing tracks is evident in all the churches, where they are used to supplement where there are instrumental deficiencies, to sustain rhythmic consistency, and to enrich musical arrangements, yet they are adjusted and controlled during moments where spontaneity and congregation participation are key. The worship teams are training musicians to be effective in both traditional and digital settings, yet also be flexible enough to diverge and improvise where necessary.

These adaptive approaches, therefore, demonstrate that the Pentecostal churches in Ibadan are not accepting and embracing digital technologies without question, but are actively negotiating their role in the theology and practice of worship. The resistance to certain aspects of digital innovation, therefore, is not based on technophobia, but on an underlying concern to ensure that the spiritual, emotional, and social integrity of the Pentecostal worship is maintained.

Therefore, the role and incorporation of digital music technologies in the worship services of the Pentecostal churches in Ibadan, Nigeria, reveals an active and dynamic process of negotiation between innovation and tradition. The benefits of the digital revolution in the musical and technological sense are undeniable, and yet their incorporation in the worship services of the Pentecostal churches in Ibadan, Nigeria, reveals an element of discernment and contextual

sensitivity. As the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria evolve and develop in an increasingly digital world, the question remains not what technology can achieve in musical and technological terms, but how technology can be used to achieve the spiritual purpose of worship.

Ambivalence and the Negotiation of Sacred Sound

The adoption of digital music technologies in Pentecostal churches in Ibadan is marked by a dynamic ambivalence an emotional and theological tension between the allure of innovation and the imperative to preserve spiritual authenticity. On one hand, technologies such as DAWs, loops, and backing tracks have elevated the aesthetic and sonic quality of worship, enabling professional-level sound production, genre fusion, and logistical efficiency (Folarin, Otunla & Atowoju, 2024). These tools have empowered musicians and worship leaders to curate immersive experiences that resonate with contemporary, tech-savvy congregations, especially among youth demographics. Yet, as Nekola (2021) observes, digital interfaces often reframe worship as a “mediated encounter,” introducing layers of programming and predictability that can dilute the raw spontaneity traditionally associated with Pentecostalism. This duality generates both admiration and caution among worship stakeholders appreciating the possibilities while remaining sceptical of the potential spiritual compromises.

For many church leaders and congregants, this ambivalence is not rooted in a simplistic binary of tradition versus modernity, but in the day-to-day negotiation of sacred sound. As Mudau and Tshifhumulo (2025) note, digital tools can both enhance and reshape religious perception, depending on how they are deployed. While some view technology as an anointed aid to worship, others fear its potential to standardise and sanitise expressions of faith that are meant to be disruptive, ecstatic, and Spirit-driven. This nuanced terrain is navigated through adaptive practices: reducing over-reliance on backing tracks, training musicians to improvise even within digital frameworks, and ensuring that the Spirit not the software or AI remains central to the worship experience. As Bogdan (2024) affirms, the digital age challenges churches to reimagine their mission without abandoning their core values. In the case of Pentecostal worship in Ibadan, the outcome is neither wholesale acceptance nor outright rejection, but an evolving practice of discernment where tradition and innovation remain in constant, and sometimes creative, tension.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the multifaceted ways in which the selected Pentecostal churches in Ibadan negotiate the ambivalent relationship between tradition and innovation in their worship practices. The adoption of AI and digital music technologies ranging from Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) to loops, stems, and backing tracks has undeniably transformed the sonic and organisational framework of Pentecostal worship. These tools have allowed for greater efficiency in rehearsals, enhanced professional sound production, and the fusion of global and local genres, which resonate deeply with younger, tech-savvy congregants. In this way, innovation has become a means of cultural relevance and artistic expansion within worship spaces.

Yet, alongside these benefits, the study found considerable tensions and reservations. Pastors, music leaders, and congregants voiced concerns about the erosion of spontaneity, the risk of worship becoming performance-driven, and the perceived loss of spiritual depth. This ambivalence reflects a broader struggle within Nigerian Pentecostalism: how to embrace modern tools without compromising the essence of Spirit-led, participatory, and emotionally charged worship. Rather than positioning tradition and innovation as opposing poles, the findings suggest that many churches operate in a negotiated middle ground experimenting with technology while consciously trying to preserve the sacred ethos that defines their worship identity.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are offered:

Contextual Integration of Technology: Churches should adopt digital tools with theological intentionality, ensuring that their use enhances rather than replaces the core spiritual experience. Loops, stems, and DAWs should be viewed as complements to, not substitutes for, live worship engagement.

Training for Worship Teams: Church musicians, sound engineers, and worship leaders should receive targeted training not only in music production software but also in the spiritual implications of their choices. Workshops on balancing production aesthetics with Pentecostal liturgical values can help cultivate sensitivity and skill.

Hybrid Worship Models: Churches can maintain a healthy balance by combining live instrumentation with selected digital elements. This hybrid approach retains the unpredictability and dynamism of traditional worship while incorporating the polish and reach that technology offers.

Congregational Involvement: It is crucial to regularly engage congregants in feedback on how digital technologies impact their worship experiences. Their voices offer practical insights into what fosters spiritual connection and what disrupts it.

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