

New Media Discipleship of Generation Z: Platform Selection, Content Strategies, and Effectiveness at CITAM Ongata Rongai, Nairobi

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Abstract

This study evaluated the effectiveness of online media used in discipling Generation Z (Gen Z) at Christ is the Answer Ministries (CITAM), Ongata Rongai, Kenya, through the lens of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). It investigated four key dimensions: the online media platforms utilized and how gratification-seeking behaviours influence platform preferences; the discipleship content provided and which types best satisfy various gratification categories; the effectiveness of current approaches when evaluated through UGT; and the qualifications of online disciple-makers in addressing media-related gratification needs. The data was collected through a qualitative phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions with fifty participants, including Gen Z church members and youth leadership. The findings revealed a significant misalignment between church-prioritized platforms (primarily Facebook) and the platforms that most efficiently satisfy Gen Z's gratification needs (Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube). Content analysis demonstrated that current discipleship approaches emphasize live-streamed services that inefficiently satisfy multiple gratification categories compared to shorter, more engaging formats that simultaneously deliver information, entertainment, identity reinforcement, and social connection. The effectiveness assessment identified format preferences and gratification competition as critical factors, with church content competing against algorithmically optimized alternatives that more efficiently satisfy entertainment gratifications. Disciple qualifications analysis revealed that while technical skills enable information and entertainment delivery, relational qualities like authenticity and vulnerability profoundly influence effectiveness by addressing the identity and social gratifications often neglected in church content.

Keywords: Digital discipleship, Generation Z, New Media, CITAM Ongata Rongai, Social Media Platforms, Uses and Gratifications Theory.



Introduction

The digital revolution has “fundamentally transformed how faith communities operate, with online spaces increasingly becoming vital ministry contexts.”¹ For Generation Z, individuals born between 1995 and 2012, digital environments represent not merely adjunct communication channels but primary spaces where identity formation, community building, and information-seeking occur. As Gabrielova and Buchko observe, “Gen Zs have always had the internet as part of their lives. Their cell phones have always been ‘smart.’”² Due to this technological immersion, churches dedicated to online discipleship have both possibilities and challenges.

Despite churches’ cautious historical relationship to media, “modern ministry is beginning to see digital platforms as possible tools for promoting spiritual development.”³ However, this realization frequently lags behind strategic execution, leading to digital ministry strategies that fall short of effectively engaging Generation Z. The disconnect between Gen Z’s communication preferences and conventional discipleship techniques “necessitates focused research on how churches might use digital platforms while upholding their theological principles.”⁴ This study examines how CITAM Ongata Rongai in Nairobi uses online discipleship programs to overcome this obstacle. By examining platform selection, content strategies, effectiveness metrics, and disciple-maker qualifications, the research seeks to contribute both theoretical understanding and practical insights regarding Generation Z’s discipleship in new media contexts. The findings have implications for CITAM and other religious organizations as they adopt discipleship approaches for digital natives.

This study addresses four key research objectives:

1. To analyze the online media platforms utilized in discipling Generation Z
2. To evaluate the content strategies that best satisfy various gratification categories for Gen Z audiences
3. To assess the effectiveness of current digital discipleship approaches through UGT principles

¹ Heidi A. Campbell et al., *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 3.

² Karina Gabrielova and Aaron A. Buchko, “Here Comes Generation Z: Millennials as Managers,” *Business Horizons* 64, no. 4 (2021): 490.

³ Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media*, 1st edition (London New York: Routledge, 2019), 24.

⁴ Amelia Johns and Niki Cheong, “Feeling the Chill: Bersih 2.0, State Censorship, and ‘Networked Affect’ on Malaysian Social Media 2012–2018,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 2 (April 1, 2019).



4. To determine the qualifications and competencies required for effective digital discipleship leadership.

Definition of Terms

This section clarifies key terms used in the study to ensure conceptual clarity:

Discipleship: The term is derived from a Greek word, *mathētēs*, or in English, a *disciple*, which means a learner or follower.⁵ A disciple refers to “someone who follows Jesus and is a true believer in Jesus Christ who strives to live according to his teachings.”⁶ Fernando defines a disciple as “a ‘learner’ in the sense of an apprentice, and in a Christian context, it means a follower of Jesus.”⁷ The Bible describes disciples in various ways: those who deny themselves and take up their cross to follow Jesus (Matt 10:38–39, 16:24), those who do the Father’s will (Matt 7:21), and those who serve and listen to Jesus’ teachings (Luke 10:38–42). Thus, discipleship refers to the process of forming disciples into Christlikeness.

Generation Z: Refers to individuals born between 1995 and 2012, representing the first truly digital native generation that has grown up with ubiquitous internet access, smartphones, and social media.

Digital Discipleship: The intentional process of “spiritual formation and mentoring that occurs through digital platforms and tools, aiming to develop followers of Christ who grow in their faith, practice, and community engagement in digital contexts.”⁸

Medium: Merriam-Webster defines this term as “a means of effecting or conveying something, such as a channel or system of communication, information, or entertainment.”⁹ In this study, “medium” refers to specific channels through which discipleship content reaches Generation Z, focusing on how different media satisfy distinct gratification categories.

Contemporary Media refers to “technology-driven media derived from the internet, including online publications, social media, blogs, streaming video, and podcasts. It has replaced traditional ‘legacy’ media distribution (newsstands, television, and radio) with digital distribution

⁵ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Edition, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 609.

⁶ Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1992), 35–50.

⁷ Ajith Fernando and Robert E. Coleman, *Discipling in a Multicultural World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 20.

⁸ Bex Lewis, “The Digital Age: A Challenge for Christian Discipleship?,” *The Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media*, July 1, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/8724570/The_Digital_Age_A_Challenge_for_Christian_Discipleship.

⁹ “Definition of Medium,” April 12, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/medium>.



of content.”¹⁰ Throughout this study, “contemporary media” specifically indicates current online media platforms used for discipleship purposes, with attention to how different platforms satisfy distinct gratification categories. For discipleship purposes, these can be categorized into four primary types:

Print Media: Though traditional, print materials, including magazines, books, and newsletters, continue to serve discipleship purposes, now often augmented by digital distribution. Many Gen Z members engage with print-derived content repurposed for digital consumption through PDF formats, e-books, or excerpt sharing on social platforms.

Broadcast Media: Radio and television channels maintain relevance as they adapt to digital streaming and on-demand consumption patterns. The transformation of broadcast content into podcast formats and YouTube channels has extended its reach among Gen Z audiences who prefer time-shifted consumption and platform-agnostic access.

New Media: Digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp represent the most dynamic category for discipleship content. These platforms offer unique affordances for user interaction, content sharing, and community formation that align with Gen Z’s communication preferences.

New media is “any media from newspaper articles and blogs to music and podcasts delivered digitally. From a website or email to mobile phones and streaming apps, any internet-related form of communication falls under its umbrella.”¹¹ New media is characterized by “its ability to utilize multimedia elements such as video and audio to create engaging, easily shareable content across different platforms.”¹² This term is used interchangeably with “online media” throughout the study, with emphasis on how different media types satisfy specific gratification combinations.

Outdoor Media: While traditionally associated with billboards and street advertisements,¹³ outdoor media increasingly incorporates digital elements, event sponsorships, and experiential marketing approaches that can complement online discipleship by creating physical touchpoints.

¹⁰ “What Is Contemporary Media?,” Quora, accessed March 31, 2025, <https://www.quora.com/What-is-contemporary-media>.

¹¹ Joe Cote, “What Is New Media?” September 23, 2022, <https://www.snhu.edu/about-us/newsroom/liberal-arts/what-is-new-media>.

¹² Western Governors University, “What Is New Media?,” Accessed March 31, 2025, <https://www.wgu.edu/blog/what-is-new-media2304.html>.

¹³ “What Is Outdoor Advertising? Examples and Types,” December 15, 2024, <https://www.themediaant.com/blog/outdoor-advertising-examples/>.



The boundaries between these categories continue to blur as media convergence accelerates. Effective discipleship strategies often leverage multiple media types simultaneously, creating ecosystem approaches that meet Gen Z where they are while encouraging deeper engagement across platforms.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is the main theoretical framework used in this study to analyze how Generation Z interacts with online discipleship materials. UGT, initially developed by Blumler, Katz, and Gurevitch in 1974, marks a substantial shift from previous theories of communication by presenting audiences as active choosers of media content instead of passive consumers.

According to the theory, people consciously select media according to expected gratifications, specific demands they believe media intake will satisfy. While the theory's origins date to the 1970s, it has proven remarkably adaptable to contemporary digital contexts. Ruggiero noted that UGT has consistently evolved to accommodate emerging media technologies.¹⁴ Recent scholars like Sundar and Limperos have updated the framework to address “unique aspects of digital and social media.”¹⁵ UGT principles have been successfully applied to social media platforms, streaming services, and mobile applications in the media context preferred by Generation Z.

Historical Development and Core Principles

This theory has undergone a series of developments by different scholars, the initial scholars Elihu Katz & Michael Gurevitch in *On the Use of the Mass Media for Important Things*¹⁶ in the 1990s–2000s, later developed by Sundar & Limperos. It is argued that “... these gratifications can be broadly categorized into general types, such as interpersonal, entertainment, and social. The advent of new media has expanded gratification categories to include aspects unique to specific technologies, such as content presentation modes (e.g., immersion) and interactivity.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Thomas E. Ruggiero, “Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century,” *Mass Communication and Society* 3, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 3–37, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0301_02.

¹⁵ S. Shyam Sundar and Anthony M. Limperos, “Uses and Grats 2.0: New Gratifications for New Media,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 57, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 504–25.

¹⁶ Elihu Katz, Hadassah Haas, and Michael Gurevitch, “On the Use of the Mass Media for Important Things,” *American Sociological Review* 38, no. 2 (1973): 164.

¹⁷ S. Shyam Sundar and Anthony M. Limperos, “Uses and Grats 2.0: New Gratifications for New Media,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 57, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 504–25.



Furthermore, Ruggiero emphasized that Uses and Gratifications Theory has “always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications medium: newspapers, radio and television, and now the Internet.”¹⁸

Uses and Gratifications Theory emerged as a response to earlier mass communication theories that portrayed media consumers as passive recipients of content. Early proponents of UGT challenged this view by arguing that individuals make deliberate choices about their media consumption based on specific needs they seek to fulfil. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch formalized this perspective by proposing that “the social and psychological origins of needs, which generate expectations of the mass media or other sources, which lead to differential patterns of media exposure, resulting in need gratifications and other consequences.”¹⁹

UGT is based on five core presumptions: Initially, viewers choose and consume material vigorously instead of passively absorbing it. Second, people choose media based on their goals, choosing items that meet requirements. Third, media must provide competitive gratifications since it faces competition from other forms of need satisfaction. Fourth, people have enough self-awareness to explain why they choose certain media. Fifth, when examining audience motives on their terms, value judgments on cultural relevance should be put on hold.²⁰ Four forms of gratification identified by UGT scholars, Whiting & Williams,²¹ are especially pertinent to Generation Z’s involvement in digital discipleship:

1. **Information Seeking Gratifications:** Seeking biblical answers to current concerns or investigating theological principles are examples of the need to gain information, insight, and direction. These satisfactions are met by digital discipleship content that effectively conveys relevant, understandable information in captivating ways.
2. **Personal Identity Gratifications:** For Gen Z members navigating religious formation, using media for identity development, value reinforcement, and self-understanding is very important. These gratifications are satisfied by content that shows people

¹⁸ Ruggiero, “Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century.”

¹⁹ Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, “Utilization of Mass Communication by the Individual,” *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research*, Beverly Hills, Calif. [u.a.]: Sage Publ., 1974.

²⁰ Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, “Uses and Gratifications Research,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1973): 509–23.

²¹ Anita Whiting & Williams, David. *Why People Use Social Media: A Uses and Gratifications Approach. Qualitative Market Research*, 2013.



comparable examples of authentic Christian life or explains how Christian identity relates to other areas of their lives.

3. **Social Integration and Interaction Gratifications:** Despite the limits of digital platforms regarding physical connection, there is still a strong desire to connect with people and build communities. Gen Z seeks information encouraging meaningful engagement and a sense of community within religious communities.
4. **Entertainment and Diversion Gratifications:** Choosing media for creative stimulation, emotional release, or relaxation significantly impacts media consumption habits. Content that conveys spiritual truths through captivating narratives and eye-catching styles appeals to Generation Z.

Digital settings, which provide previously unheard-of power over material selection, are especially well-suited to UGT's emphasis on active audience choice. Digital natives, who have never known a world without internet access, find this active selection process natural. Ruggiero pointed out, "UGT has always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications medium."²²

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework integrates the Uses and Gratifications Theory²³ with discipleship concepts to create a comprehensive model for understanding the online discipleship of Generation Z. This framework illustrates the dynamic interplay between key elements that shape how Gen Z engages with digital discipleship content. Gen Z's engagement with online discipleship content is at the centre of the framework, influenced by four primary factors: platform selection, content preferences, disciple-maker qualifications, and effectiveness factors. Each factor can be understood through UGT gratifications while considering contextual elements specific to digital discipleship.²⁴ The framework asserts that effective digital discipleship occurs when platform choice, content design, and disciple-maker attributes align with Gen Z's gratification needs while maintaining theological integrity. This effectiveness manifests as increased spiritual knowledge, identity formation, community connection, and spiritual practice among Gen Z participants.

²² Ruggiero, "Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century," 3.

²³ Philip Palmgreen, "Uses and Gratifications: A Theoretical Perspective," *Communication Yearbook* 8, no. 1 (January 1, 1984): 20–55.

²⁴ Lewis, "The Digital Age."



Literature Review

Contemporary Media for Discipleship

The contemporary media landscape presents opportunities and challenges for discipleship efforts targeting Generation Z. Ortiz observes that “effective discipleship approaches must navigate an increasingly fragmented media ecosystem where attention is the primary currency.”²⁵ A recent Barna Group research indicates that “94% of Gen Z identified as ‘always connected,’”²⁶ with the typical Gen Z individual actively using five different social media platforms daily, a connectivity rate higher than any previous generation. These digital platforms have substantially transformed discipleship possibilities. As Campbell notes, “Digital spaces have evolved from merely transmitting religious content to becoming legitimate contexts for spiritual formation, community building, and religious identity development.”²⁷ This evolution requires ecclesial responses that move beyond viewing digital platforms merely as promotional tools and toward understanding them as ministry contexts in their own right.

Research by Common Sense Media highlights how Gen Z’s media consumption patterns differ significantly from previous generations, emphasizing “short-form video content, interactive media, and user-generated content.”²⁸ These preferences create both opportunities and challenges for discipleship approaches. Ostrowski demonstrates that “Gen Z seeks spiritual content that is authentic, visually engaging, and contextually relevant to their lived experiences, qualities that traditional one-way discipleship communication often lacks.”²⁹

The literature reveals significant disparities between platforms most utilized by churches for discipleship efforts and those most frequented by Generation Z. While church organizations continue to prioritize Facebook and email communication, “Gen Z demonstrates stronger

²⁵ Kenneth Ortiz, “3 Discipleship Models to Drive Your Ministry Forward,” *Theology For the Rest of Us* (blog), January 17, 2023, <https://www.theologyfortherestofus.com/3-discipleship-models-to-drive-your-ministry-forward/>.

²⁶ Barna Group. “5 Things You Need to Know About Gen Z in 2024,” accessed April 25, 2025, <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-2024/>.

²⁷ Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, eds., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2021.

²⁸ Common Sense Media. Movie & TV reviews for parents, “Two Years Into the Pandemic, Media Use Has Increased 17% Among Tweens and Teens | Common Sense Media,” accessed April 25, 2025, <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/press-releases/two-years-into-the-pandemic-media-use-has-increased-17-among-tweens-and-teens>.

²⁹ Anastasia K. Ostrowski et al., “Small Group Interactions with Voice-User Interfaces: Exploring Social Embodiment, Rapport, and Engagement,” in *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM/IEEE International Conference on Human-Robot Interaction*, Boulder CO USA: ACM, 2021), 322–31.



engagement with platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Snapchat.”³⁰ This misalignment often results in discipleship content reaching smaller segments of the target audience than intended.

Content for Online Discipleship Programmes

Online discipleship content aims to nurture spiritual development among Gen Z believers by addressing foundational aspects of Christian faith and practice. Key content areas include:

Prayer: Digital discipleship frequently emphasizes prayer as essential spiritual communication. Content explores prayer as communion with God through speaking, hearing, and listening, often incorporating interactive elements like guided prayer experiences or journaling prompts that engage Gen Z’s desire for participatory spiritual practice. Studies by Ellis indicate that Gen Z believers value prayer content that connects ancient spiritual practices with contemporary life challenges.³¹

Love for God and Humanity: Content addresses the dual commandment to love God and others as foundational to Christian identity. This theme resonates with Gen Z audiences who value authenticity and social justice, providing bridges between theological concepts and lived expressions of faith. As Cox notes, “Gen Z discipleship must connect theological foundations with tangible expressions of justice and compassion that transcend political dichotomies.”³²

Spiritual Gifts: Content exploring spiritual gifts helps Gen Z believers understand their unique capacities for ministry. Practical approaches often incorporate interactive assessments, testimonial videos, and practical application guidance that help young believers identify and deploy their gifts in ministry contexts.

Holy Living: Discipleship programs frequently address holiness as reflecting God’s character in daily life. Effective content avoids legalism and moral relativism, instead framing holiness as a positive transformation that flows from a relationship with God rather than mere rule-following.

³⁰ Emily A. Vogels Massarat Risa Gelles-Watnick and Navid, “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), August 10, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>.

³¹ Wesley W. Ellis, “Youth and Prayer in a Secular Age,” *Journal of Youth and Theology* 24, no. 1 (June 10, 2024): 23–39, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24055093-bja10065>.

³² Daniel A. Cox. “Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America,” *The Survey Center on American Life*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith>.



Garzon and Ford observe that “Gen Z responds more positively to holiness content that emphasizes character formation rather than behavioural restriction.”³³

The Trinity: Online discipleship often explores this foundational doctrine of God’s nature. This theological concept challenges discipplers to present complex doctrine in accessible formats that connect abstract theology to practical spiritual life. Ott expounds that “visual explanations and metaphor-based communication more effectively transmit trinitarian concepts to Gen Z audiences than traditional theological language.”³⁴

Relationships: Content addressing dating, friendship, family, and community through biblical perspectives engages one of Gen Z’s most sought-after topics. Vicente notes, “Gen Z often uses informal language like ‘talking stage’ and ‘situationship’ to navigate relationship complexity.”³⁵ Effective discipleship content engages with contemporary relationship patterns while offering biblical wisdom. Research by Khatri indicates that “relationship content receives significantly higher engagement rates among Gen Z than traditional theological topics.”³⁶

Effectiveness of Digital Discipleship

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed Christian ministry approaches for reaching Generation Z. As Subsplash observes, “What we find in Gen Z is a generation of people looking for information at all times. Gen Z is happy to receive communication if it reaches them through the right channels, specifically, digital platforms that prioritize ease and immediacy.”³⁷ Recent research by Pew Research Centre confirms Generation Z’s distinctive platform preferences: “YouTube tops the 2022 teen online landscape among the platforms covered in the centre’s new survey, as it is used by 95% of teens. TikTok is next on the list of platforms asked about in this survey (67%), followed by Instagram and Snapchat, which are used by about six in ten teens.”³⁸

³³ Fernando Garzon et al., “Christian Accommodative Mindfulness: Definition, Current Research, and Group Protocol,” *Religions* 13, no. 1 (January 2022): 63.

³⁴ Craig Ott, “The Power of Biblical Metaphors for the Contextualized Communication of the Gospel,” *Missiology* 42, no. 4 (October 1, 2014): 357–74.

³⁵ Sara Forastieri Vicente, “Opinion: What Gen Z’s ‘Happily Ever after’ Looks Like,” *CNN*, July 24, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/24/opinions/gen-z-dating-situationships-vicente/index.html>.

³⁶ Geetika Khatri et al., “Beyond Tradition: A Study of Relationship Evolution in Millennials and Gen Z,” *South Eastern European Journal of Public Health*, November 26, 2024, 1239–43.

³⁷ Subsplash. “Learn More about the Shift to Digital Discipleship,” accessed March 31, 2025, <https://www.subsplash.com/blog/the-digital-discipleship-shift>.

³⁸ Massarat, “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022.”



Thompson identifies several factors that contribute to practical digital discipleship approaches.³⁹ First, speed and efficiency are valued by Gen Z, who prefer platforms facilitating swift communication and content consumption. Second, connectivity features that enable seamless interaction attract Gen Z users seeking community connection. Third, concise messaging is preferred, as Gen Z has developed sophisticated filtering mechanisms favouring brief, focused content. Fourth, user-generated content approaches incorporating co-creation tap into Gen Z's participatory preferences. Finally, global networking capabilities that transcend geographical limitations enable connection and collaboration across physical boundaries.

Qualities of Digital Disciple-Makers

The digital landscape hosts diverse voices promoting varied agendas, making the distinctive qualities of authentic Christian disciplers particularly important in online contexts. While traditional leadership qualifications apply across ministry contexts, digital discipleship introduces unique considerations. First, spiritual authenticity represents a foundational requirement for effective digital discipleship. Anschutz and Williams explain, “Generation Z demonstrates heightened sensitivity to perceived hypocrisy, particularly in digital contexts where performance often supersedes authenticity.”⁴⁰ This genuine character becomes a compelling, distinctive trait that resonates with Gen Z's values. This research indicates that “perceived authenticity functions as the primary gateway factor determining whether Gen Z engages with discipleship content at all.”⁴¹

Second, humble submission to God's will provides essential orientation in digital environments that can amplify ego and prioritize metrics over mission. Effective disciplers maintain a Christ-centred focus that places divine purposes above personal platform-building.⁴² This quality manifests in content creation that elevates scriptural truth rather than personal brand. Third, sacrificial service demonstrates a willingness to invest time, energy, and resources without immediate return. This approach often means valuing relational impact over engagement metrics.

³⁹ Acquenetta Thompson, “Discipleship Mentoring Program for Emerging Adults that have Abandoned Church,” *Doctoral Dissertations and Projects*, April 1, 2022, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/3550>.

⁴⁰ Jessica Anschutz and Brandi Nicole Williams, “8 Strategies for Reaching and Developing Gen Z - Lewis Center for Church Leadership,” February 27, 2024, <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/8-strategies-for-reaching-and-developing-gen-z>

⁴¹ Anschutz and Williams.

⁴² Discipleship.org Partner, “6 Habits of an Effective Disciple Maker,” January 28, 2019, <https://discipleship.org/blog/6-habits-of-an-effective-disciple-maker/>.



Fourth, non-judgmental grace creates safe spaces for spiritual exploration by responding to questions and doubts with grace rather than condemnation. Harrington and Wiens identify “open dialogue and acceptance of difficult questions as crucial elements for creating digital environments,”⁴³ where Gen Z feels secure exploring faith questions. This approach emphasizes relational safety over doctrinal conformity as an entry point. Fifth, committed service recognizes ultimate accountability to God rather than metrics or audience approval, shaping content creation with eternal perspectives rather than temporary trends. Sixth, rootedness in Scripture and prayer maintains spiritual vitality through consistent engagement with Scripture and prayer. Drissi emphasizes that “effective ministry flows from personal communion with God rather than technical skill alone,”⁴⁴ preventing digital discipleship from becoming merely content creation detached from spiritual practice.

Finally, technical competence provides appropriate technical skills to communicate effectively across platforms. As Magezi notes, churches must “speed up the training and upskilling of church pastors and leaders to utilize technological devices, as these will be indispensable to both present and future ministries of the church.”⁴⁵ This competency includes “understanding platform-specific communication norms, video production techniques, and algorithmic functions,”⁴⁶ as Metzler and Garcia state. Scholars identify an emerging consensus regarding the integrated nature of digital discipleship qualifications.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the experiences and perspectives of Generation Z members and leadership at CITAM Ongata Rongai regarding digital discipleship. The phenomenological design enabled the researcher to explore “the lived experiences of participants engaging with online discipleship content, providing rich insights into motivations, perceptions, and meaning-making processes that shape discipleship

⁴³ Bobby Harrington and Greg Wiens, *Becoming a Disciple Maker: The Pursuit of Level 5 Disciple Making* (Renew, 2019).

⁴⁴ Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, “What Is Transforming Discipleship?,” *The Ecumenical Review* 71, no. 1/2 (2019): 216.

⁴⁵ Vhumani Magezi, “Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on Church Ministries in Africa: A Literature Analysis Focusing on South Africa,” *HTS: Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (n.d.): 7219.

⁴⁶ Hannah Metzler and David Garcia, “Social Drivers and Algorithmic Mechanisms on Digital Media,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 19, no. 5 (September 1, 2024): 735–48.



effectiveness.”⁴⁷ The research was guided by a “phenomenological and constructivist paradigm,”⁴⁸ that recognized the socially constructed nature of digital engagement and spiritual formation. This paradigm acknowledged that participants’ experiences with digital discipleship are shaped by their unique contexts, prior experiences, and interpretive frameworks. By privileging participants’ voices and perspectives, the study sought to capture the nuanced realities of digital discipleship experienced by Generation Z members and ministry leaders.

Sampling Procedures

The study employed purposive sampling to ensure participation from respondents possessing relevant characteristics and experiences. Participants were selected from CITAM Ongata Rongai members between 19 and 28 who had engaged with the church’s digital discipleship content within the previous six months. This age range captures the adult segment of Generation Z while ensuring participants possess a sufficient experiential basis to evaluate discipleship effectiveness.

For leadership perspectives, purposive sampling identified digital ministry leaders directly involved in content creation, platform management, and discipleship program development. This approach ensured representation from content consumers (Gen Z members) and content producers (ministry leaders) to provide comprehensive insights into the digital discipleship ecosystem. Fifty participants were included in the study, comprising forty Gen Z church members and ten church leaders involved in digital ministry. This sample size allowed for data saturation while capturing diverse experiences and perspectives within the CITAM Ongata Rongai context.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection employed two primary qualitative methods: First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty participants (twenty Gen Z members and ten ministry leaders) to explore personal experiences, perceptions, and insights regarding digital discipleship. The interview protocol included open-ended questions addressing platform preferences, content engagement patterns, perceived effectiveness factors, and leadership qualities. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent.

⁴⁷ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th edition (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2018).

⁴⁸ “Phenomenological Research Approach, Model & Methods - Lesson,” study.com, accessed April 11, 2025, <https://study.com/learn/lesson/phenomenological-research-model-examples-design.html>.



Second, focus group discussions were conducted with three groups of Gen Z participants (each group with ten participants) and two groups of church leadership (each with five participants), including pastors, elders, Head of Departments (HODs), and other ministry volunteers in media and youth ministries. These discussions facilitated dynamic interaction and collective meaning-making around digital discipleship experiences. The focus group protocol encouraged dialogue regarding platform selection rationales, content preferences, effectiveness perceptions, and ministry challenges. Each focus group session lasted approximately 90 minutes and was recorded for analysis. Both data collection methods incorporated stimulus materials featuring examples of the church's digital discipleship content across various platforms to prompt specific feedback and evaluation. This approach grounded abstract discussions in concrete examples of actual discipleship content.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative data underwent systematic thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, significant themes, and illuminating insights within participant narratives. The analysis followed the “six key steps outlined by Braun and Clarke:”⁴⁹ First, data familiarisation began with verbatim transcription of recordings, followed by repeated reading of transcripts to develop a deep familiarity with the data corpus. Second, initial coding employed open coding techniques to identify key concepts, experiences, and perspectives within the data. The coding process remained close to participants' language and expressions to preserve authenticity. Third, theme development grouped initial codes into potential themes representing significant patterns across the dataset.

Theme development involved identifying relationships between codes and clustering-related concepts. Fourth, the theme review evaluated provisional themes against the coded data extracts and the entire dataset to ensure coherence and representativeness. This process led to refinement, merging, or splitting themes as needed. Fifth, the theme definition clearly defines and names final themes to capture their essential meaning and contribution to understanding digital discipleship dynamics. Finally, report production culminated in a detailed narrative account of themes supported by illustrative quotations from participants that exemplified key findings. The analysis incorporated member checking to enhance trustworthiness, and

⁴⁹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 77–101.



preliminary findings were shared with selected participants to verify interpretive accuracy. Peer debriefing⁵⁰ with colleagues not involved in the research provided an additional analytical perspective, while an audit trail documented analytical decisions throughout the process.

Results and Discussion

Online Media Platforms Used for Discipling Generation Z

The first research objective examined the online media platforms used to discipline Generation Z at CITAM Ongata Rongai. Survey responses from church leadership revealed that Facebook was the primary platform for discipleship content distribution, with 90% of leaders (9 out of 10) identifying it as their primary channel. Leadership interviews indicated significant resource allocation to Facebook, with approximately 65% of digital content creation time directed toward this platform. However, only 37.5% of Gen Z participants (15 out of 40) reported regular engagement with church content on Facebook, with most describing their Facebook usage as infrequent and primarily family-oriented.

In contrast, 92.5% of Gen Z participants (37 out of 40) identified Instagram as their preferred platform for faith-related content, followed closely by YouTube (85%, 34 out of 40) and TikTok (70%, 28 out of 40). This platform preference disparity reveals a significant misalignment between church content distribution strategies and Gen Z engagement patterns. As one 19-year-old female participant explained: “I rarely see church content because they post everything on Facebook, and I only check Facebook maybe once a week to see what my mom tagged me in. All my daily scrolling happens on Instagram and TikTok.” This platform misalignment reflects broader trends identified by Pew Research Centre, which found “Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok to be the dominant platforms among Gen Z users.”⁵¹ It also aligns with findings from Barna Research showing that “churches predominantly utilize Facebook for ministry content despite younger demographics migrating to other platforms.”⁵²

The youth leadership acknowledged awareness of this disconnect. Still, it cited several barriers to platform diversification, including limited technical expertise, resource constraints, and concerns about content appropriateness on youth-oriented platforms. One ministry leader noted: “We understand our youth are on these other platforms, but we don’t always understand

⁵⁰ Valerie J. Janesick, “Peer Debriefing,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

⁵¹ Massarat, “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022.”

⁵² Barna Group. “5 Things You Need to Know About Gen Z in 2024.”



how these platforms work or how to create appropriate content for them. Facebook feels safer and more familiar to our content creators.” When analyzed through the lens of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, platform selection patterns revealed distinct gratification-seeking behaviours. Gen Z participants articulated platform preferences based on specific gratification combinations each platform efficiently delivered: Instagram was valued primarily for identity and social gratifications, with participants highlighting features like Stories and Reels that facilitated identity expression and community building. One 22-year-old participant explained: “When church content appears on Instagram, it feels like part of my world. I can easily share it with friends through Stories or DMs without feeling awkward.”

YouTube simultaneously satisfied information and entertainment gratifications, with participants appreciating longer-form teaching content that maintained engagement through visual elements and narrative approaches. A 20-year-old male participant noted, “YouTube is where I go when I want to learn something deeply but still be engaged.” These findings correspond with research by McMahan, which shows YouTube’s unique capacity to deliver substantive religious content while maintaining visual engagement.⁵³ TikTok emerged as highly effective for delivering concentrated information and entertainment gratifications within brief content formats. Gen Z participants reported high receptivity to faith content on this platform when it utilized platform-native communication styles. One 18-year-old explained: “A 60-second TikTok explaining a biblical concept with relevant music and visuals sticks with me more than a 40-minute sermon sometimes because it’s designed for how my brain processes information now.” This finding echoes Cervi’s research, demonstrating TikTok’s efficacy for religious micro-learning among Gen Z audiences.⁵⁴

WhatsApp groups demonstrated effectiveness for social gratification and accountability mechanisms, though participants distinguished between church-initiated groups (perceived as more formal and less engaging) and peer-initiated groups (described as more authentic and interactive). A 21-year-old participant shared, “Our youth-created WhatsApp group is where real conversations happen, while the official church group feels more like announcements.” Church website usage ranked significantly lower than social platforms, with only 30% of Gen Z

⁵³ Billy McMahan, “Innovations in Engaging the Next Generation Towards Discipleship and Mission,” *Great Commission Research Journal* 16, no. 2 (October 1, 2024): 19–39.

⁵⁴ Laura Cervi. *Tik Tok and Generation Z. Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 2021. 12. 198-204. 10.1080/19443927.2021.1915617.



participants (12 out of 40) reporting engagement in the previous month, reflecting broader trends regarding Gen Z's preference for dynamic, interactive platforms over static information repositories, consistent with findings from the Barna Group's "State of the Church Digital" report⁵⁵

Content Presented in Discipling Generation Z

The second research objective examined the content strategies employed in digital discipleship efforts targeting Generation Z. Content analysis revealed five primary content categories across CITAM Ongata Rongai's digital discipleship initiatives: sermon recordings/livestreams (42% of total content), announcements/event promotions (27%), devotional content (18%), testimonial content (8%), and biblical teaching specifically addressing youth contexts (5%). This content distribution contrasted sharply with stated preferences from Gen Z participants, who ranked testimonial content from peers (87.5%, 35 out of 40 participants) and contextualized biblical teaching addressing contemporary issues (77.5%, 31 out of 40) as most impactful for their spiritual development. This misalignment between content production focus and consumption preferences significantly impacted perceived relevance and engagement. Reflecting similar findings by Thompson and Rodriguez, who identified "content-preference misalignment as a primary factor in diminished digital ministry effectiveness."⁵⁶

When evaluated through the gratification categories of UGT, current content offerings demonstrated uneven gratification fulfilment. Sermon content primarily addressed information gratifications but often failed to satisfy entertainment gratifications due to format length and presentation styles not optimized for digital consumption. One participant noted: "Live-streamed sermons are important but difficult to engage with on a phone screen for 45 minutes, especially with all the notifications and other content competing for attention." Hutchings identified similar challenges regarding attention sustainability for religious livestream content.⁵⁷ Though limited in quantity, testimonial content demonstrated the highest efficiency in simultaneously satisfying multiple gratification categories. This finding aligns with Shepherd and Kim's research, which shows testimonial content's unique capacity to fulfil diverse psychological needs through authentic narrative formats.

⁵⁵ Barna Group. "The Uncertain Digital & Physical Realities of Churches," accessed April 27, 2025, <https://www.barna.com/research/uncertain-digital-physical-realities/>.

⁵⁶ Thompson, "Discipleship Mentoring Program for Emerging Adults That Have Abandoned Church."

⁵⁷ Hutchings, *Creating Church Online*.



Gen Z participants reported that authentic peer testimonies addressed information needs (practical application of faith), identity gratifications (models for integrating faith with contemporary youth experience), social gratifications (sense of community and belonging), and entertainment gratifications (engaging narrative format). One 23-year-old participant explained this multi-gratification impact: “When I see someone my age sharing honestly about applying faith to the exact challenges I’m facing, relationships, career choices, mental health, it’s not just informative but also helps me understand my own identity as a Christian, connects me with others facing similar struggles, and keeps me engaged because it’s a real story, not just abstract concepts.” Content formatted specifically for platform-appropriate consumption showed significantly higher engagement than cross-posted content. Leadership interviews revealed that 82% of digital content was produced in a single format and distributed across multiple platforms without platform-specific adaptation. This approach proved particularly ineffective for platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where native content formats significantly influence algorithm performance and user engagement.

A content gap emerged regarding topics of highest relevance to Gen Z participants. While church discipleship content emphasized traditional theological topics, participants consistently identified five priority areas inadequately addressed: faith and mental health (82.5%, 33 participants), biblical perspectives on relationship dynamics (72.5%, 29 participants), reconciling faith with social justice concerns (67.5%, 27 participants), navigating faith in university/workplace environments (62.5%, 25 participants), and addressing doubts/questions without judgment (60%, 24 participants). One ministry leader acknowledged this gap: “We tend to create content based on what we think young people should know rather than addressing their struggles. When we do address relevant topics, engagement metrics immediately demonstrate the difference.” The findings suggest that effective digital discipleship requires content strategies that directly address the lived experiences and contemporary challenges Gen Z believers face.

Effectiveness of Online Media in Discipling Generation Z

The research conducted at CITAM Ongata Rongai reveals nuanced insights regarding digital discipleship effectiveness among Generation Z participants. The assessment identified complex patterns influenced by content characteristics and broader digital ecosystem factors. Generation Z participants evaluated effectiveness through four primary lenses: relevance to lived experience, authenticity of presentation, technological appropriateness, and connection to community.



Content relevance emerged as the strongest predictor of perceived effectiveness, with participants consistently prioritizing content that directly addressed their current life challenges. As one 19-year-old female participant expressed: “The most effective digital ministry doesn’t just present Bible principles but shows exactly how those principles apply to the situations I face every week. When content bridges that gap between Sunday and daily life, it shapes my decisions.” Technological appropriateness significantly influenced effectiveness perceptions, with participants articulating sophisticated expectations regarding platform-appropriate content, extending beyond basic technical competence to understand platform-specific communication norms, visual aesthetics, and interaction patterns. One 22-year-old participant observed: “You can immediately tell when content was created by someone who understands the platform versus someone who’s just trying to be present because they think they should be.”

The research identified format preferences strongly influenced by attention patterns shaped by broader digital media consumption. Short-form vertical video content (under 90 seconds) received the highest engagement across platforms, with participants citing both attentional factors and algorithm performance. One of the participants stated, “Even when I’m interested in the topic, long-format content requires a time commitment I have to plan for, while short content I can engage with immediately.” Competition for attention emerged as a critical factor in discipleship effectiveness. Gen Z participants described church content competing within the same attentional economy as professionally produced entertainment content. One participant framed this challenge directly: “When I’m scrolling and see church content next to perfectly produced TikToks with professional creators who understand exactly how to hook attention in the first second, the church content often loses that split-second decision about what to watch.”

Integration between digital and physical discipleship contexts significantly enhanced perceived effectiveness. Content that extended physical gatherings or facilitated in-person connections demonstrated a more substantial impact than standalone digital initiatives. One of the participants noted, “The most effective digital content isn’t trying to replace gathering together but enhances those connections between gatherings.” When evaluating specific discipleship objectives, participants reported digital content was most effective for knowledge transmission and inspiration, but less practical for accountability and spiritual discipline development. Another youth remarked, “Online content can teach me what to believe and



motivate me to want to change, but establishing new habits or maintaining commitments requires relationships beyond likes and comments.” Ministry leaders identified several barriers to effectiveness improvement, including limited metrics beyond surface-level engagement statistics, insufficient feedback mechanisms, and resource constraints for platform-specific content creation. One leader noted: “We often don’t know what’s working beyond view counts and likes. We need better ways to understand spiritual impact, but those metrics are harder to capture.”

Recommendations for Improving Effectiveness

Based on the research findings, several recommendations can enhance the effectiveness of digital discipleship for Generation Z:

- First, CITAM Ongata Rongai should reallocate resources on Facebook and redirect them to popular platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok based on Gen Z usage patterns and gratification preferences. The current platform misalignment significantly hampers discipleship effectiveness.
- Second, the emphasis on content production should shift from primarily sermon broadcasts to increased testimonial content, practical biblical teaching addressing contemporary issues, and interactive discipleship resources that better align with Gen Z preferences.
- Third, the church should develop platform-specific content strategies rather than cross-posting identical content, with particular attention to format requirements, length optimization, and aesthetic conventions for each platform.
- Fourth, content should be designed to address each UGT gratification category (information, identity, social, entertainment) with awareness of which platforms best deliver each gratification type.
- Fifth, establishing collaborative content creation teams combining theological expertise from experienced leaders and platform fluency from Gen Z members would enhance content relevance and technical appropriateness.
- Sixth, greater emphasis should be placed on content formats facilitating response, participation, and dialogue rather than one-way communication models failing to engage Gen Z’s interactive expectations. Finally, the church should implement regular qualitative feedback mechanisms beyond quantitative metrics to assess spiritual impact and content relevance, enabling continuous improvement in digital discipleship strategies.



Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of digital discipleship strategies for Generation Z at CITAM Ongata Rongai through the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory. The findings reveal significant insights across four dimensions of investigation. First, regarding platform selection, a substantial misalignment exists between church-prioritized platforms and those most effectively engaging Generation Z. While church leadership allocates significant resources to Facebook, Gen Z members demonstrate clear preferences for Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok based on each platform's distinct gratification efficiency. This platform disconnect significantly impacts the reach and effectiveness of digital discipleship initiatives.

Second, content analysis revealed that current discipleship approaches emphasize formats and topics that inefficiently satisfy Gen Z's primary gratification needs. Live-streamed sermons and announcements dominate current content production, while participants strongly prefer testimonial content and contextualized biblical teaching addressing contemporary issues. This content misalignment significantly impacts perceived relevance and engagement.

Third, effectiveness assessment identified format preferences and gratification competition as critical factors shaping discipleship outcomes. Short-form video content showing practical faith application demonstrated the highest engagement, while content competition within attention economies emerged as a significant challenge. The integration of digital and physical discipleship experiences significantly enhanced perceived effectiveness.

Fourth, disciple-maker qualifications analysis revealed that while technical competence establishes minimum credibility thresholds, relational qualities like authenticity, vulnerability, and cultural fluency more decisively influence effectiveness. These qualities address identity and social gratifications, which are often neglected in production-focused content strategies.

The study contributes to theoretical and practical ministry application by demonstrating how understanding Generation Z's gratification-seeking behaviours can enhance digital discipleship strategies. The findings suggest that effective digital discipleship requires platform-specific approaches, content addressing contemporary concerns, format optimization for digital attention patterns, and authentic leadership that balances technological competence with relational engagement. Future research should explore how algorithmic content distribution affects religious formation, examine platform-specific spiritual formation patterns, and investigate longitudinal outcomes of various digital discipleship models. Comparative studies



across denominations and cultural contexts would further enhance Generation Z's understanding of effective digital ministry practices.

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