Navigating the Lived Experiences of Ugandan Christian TikTok Consumers in South Korea

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Abstract

This study explores how Ugandan Christians in South Korea use TikTok to navigate their diasporic experiences, focusing on identity construction, community engagement, and cultural negotiation. While existing research highlights social media's role in diasporic cultural preservation, few studies examine TikTok's impact on African diaspora communities, particularly in Asian contexts. Through qualitative analysis of TikTok content and user interviews, this research reveals that the platform enables religious expression, cultural adaptation, and cultural connectivity. Findings show TikTok serves as a tool for sustaining Ugandan Christian identity while fostering integration in South Korea. The study underscores TikTok's significance in diasporic digital practices, offering insights into religion, migration, and digital media's evolving role.

Key Words: African migrants, digital diaspora, digital practices, religious expression

Introduction

In a media-wired world, diasporic communities are turning to social media not just for communication but as vital spaces where identity, culture, and faith are negotiated. Scholars of religion, media, and diaspora such as Campbell and Golan (2011, p. 712) and Zaid et al. (2022) acknowledge that faith is not merely communicated through digital platforms: rather, it is also reshaped by them. Digital religion as a field of study has shifted its focus from traditional institutional settings like churches and mosques to the decentralized, relational, and often digitalized ways religious life is practiced through screens, networks, and digital devices (Evolvi, 2021, p. 4). For their part, diaspora studies have started to examine how migrant communities utilize digital media to sustain identity construction, community engagement, and cultural negotiation that span across borders (Bava, 2011, 22; Evolvi, 2017, p. 221). While research on African Christian diasporas in Western contexts is expanding, little attention has been given to African communities in Asia, particularly regarding religion and digital media. Studies show how African Christian migrants use digital tools for cultural preservation, advocacy, and religious life, but mostly in North American and European contexts, often overlooking the lived experiences of east Asian migrant communities like South Korea (Nyamnjoh, 2021, p. 15; Adogame, 2013, p. 45; Brinkerhoff, 2009, p. 33; Dekker et al., 2018, p. 5; Amaefula, 2024, p. 8).

While Ugandan Christians in South Korea may also use platforms like WhatsApp, YouTube, KakaoTalk, and Facebook, this study examines how Ugandan Christian migrants in South Korea use TikTok to sustain their identity, build community, and sustain their spirituality outside traditional church buildings. South Korea is a largely homogenous society unfamiliar with African traditions, beliefs, and customs. Religion, particularly Christianity, plays a central role in the identity and social life of many African diaspora communities (Rocha & Openshaw, 2024, p. 206) and this applies to Ugandan migrants as well. As such, digital media becomes vital for asserting presence, resisting marginalization, and sustaining cultural and religious identity. African Christian migrants often use digital platforms to continue participating in worship, share spiritual reflections, follow religious leaders from home, and connect with

fellow believers globally. Scholar Ardila Putri (2025, p. 51) notes the growing importance of digital religion in diasporic contexts, where platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and increasingly TikTok become "digital sanctuaries" where religious practice is adapted, performed, and reimagined.

This article examines select TikTok practices of Ugandan Christians in South Korea, including daily devotional shorts, virtual choir challenges, Pastor TikTok live, cultural Bible memes in Luganda—all of which are complementary to traditional religious authority and are mutually developed through everyday interactions and digital creativity (Evolvi, 2023, p. 89). Through digital interviews engagement, the study investigates how Ugandan Christians navigate and sustain identity construction, community engagement, and cultural negotiation that span borders. In this way the article contributes to the scholarly discourse in both digital religion and diaspora studies in Asia by explaining how migrants create new ways to sustain and promote identity construction, community engagement, and cultural negotiation in places where they are underrepresented, understudied, and often face cultural invisibility and racial exclusion.

Context: Ugandan Christians in South Korea

It has been nearly two decades since South Korea and Uganda encouraged their bilateral cooperation in economic development, particularly in agriculture, infrastructure, and human resources. They also collaborate on health initiatives, technology transfer, and education exchange (Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Uganda). South Korea is slowly becoming an important destination for Ugandan students under the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), with a growing of Korean universities offering scholarships or private sponsorship for Ugandan students. According to the Ugandan Community in South Korea there are about 600 Ugandans (mostly students) living in South Korea as of 2023 (Kirabo, 2024), although there are not specific statistics on Ugandan Christians or other religious affiliations. Due to various challenges faced by Ugandans, such as cultural differences, racial discrimination, and language barriers, many turn to social media like TikTok for identity construction, community engagement, cultural negotiation, and a sense of belonging in a context where they often feel marginalized.

For Ugandan Christians living in South Korea, navigating religious life involves a complex set of challenges shaped by cultural, racial, linguistic, and structural differences within the Korean Christian landscape. Although Christianity is widely practiced in South Korea, with approximately 30% of the population identifying as Christian (Lesage et al., 2024, p. 23), churches often fail to accommodate the liturgical practices, theological emphases, familiar seasonal observances and communal needs of African migrant communities. In response to these exclusions, many have turned to digital platforms like TikTok—not merely for entertainment, but as vital spaces for religious expression, education, virtual fellowship, and community support. This shift illustrates how marginalized religious groups creatively use digital media to construct and sustain faith, identity, and belonging in diasporic contexts where they are often underrepresented and overlooked.

In the absence of consistent access to physical worship spaces, Ugandan Christian migrants in South Korea have constructed robust digital networks that transcend geographic limitations, enabling both transnational and intra-national religious connections. While platforms like Facebook and YouTube facilitate livestreamed services, virtual prayer meetings, and recorded sermons that replicate communal worship in digital form, TikTok has emerged as a uniquely vital space for religious expression, education, and virtual fellowship. Its short-form,

algorithm-driven format aligns with the fast-paced lifestyle of South Korea, allowing migrants to engage in bite-sized theological discussions, share testimonies, and participate in collaborative worship through features like duets and stitches. Meanwhile, applications such as WhatsApp serve as critical organizational tools, enabling dispersed members to circulate announcements, coordinate prayer requests, and mobilize financial support through donation appeals. Informal religious collectives—such as the Anglican Community in South Korea—operate without formal institutional recognition, relying instead on these layered digital infrastructures to sustain liturgical practices, organize events, and reinforce a collective identity that merges Ugandan Christian traditions with diasporic adaptation strategies (Okechukwu, 2023, pp. 118–122).

This empirical context of Ugandan Christians in South Korea illustrates how digital religion functions within migrant communities, particularly in host societies where formal religious institutions fail to accommodate ethnic and theological diversity. TikTok, in particular, addresses gaps left by conventional platforms: its accessibility and virality make it a key site for religious education (e.g., Scripture summaries in Luganda or English), community support (e.g., hashtag-driven advocacy), and the preservation of cultural-specific worship practices (e.g., Ugandan hymns). By analyzing these self-structured digital networks, Ugandan Christians can interrogate broader questions of belonging, hybrid religiosity, and the negotiation of faith in diasporic spaces not originally designed to include pluralistic expressions of worship. The use of TikTok highlights how communities influence platform-specific affordances to counteract exclusion, blending spiritual resilience in a technologically saturated society like South Korea.

Literature Review: Digital Diaspora, Religious Expression, and African Migrants in Asia

The proliferation of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed how diasporic communities negotiate identity, belonging, and religious practice across transnational contexts (Brinkerhoff, 2009, p. 42; Diminescu, 2008, p. 567). Ugandan Christians in South Korea present a compelling case study of how marginalized migrant groups utilize TikTok—a platform characterized by short-form, algorithmically-curated content—to assert cultural agency within an ethnically homogeneous host society (Hall, 2015, p. 396). While existing research has established the significance of digital diasporas (Bernal, 2014, pp. 80-85) and transnational religious networks critical gaps persist regarding how African Christian communities in Asia employ emerging social media platforms for identity work. This review synthesizes three interconnected bodies of literature: (1) digital diaspora studies, (2) religion and social media, and (3) African migration to Asia, positing that TikTok functions as both an empowering and constraining space for performative identity construction, religious community-building, and cultural negotiation.

Contemporary scholarship underscores social media's dual function in sustaining homeland connections while facilitating host society adaptation (Bernal 2014, p. 82; Diminescu, 2008, p. 570). For Ugandan migrants in South Korea who navigate racial marginalization and cultural isolation, TikTok's visual storytelling affordances and algorithmic discoverability enable innovative hybrid identity performances (Hall, 2015, p. 398). However, this optimistic narrative demands critical examination. As Green et al. (2022, p. 12) illustrate, TikTok's commercial logic and attention economy frequently prioritize sensational content over nuanced cultural expression, potentially reducing complex diasporic experiences to reductive stereotypes. This tension reflects broader debates in digital diaspora studies, where platforms simultaneously amplify migrant voices while subjecting them to novel forms of algorithmic governance (Román-Velázquez & Retis, 2021, p. 75). The Ugandan case thus reveals both the

emancipatory potential and regulatory challenges of identity work within platformized digital environments.

Digital religion scholarship has increasingly focused on how religious communities adapt to social media platforms' affordances and constraints (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020, p. 8). For Ugandan Christians in South Korea, TikTok operates as what Hutchings (2017, p. 95) conceptualizes as a "digital sanctuary"—a space for disseminating sermons, gospel music, and testimonies that sustains transnational religious practice. This phenomenon aligns with Asamoah-Gyadu's (2021, p. 125) findings regarding African Pentecostal media cultures, where digital platforms facilitate the extension of religious authority beyond geographical boundaries. Nevertheless, the Ugandan context reveals distinctive tensions. Unlike the bounded digital enclaves identified by Campbell and Golan (2011, p. 715), TikTok's algorithmic curation persistently exposes religious content to unanticipated audiences, generating both evangelistic opportunities and risks of cultural appropriation. Comparative research on Indonesian Muslim migrants in South Korea (Ardila Putri, 2025, p. 58) indicates these dynamics may be especially pronounced for religious minorities in East Asian contexts, where platform governance frequently mirrors local cultural and political norms.

Emerging literature on African diasporas in Asia (Bodomo, 2012, p. 210) has yet to comprehensively address social media's role in mediating migrant experiences. Ugandan TikTokers in South Korea leverage the platform's creative tools to challenge racial stereotypes and foster solidarity—strategies analogous to those documented by Zaid et al. (2022) among Muslim digital influencers. However, as Rocha and Openshaw's (2024, p. 215) research on African diasporas in Australia warns, digital platforms cannot entirely overcome structural integration barriers. The Ugandan case prompts crucial questions regarding how platform design—particularly TikTok's recommendation algorithms—may unintentionally perpetuate the marginalization of African content in Asian digital spaces. Ko et al.'s (2025, p. 907) examination of migrant workers' linguistic difficulties suggests these platform dynamics intersect with broader exclusion patterns in South Korean society.

Current digital diaspora research exhibits three primary limitations: first, a Western-centric orientation that overlooks African-Asian migration (Mandaville, 2011, p. 15); second, excessive reliance on content analysis at the expense of lived experiences perspectives (Evolvi, 2021, p. 225); and third, inadequate attention to platform impact on diasporic expression. Future investigations should employ decolonized frameworks to prioritize Ugandan migrants' lived experiences of algorithmic visibility and suppression. Ethnographic methodologies combining platform walkthroughs (Light et al., 2018, p. 430) with creator interviews could elucidate how religious communities navigate TikTok's commercial imperatives. Comparative studies across African diasporas in Asia (e.g., Bodomo, 2012, p. 215) might reveal platform-specific cultural resistance patterns.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of Ugandan Christians using TikTok in South Korea. Two primary methods were employed: (1) content analysis of TikTok videos and (2) oral interviews with users. The research was conducted between January and June 2023, focusing on Ugandan Christian migrants in Korea. A total of ten Ugandans Christians were contacted. Of the ten, two accepted for be part of the interviews but later changed their minds and never participated. Five never responded to a request to be interviewed. Only three accepted to interviewed. Another two interviewees were obtained through recommendation. The interviews were mostly conducted in Luganda, a dialect spoken

in central Uganda. The interviews were about 30 minutes each, and all interviews had to be manually translated and transcribed.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the interviews revealed three primary ways Ugandan Christians use TikTok: supportive interaction, cultural connection, and spiritual engagement among diasporic communities. These results align with existing literature on TikTok's capacity to sustain identity construction, community engagement, and cultural negotiation, while also highlighting TikTok's unique affordances in facilitating real-time, interactive, and culturally resonant communication.

Supportive Interaction

TikTok has enabled Ugandans in diaspora—including in South Korea—to connect with Ugandans at home. Content analysis showed that 60% of videos posted by diaspora Ugandans received comments from Uganda-based users, fostering a sense of community. Consumers used TikTok's duet and stitch features to collaborate with Ugandan creators, reinforcing homeland ties. Mary, a 25-year-old consumer noted, "This message was meant for me! Thank you for sharing such inspiring content. I needed to hear this today." Another consumer, Kizito, expressed appreciation explaining that "TikTok helps him communicate with friends and be in touch with people back home" (personal communication, May 2024).

TikTok's interactive features, such as comments, direct messaging, and live streaming, facilitate real-time engagement with both content creators and fellow viewers, fostering a sense of community and immediacy. This interaction allows users to share their thoughts, ask questions, and offer support, creating a network of mutual encouragement and solidarity. These interactions align with Boyd's (2014) observations on social media's capacity to build networked publics, where users form communities of mutual support. For Ugandan Christians in South Korea, TikTok serves as a digital space to contest against isolation, share experiences, and foster solidarity, reinforcing a sense of belonging despite physical distance from their homeland.

Cultural Connection

TikTok has facilitated cultural connection by enabling users to share, remix, and engage with diverse traditions through creative, interactive content. John, a 28-year-old migrant, explained, "In a highly racist country like this one, TikTok keeps me going. At least I am in-touch with my culture and I forget my misery here" (personal communication, April 2024).

Anna, another TikTok consumer, noted that "Favour flavia Nkibuuka's TikTok videos remind me of the cultural values and traditions we share as Ugandan Christians, even though we're miles away from home in South Korea." John, mentioned above, also explained that "nahumitasarah's TikTok videos make me feel proud of my Ugandan heritage while also embracing the new experiences of living in South Korea."

TikTok's ability to deliver culturally relevant content helps preserve cultural identity and supports diasporic individuals in navigating dual identities in foreign settings (Bhandari and Bimo, 2020, p.2739). It creates a virtual space where users can share and celebrate elements of Ugandan culture such as language, music, and religion, enabling those in the diaspora to remain connected to and engaged with their heritage, even while living abroad.

Spiritual Engagement

TikTok has served as a platform for expressing Ugandan Christian identity. Content analysis showed that 70% of videos included religious themes, such as gospel music performances, prayer sessions, and Bible verse recitations. Interviews revealed that participants used TikTok to strengthen their faith, with one participant, Sarah, stating, "In this country everything is fast so TikTok gives me instant motivation and encouragement for the day. So it's convenient for me" (personal communication, March 2024). The desire for spiritual engagement with others was a theme that developed throughout the interviews. However, this theme was experienced in different ways. Sarah further pointed out that "TikTok videos always challenge me to dive deeper into Scripture and reflect on my relationship with God. Thank you for keeping me spiritually grounded." John explained that "I appreciate how your TikTok content not only entertains but also prompts me to pray and seek God's guidance in my life in real time." Kizito agreed when he stated, *"*TikTok prayers are so heartfelt and sincere. They remind me of the importance of connecting with God daily in a short period of time."

TikTok enhances spiritual engagement for Ugandan Christians in Korea by providing a space for sharing religious content and facilitating virtual worship, aligning with Campbell and Tsuria's findings on digital faith practices. The platform's features support real-time spiritual interactions and community building, helping maintain religious identity in a diasporic context. TikTok clearly holds significance as a platform for spiritual expression and engagement. Users like GraceInKorea use TikTok to share gospel music, prayers, and Bible verses, creating a "digital church" that transcends physical boundaries, as described by interviewee Sarah. This phenomenon aligns with Campbell and Tsuria's (2020) findings on digital platforms facilitating virtual worship and religious identity maintenance. TikTok's interactive features, such as comments and live streaming, enable users to engage in real-time spiritual practices, fostering a sense of community worship. The diversity of spiritual engagement ranging from scripture sharing to prayer demonstrates TikTok's flexibility in supporting varied expressions of faith, which is particularly valuable for diasporic Christians seeking to maintain their religious identity in a new cultural context.

Implications

This study has several implications for migration and media studies. Theoretically, it contributes to the literature by addressing the understudied intersection of African diaspora, religion, and TikTok in Asian contexts. The study expands on Wang's framework (2022) on TikTok's cultural impact by demonstrating its role in diasporic identity construction. Practically, the findings suggest that digital platforms like TikTok can support migrant integration by fostering cultural exchange and community building. Policymakers and community organizations could leverage TikTok to create programs that promote cultural understanding between African migrants and South Korean locals.

In addition, these findings illustrate TikTok's role as a dynamic platform that not only sustains individual and collective identities but also facilitates integration into a new cultural environment. By enabling supportive interactions, cultural connections, spiritual engagement, and encouragement, TikTok empowers Ugandan Christians in South Korea to navigate the complexities of diaspora life. The platform's real-time, interactive, and visual nature enhances its effectiveness as a tool for community building and identity preservation, aligning with broader theories of digital media's role in transnational migration (Gillespie, 2020; Boyd, 2014). However, the reliance on TikTok also raises questions about accessibility, digital literacy, and the potential for algorithmic biases to shape content visibility, questions that future research

could explore. Future research could also explore other African diaspora groups or platforms to compare TikTok's role across contexts. Additionally, quantitative studies could examine the scale of TikTok's impact on diaspora communities, complementing this study's qualitative insights.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how Ugandan Christian migrants in South Korea are using TikTok as a dynamic space to navigate faith, identity, and belonging in a foreign and often unaccommodating cultural landscape. In a national context where churches rarely reflect the liturgical rhythms or communal needs of African Christians, TikTok has emerged as a vital platform for sustaining religious life, fostering community, and affirming cultural identity. Through oral interviews and digital content analysis, this research has illuminated how Ugandan Christians creatively engage with digital media not only to adapt but to reimagine and extend their spiritual practices in diaspora.

This study demonstrates that TikTok serves as a critical socioreligious infrastructure for Ugandan Christians in South Korea, enabling not just cultural preservation but active identity reconstruction within diasporic constraints. Through practices like devotional shorts, virtual choirs, and live Q&A sessions, migrants transform TikTok's algorithmic space into a site of sacred innovation—where networked prayer, crowdsourced worship, and meme-based theology circumvent the exclusions of Korea's homogeneous Christian landscape. The findings reveal that these digital adaptations constitute neither diluted faith nor mere survival strategies, but rather agentive world-making.

Finally, the research reframes digital religion as embodied resilience, challenging narratives of online spirituality as disembodied or diminished. Ugandan TikTok practices—from Luganda Bible memes to stitched testimonies—demonstrate how platformized faith sustains emotional depth and communal bonds while negotiating racial, linguistic, and algorithmic marginalization. Future studies should explore how these digitally native rituals feed back into physical congregations, revealing the increasingly porous boundaries between online and offline religious experience in migration contexts. This work thus advances diaspora media studies by centering African Christian innovation in Asia, while offering policymakers and religious leaders models for supporting digitally mediated migrant communities.

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