

# "Thou Shalt Not Kill:" Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Sanctity of Human Life in Nigerian Society in the Age of Digital Technology

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**\*Nwankwo Samuel C.**

Department of Theology, Wesley University Ondo, Nigeria

[✉ samuel.nwankwo@wesleyuni.edu.ng](mailto:samuel.nwankwo@wesleyuni.edu.ng)

**Makinde Michael Olusola**

Department of Computer Science, Wesley University Ondo, Nigeria

*This article is part of a special issue titled Sustainability, innovation, and development: A Festschrift in honour of Rt. Rev. Prof. Obeka Samuel Sunday.*



# ABSTRACT

Grounded in the *Imago Dei* (Middleton, 2005) and the Sixth Commandment—"Thou shalt not kill" (Bailey, 2005; Davidson, 2019; Dozeman, 2005; Hester, 2003)—the biblical doctrine of human life's sanctity is a foundational Christian theological and ethical principle (Barclay, 1998; Hauerwas, 1981; Hays, 1996). This principle faces significant challenges in contemporary Nigerian society (Iyanda, 2020), where rampant physical violence (e.g., ritual killings, extrajudicial acts) coexists with the rising threat of "digital murder"—moral erosion from online incitement, graphic content exposure, and life devaluation via digital media (Debord, 1994; Postman, 1985; Gillespie, 2018; Okyere-Manu, 2021). Using a mixed-methods approach, this study investigated how digital technology reshapes human life's perception and treatment in Nigeria, examining theological foundations and faith communities' lived realities (Campbell & Garner, 2016). The research combined quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from interviews and focus groups, offering a comprehensive perspective on public attitudes, ethical practices, and theological awareness. Findings from 500 purposively and conveniently selected Christian participants (clergy, youth leaders, digital media users/practitioners) from the South-Western states revealed a deep ethical contradiction: while 445 respondents (89%) affirmed *Imago Dei* belief, 325 (65%) admitted to sharing or consuming violent online content, and 380 (76%) acknowledged desensitisation to violence through digital media. Furthermore, 275 (55%) reported no recent exposure to religious messages on digital ethics, and 205 (41%) indicated a lack of pastoral guidance on online conduct. This gap between Christian confession and digital behaviour underscores the urgent need for theological engagement and public ethics education. The study advocated for contextualised digital discipleship, emphasising virtue ethics (MacIntyre, 2007) and media ecology in guiding online behaviour. Recommendations include promoting *Imago Dei*-based media literacy, pastoral training in digital ethics, and faith-driven campaigns to restore moral sensitivity and affirm life's sacredness in both virtual and physical spaces.

<b>Methodology</b> Mixed-methods approach using survey data from 500 Christian participants and qualitative interviews	<b>Key Variables</b> <i>Imago Dei</i> belief, digital violence exposure, pastoral guidance, and ethical behaviour online	<b>Main Finding</b> 89% affirm <i>Imago Dei</i> , but 65% consume violent content, revealing an ethical contradiction
---	---	--

**Keywords:** Thou shalt not kill, Theology, Ethics, Human Life, Sanctity, Nigeria.

# INTRODUCTION

In Judaism and Christianity, the Bible is divinely inspired, wholly free from error, and contains truth in its fullest form. Central to its teachings is the doctrine of the sanctity of human life, rooted in the creation story and the \*Imago Dei (Middleton, 2005). This foundational narrative conveys that life originates from and ultimately belongs to God, underscoring the inherent value and sacredness of every human being. The biblical injunction "Thou Shalt Not Kill" (Exodus 20:13; Bailey, 2005; Davidson, 2019; Dozeman, 2005; Hester, 2003) is a universally recognised moral principle crossing religious, cultural, and philosophical boundaries. This commandment emphasises the sanctity of human life, a value upheld across centuries and civilisations as foundational for ethical living and societal harmony (Barclay, 1998; Gushee & Stassen, 2016; Hauerwas, 1981).

01	02	03
<b>Physical Violence Crisis</b>	<b>Digital Violence Emergence</b>	<b>Theological Response Need</b>
Nigeria faces endemic violence, including ritual killings, political violence, and extrajudicial executions, challenging human dignity (Ojedokun, Tade, & Aderinto, 2019; Iyanda, 2020).	Social media platforms amplify violent content, creating "digital murder" through desensitisation and moral erosion (Gillespie, 2018; Okyere-Manu, 2021).	Churches must develop digital discipleship frameworks to address both physical and virtual threats to human life (Okyere-Manu, 2021).

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation with over 230 million people (Worldometer, 2025), is ethnically, religiously, and culturally diverse. Home to over 250 ethnic groups, including the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, it has a near-even split between Christian and Muslim populations, along with significant traditional beliefs (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024; Falola, 2018; Olupona, 2018). While diversity offers strength, it has also fuelled tensions manifesting as violence. Political instability, economic disparity, corruption, and weak governance often challenge the sanctity of human life.

The digital age introduces new dimensions to these challenges. Social media platforms—including Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok—are frequently inundated with graphic content depicting violence in Nigeria. This digital landscape often features uncensored videos of mob justice and raw images from various conflict zones (Aborisade & Adedayo, 2018; Obasanjo et al., 2023; Gillespie, 2018). The widespread dissemination of such disturbing visuals highlights a significant challenge in the country's digital sphere, potentially influencing perceptions of violence (Paradigm Initiative, 2024; Conciliation Resources, n.d.).

# OBJECTIVES

This research explores the theological and ethical significance of the sanctity of human life in Nigerian society, within the context of the sixth commandment ("Thou shalt not kill"), particularly examining how digital technology affects human life perception and treatment. This study also aims to achieve the following:

**Biblical Foundations**  
Examine the biblical and theological foundations of human life's sanctity, particularly through the lens of the *Imago Dei* doctrine (Middleton, 2005; Dozeman, 2005).

**Digital Impact Analysis**  
Investigate how digital technology and online media in Nigeria contribute to violence normalisation and moral sensitivity erosion (Iyanda, 2020; Okyere-Manu, 2021).

**Ethical Framework Application**  
Analyse how Christian ethical frameworks can apply to digital contexts to uphold and protect human life's value (Gushee & Stassen, 2016; Hauerwas, 1981).

**Faith-Based Solutions**  
Recommend practical, faith-based strategies for promoting life-affirming values in digital spaces among Nigerian Christians (Ojedokun et al., 2019).

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

## *Imago Dei* and the Sanctity of Human Life Theory

The *Imago Dei* doctrine, meaning "image of God" in Latin, originates from Genesis 1:26 - 27: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." This foundational theological concept asserts that every human, regardless of race, gender, age, status, or location, possesses inherent worth and dignity by reflecting the divine image (Middleton, 2005; Dozeman, 2005; Barclay, 1998). In theological ethics, *Imago Dei* is not merely a static characteristic but a relational and moral calling, speaking to human relationships with God, one another, and the world (Middleton, 2005; Gushee & Stassen, 2016; Hauerwas, 1981). This concept is crucial for understanding human life's sanctity in contemporary society, especially amidst digital platform complexities.

# Media Ecology and Spectacle Theory

Media Ecology, a field developed by scholars such as Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman primarily during the 1960s and early 1970s (Postman, 1985), investigates how media, technology, and communication systems profoundly influence human thought, emotion, values, behaviour, and societal structure. Rather than solely conveying information, it considers media as dynamic environments that shape human experience and cultural development (Postman, 1985; Gillespie, 2018). Guy Debord's Spectacle Theory similarly posits that contemporary society replaces real human relationships with images, commodifying people and experiences (Debord, 1994). He observed that when entertainment dominates public discourse, serious moral issues are trivialised; this is evident when violent videos are edited with humorous captions or sensational headlines, reducing tragedy to click-worthy spectacle. The spectacle both reflects and shapes societal desires; in Nigeria, such content normalises public voyeurism, subtly framing violence as acceptable social commentary. For instance, the 2022 Owo church massacre footage was widely circulated, disregarding victims' dignity, amplifying trauma, and fostering desensitisation rather than empathy (Ojedokun, Tade, & Aderinto, 2019; Iyanda, 2020). In Nigeria, these dynamics are manifest in how traditional and digital media frame violence, political events, and social issues. The 2020 #EndSARS protests, for example, were not only a grassroots movement against police brutality but also a media spectacle, with viral videos, livestreams, and trending hashtags shaping national and international perceptions of the crisis. Similarly, the circulation of graphic images and videos following the Owo Church Massacre in 2022 amplified emotional reactions, mobilised public outrage, and, in some cases, deepened communal divides (Ojedokun, Tade, & Aderinto, 2019).



## Imago Dei Foundation

Every human being possesses inherent worth and dignity as bearers of God's image, demanding respect in both physical and digital spaces.



## Media Ecology Impact

Digital technologies shape human thought and behaviour, requiring ethical frameworks to guide online conduct and protect human dignity.



## Spectacle Resistance

Christians must resist the commodification of human suffering and violence as entertainment in digital media.

# EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK

In the past two decades, violence in Nigeria has escalated into a multi-dimensional crisis across nearly every region. Empirical studies document its scope and impact, revealing a grim portrait of human life and dignity lost—an affront to the ‘Imago Dei’ theological principle, which affirms inherent human worth and dignity (Middleton, 2005).

Ukoji and Ukoji (2023) analysed national violence-related deaths (2006–2021), revealing Nigeria's consistently high fatality rate from conflicts, banditry, political unrest, and terrorism. They found over 169,000 deaths during this 15-year period, with sharp increases during years marked by insurgent activities in the north-east and growing insecurity in the north-west and north-central zones. Theologically, such mass loss of life constitutes a grave ‘Imago Dei’ violation and an ethical crisis demanding urgent repentance and restorative justice.

In a focused study on homicide trends, Ojedokun et al. (2019) reviewed 516 cases of interpersonal violence-related homicides in Nigeria (2006–2016). Their research shows most victims were young males (20–40 years old), with causes often rooted in domestic quarrels, land disputes, cultism, and political disagreements. This highlights the erosion of conflict resolution mechanisms and violence normalisation in everyday life. It also points to how easily the sanctity of life is disregarded over seemingly trivial disputes, reflecting a societal shift towards moral numbness. Ethically, this normalisation reflects a departure from virtue ethics (MacIntyre, 2007), which emphasises character, self-control, and peaceful dispute resolution. Theologically, it signals a society drifting from God’s mandate to “seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14).

## 2006-2016: Interpersonal Violence

Ojedokun et al. (2019) documented 516 homicides, mostly affecting young males (20–40), reflecting eroded conflict resolution and disregard for life's sanctity.

1

2

## 2020-2022: Digital Violence Rise

Increased online circulation of graphic violence, including the Owo Church Massacre, amplified trauma and desensitisation.

3

## 2023-2025: Gender-Based Violence

Alarming increase in femicide and GBV prompts calls for a state of emergency, highlighting the devaluation of women's lives.



Akingbade, Olabamiji, and Ajala (2022) conducted a geospatial analysis of violent incidents in Northeastern Nigeria using Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), revealing the region as a hotspot for violent extremism. Boko Haram and its offshoots perpetrate widespread killings, abductions, and community destruction, with Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states bearing the brunt. This pattern of violence has displaced millions, creating urgent humanitarian needs as many victims lack protection or psychological care. Such systemic displacement and destruction violate biblical principles of hospitality, neighbourly care, and the ethical obligation to protect the vulnerable (Matthew 25:35-40; Wright, 2004).

Gender-based violence (GBV) has also surged, prompting national and international concern. Reports from human rights organisations and academic studies (e.g., Amnesty International, 2023) indicate an alarming increase in femicide and other forms of GBV, leading activists to call for a state of emergency. Frequent cases of domestic violence, rape, and ritual killings of women often go unpunished due to weak law enforcement and cultural silence. *From a theological-ethical standpoint (Barclay, 1998), these acts represent not only a breach of human rights but also a desecration of the divine dignity inherent in women (Middleton, 2005), contradicting the biblical witness that “male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27) with equal worth and honour.* These incidents further highlight the diminishing regard for human life, especially that of women and girls. Such widespread violence not only threatens physical safety but also corrodes national identity, civic trust, and interreligious harmony.

Collectively, these studies reveal a disturbing pattern: human life in Nigeria is increasingly devalued by violent actors and societal indifference. The normalisation of brutality—whether on the streets, in the home, or on digital platforms—demands urgent theological, ethical, and social intervention (Hauerwas, 1981; Hays, 1996) to restore a culture that cherishes life and dignity for all. Thus, empirical data underscores the moral and spiritual urgency for Nigeria to reclaim its commitment to the sanctity of life through faith-based advocacy and practical policy reforms.

## THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF "THOU SHALT NOT KILL"

As social beings, humanity is guided by the Ten Commandments (Decalogue), fundamental principles for spiritual and social relationships. These commandments establish vertical relationships with God (devotion, reverence, obedience) and horizontal relationships among individuals (justice, respect, and love). More than religious doctrines, they form the foundation of biblical ethics and legal systems, shaping societal norms across cultures and religions (Hester, 2003). Regardless of tribe or religious background, these universal moral laws transcend generations, reinforcing righteous living and communal harmony (Bailey, 2005).

Among these divine principles, “Thou shalt not kill” is pivotal in moral conduct, legal structures, and religious beliefs. Underscoring human life's sacredness, it prohibits unlawful violence and murder while advocating justice, compassion, and human dignity (Barclay, 1998). Across religious traditions, this commandment has influenced interpretations of self-defence, warfare, punishment, and moral responsibility, leading to diverse social and judicial applications. In modern society, it remains a cornerstone of legal frameworks, human rights advocacy, and ethical debates, upholding the intrinsic value of life in governance, law enforcement, and interpersonal relationships (The Catholic Church, 2012).

Hermeneutically, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant traditions often approach this commandment through distinct interpretive frameworks. Jewish exegesis tends to emphasise covenantal ethics and community preservation, Catholic theology frames it within natural law and the sanctity of life doctrine, while many Protestant perspectives highlight personal moral accountability alongside societal justice. These interpretations enrich the understanding of the text's application in varying cultural and historical contexts (Davidson, 2019).

<p><b>Hebrew Context</b></p> <p>The word <i>ratsakh</i> is more accurately translated as "murder" rather than "kill," prohibiting illegal killing while allowing self-defence and just warfare.</p>	<p><b>New Testament Expansion</b></p> <p>Jesus reinterprets the commandment to include internal dispositions—anger, hatred, and contempt—as seeds of murder (Matthew 5:21-22).</p>	<p><b>Digital Application</b></p> <p>Modern interpretation must extend to digital spaces where online hostility, cyberbullying, and viral violence can inflict profound harm.</p>
---	--	---

In the New Testament, "Thou shalt not kill" underwent significant reinterpretation, evolving from a mere legal prohibition against physical murder to a moral and spiritual mandate for holistic living. Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, reinterprets this command with insight into human nature (Matthew 5:21-22). This interpretive move aligns with the broader New Testament emphasis on heart transformation over legal compliance.



# THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE IN NIGERIA: PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL REALITIES

The sacredness of human life, a foundational principle in religious and ethical systems, is gravely threatened in Nigeria. As Adeyemi (2018) argues, no national achievement, including economic progress, holds significance without human life protection. Over the past decade, intensified security threats in Nigeria reflect a growing disregard for life (Iyanda, 2020).

This devaluation is exemplified by the brutal rape and murder of Uwa Omozuwa, a 22-year-old student, inside a Benin City church in May 2020, which sparked widespread outrage (Akinwotu, 2020). Subsequently, on 5 June 2022, St. Francis Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo State, suffered a horrific attack with numerous fatalities and injuries (Amnesty International, 2022; BBC News, 2022). Disturbingly, reports indicated some individuals recorded and live-streamed the event across social media, turning the tragedy into a widely disseminated spectacle of violence (Debord, 1994; Postman, 1985).

**Physical Violence Manifestations**

Nigeria faces unprecedented ritual killings, political violence, insurgency, and extrajudicial executions, violating human dignity (Ojedokun, Tade, & Aderinto, 2019).

**Digital Murder Emergence**

Online platforms enable "digital murder" through character assassination, incitement to self-harm, and public shaming, leading to tragic consequences (Gillespie, 2018).

**Spectacle Culture**




Violence becomes entertainment as graphic content is shared for views, eroding moral sensitivity to human suffering (Debord, 1994; Postman, 1985).

This disrespect for human life and value in Nigeria reflects a grim reality where life's sanctity is under constant assault, physically and digitally. While tragedies like the Owo Church Massacre highlight violent extremism, an equally dangerous but less visible threat is emerging digitally: *digital murder*. This involves digital platforms used to incite, abet, or directly lead to psychological and social harm so grave it results in the victim's death—by suicide, public lynching, or mental collapse (Okyere-Manu, 2021).

# REIMAGINING THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL VIOLENCE

The digital age profoundly transforms thought, communication, and societal participation. Palfrey and Gasser (2008) note that digital media foster new perspectives on self, others, and the world. Yet, as Castells (2002) highlighted, despite our networked society, this influence isn't always positive. Online environments can be misused; thus, while offering powerful opportunities, the digital age also presents serious challenges, particularly ethical considerations of technology (Okyere-Manu, 2021; Turkle, 2011).

The proliferation of digital technology, especially social media, has birthed complex forms of violence challenging traditional theological ethics (Hauerwas, 1981). These actions inflict profound psychological trauma, incite mob action, destroy reputations (Gillespie, 2018), and can lead to severe outcomes like suicide, mental breakdown, or violent retaliation. Theologically, such digital aggression seriously violates the spirit of the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" (Bailey, 2005; Barclay, 1998; Davidson, 2019; Dozeman, 2005; Hester, 2003; Wright, C. J. H., 2004). New Testament interpretation extends this commandment beyond physical murder to encompass character and ethical living (Hays, 1996; Wright, N. T., 2010).

		
<b>Digital Platforms</b> Social media acts as a weapon for character assassination and psychological harm, challenging content moderation and ethical frameworks (Gillespie, 2018).	<b>Psychological Violence</b> Cyberbullying and online shaming contribute to mental breakdown and suicide, necessitating a virtue ethics approach to digital conduct (MacIntyre, 2007).	<b>Digital Discipleship</b> The Christian response employs virtue ethics and compassionate online engagement, fostering digital faith communities and promoting ethical digital citizenship (Campbell & Garner, 2016).

High exposure to violent or sensational online content reduces empathy, increases anxiety, and lowers self-esteem, especially among young people. A strong association between cyberbullying exposure and depressive symptoms among secondary school students in Lagos State has been found. This highlights digital citizenship's profound moral responsibility in Nigeria: to avoid perpetuating harmful content and resist the growing culture of spectacle that commodifies human suffering.

# BARRIERS TO ETHICAL DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT IN FAITH COMMUNITIES

Ethical digital engagement in faith communities faces significant barriers. A primary obstacle is technological illiteracy among both congregants and, crucially, church leadership. Many older ministers and lay leaders lack understanding of digital platforms and their specific ethical challenges, hindering relevant guidance. This often creates a generational divide, leaving younger, digitally-fluent members to navigate complex online spaces without pastoral oversight.

A second barrier is the cultural normalisation of digital violence and disinformation. In a society where graphic content and misinformation frequently go viral, many believers do not perceive a conflict between their Christian faith and online behaviour. This is compounded by "the fragmentation of moral identity," where individuals compartmentalise spiritual commitments from online personas, viewing the digital sphere as a separate, less sacred space governed by different rules.

**Technological Illiteracy**  
Church leaders' lack of digital literacy creates a generational divide in moral guidance for congregants' online behaviour.

**Cultural Normalisation**  
Believers often compartmentalise their spiritual and digital identities, not connecting faith with online conduct.

**Theological Education Gap**  
Seminaries lack digital ethics curricula, leaving churches without frameworks to address digital age moral complexities.

Finally, a lack of formalised theological education and digital ethics resources exists. Seminaries and Bible colleges have been slow to integrate media ecology, digital discipleship, and online pastoral care into their curricula (Okyere-Manu, 2021; Campbell & Garner, 2016). Without a robust theological framework, churches lack tools to develop effective sermons, Bible studies, and training programmes to address digital age moral complexities (Hester, 2003).

To overcome these barriers, faith communities must adopt a multifaceted approach integrating education, virtue formation, and proactive leadership (Gushee & Stassen, 2016; MacIntyre, 2007). This requires prioritising digital literacy and theological education at all church levels. Theological institutions should update curricula with digital ethics courses, while churches host regular workshops for leaders and congregants on safe, ethical online behaviour. These sessions demystify technology, equipping believers to apply Christian principles to digital life (Hauerwas, 1981; Hays, 1996; Wright, N. T., 2010).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine how the sanctity of human life (Iyanda, 2020), rooted in "Thou shalt not kill" (Davidson, 2019; Dozeman, 2005), is challenged in Nigerian society amid increasing digital violence (Ojedokun, Tade, & Aderinto, 2019). Combining quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from interviews and focus groups, the research offered a comprehensive perspective on public attitudes, ethical practices, and theological awareness (Gushee & Stassen, 2016; Hauerwas, 1981).

### Quantitative Data Analysis

A structured online survey, completed by 500 respondents via Community Access Network (CAN) platforms in Southwest Nigeria, evaluated perceptions and practices relating to human dignity and digital conduct (Campbell & Garner, 2016; Gillespie, 2018).

1. Awareness of Human Dignity: 89% of respondents agreed human life is sacred because every person is made in God's image (Middleton, 2005), indicating a strong theological foundation.
2. Exposure to Digital Violence: 76% acknowledged digital platforms have desensitised Nigerians to violence (Debord, 1994; Postman, 1985). Approximately 65% admitted watching or forwarding videos depicting physical harm, public humiliation, or extrajudicial actions on platforms like WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook (Ojedokun, Tade, & Aderinto, 2019).

3. **Ethical Engagement:** Although 82% agreed Christian teachings on love, compassion, and justice should shape online behaviour (Hays, 1996; MacIntyre, 2007; Wright, N. T., 2010), only 45% reported regular church engagement with digital ethics, and 41% rarely heard sermons on ethical online conduct. The relevance of African ethics (Okyere-Manu, 2021; Olupona, 2018) and Old Testament ethics (Wright, C. J. H., 2004) to contemporary digital challenges was also considered.
4. **Role of Religious Institutions:** 70% of respondents believed churches and faith-based organisations should proactively guide ethical digital behaviour.

This analysis is presented in Table 1, which details respondents' views on the sanctity of life and digital ethics in Nigeria (N = 500):

Survey Item	Agree (%)		Neutral (%)		Disagree (%)	
Human life is sacred because every person is made in the image of God (Imago Dei).	445	89%	30	6%	25	5%
Digital media has desensitised Nigerians to violence.	380	76%	70	14%	50	10%
I have watched or shared violent or degrading videos online.	325	65%	90	18%	85	17%
Christian teachings on compassion and justice are not adequately practised in Nigeria's digital culture.	410	82%	50	10%	40	8%
I have seen religious messages online condemning digital violence or promoting the sanctity of life in the last 6 months.	225	45%	110	22%	165	33%
My pastor or church leader often addresses ethical digital conduct.	145	29%	150	30%	205	41%
Christian institutions should be more active in shaping digital behaviour and ethics.	350	70%	85	17%	65	13%

Source: Research Survey 2025

These figures reflect a critical gap between religious belief and moral practice, particularly within the digital landscape.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Thirty in-depth interviews (pastors, church members, theologians, and digital media practitioners) and four focus groups (university students, church youth, women fellowship leaders, and media practitioners) were conducted. The thematic analysis is shown in Table 2 below:

### Thematic Analysis:

**Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Interviews on the Sanctity of Life and Digital Ethics in Nigeria**

Theme	Description	Quote
Theological Awareness of Imago Dei	Participants understood Imago Dei but acknowledged a gap between this knowledge and digital practice.	"We are taught that everyone bears God's image, but online we treat people like they don't matter." – Youth Participant
Digital Desensitisation	Repeated exposure to online violence numbed emotional and ethical responses to human suffering.	"People no longer cry when they see someone killed in a video. They just forward it." – University Student
Religious Hypocrisy	Participants observed that despite widespread religiosity, moral behaviour did not reflect Christian teachings.	"We preach holiness, yet Christians are first to post fights online. We have a serious discipleship problem." – Pastor
Call for Digital Discipleship	Participants advocated for churches to teach media literacy and guide believers in ethical digital engagement.	"We need to disciple believers not just in prayer but in how to behave online." – Youth Pastor

*Source: Interview and focus group discussion 2025*



89%

### Imago Dei Belief

Respondents affirm human life is sacred due to Imago Dei.

65%

### Digital Violence Consumption

Admit watching or sharing violent/degrading online content despite beliefs.

41%

### Lack of Pastoral Guidance

Report rare pastoral guidance on ethical digital conduct.

## INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings reveal a troubling ethical and theological conflict within Nigerian Christianity in the digital age. Though most respondents affirm human life's sacredness, rooted in the *Imago Dei* doctrine (Middleton, 2005), their digital practices often contrast this. This tension illustrates ethical opacity in digital environments, blurring the line between moral affirmation and practical action.

Nigerian Christians, despite strong theological convictions on life's sanctity, often engage in or passively consume dehumanising content (e.g., violent videos, mob justice footage, cyberbullying). This ethical contradiction echoes findings on social media's contribution to moral disengagement in Nigerian digital spaces, where online media's spectacle-driven logic dilutes societal values (Debord, 1994; Hauerwas, 1981).

#### Ethical Contradiction

89% affirm Imago Dei; however, 65% consume violent content, revealing a gap between Christian confession and digital conduct in Nigerian society.

#### Pastoral Silence

41% report rare pastoral guidance on digital ethics, indicating church silence on online moral formation.

#### Digital Discipleship Need

70% desire active Christian institutions in shaping digital ethics, indicating a hunger for online moral direction.

The findings that 55% of respondents identified no online religious messages addressing digital violence, and 41% seldom hear pastors discuss digital ethics, highlight a gap in pastoral formation and public theology. As Okyere-Manu (2021) noted, Nigerian Christian leaders must contextualise ethical teachings to digital life, not just abstract salvation and morality.

# CONCLUSION

"Thou Shalt Not Kill" (Exodus 20:13) is a moral and theological imperative affirming human life's sanctity. In Nigeria, life's sacredness is severely threatened by various forms of violence, including digital harm. Theological reflections from the *Imago Dei* (Genesis 1:27), Christ's teachings (Matthew 5:21-22; France, 2007), and African communal ethics (Mbiti, 1969; Okyere-Manu, 2021) affirm life as inviolable and divinely ordained. Despite Christian theology upholding life as sacred and inviolable (Hauerwas, 1981), real-life experiences, often amplified by digital media (Turkle, 2011), reveal systemic failures in translating these ideals into societal practice. This disconnect between theological affirmations and empirical realities necessitates urgent ethical, spiritual, and policy responses, especially concerning digital content moderation (Gillespie, 2018) and pervasive digital violence (Ojedokun et al., 2019).

Therefore, religious institutions, particularly Christian churches, must broaden their engagement with contemporary violence. Upholding "Thou Shalt Not Kill" demands going beyond pulpit pronouncements to include robust education, proactive advocacy, technological awareness, and strategic policy engagement (Wright, 2004).

01

## ***Imago Dei*-Based Media Literacy**

Churches should teach the *Imago Dei* doctrine (Middleton, 2005) as a foundational principle for digital ethics, emphasising respect for human dignity online and offline.

02

## **Digital Violence Awareness Campaigns**

Christian organisations should develop programmes sensitising believers to digital violence dangers and promoting ethical digital citizenship, fostering Christian character (Wright, 2010).

03

## **Pastoral Training in Digital Ethics**

Church leaders need comprehensive training to effectively address digital gossip, online cruelty, and virtual complicity in sermons and counselling, enhancing engagement with digital faith communities (Campbell & Garner, 2016).

04

## **Life-Affirming Digital Content**

Christian media ministries should proactively produce and disseminate content promoting compassion, forgiveness, and human dignity as powerful counter-narratives to online violence.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Not Applicable

# CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest

# FUNDING

This research received no funding from any agency.

# REFERENCES

- Aborisade, R. A., & Adedayo, S. S. (2018). Social media and youth violence in Nigeria: A psychosocial review. *IFE Psychologia*, 26(2), 197-208.
- Akinwotu, E. (2020, June 2). *Rape and murder of student in church sparks outrage across Nigeria*. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jun/02/and-of-student-in-church-sparks-outrage-across-nigeria>
- Amnesty International. (2022, June 6). *Nigeria: Gunmen attack Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo State*.
- Bailey, W. A. (2005). *"You shall not kill" or "you shall not murder"?* Liturgical Press.
- Barclay, W. (1998). *The Ten Commandments*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- BBC News. (2022, June 6). Nigeria Owo church attack: Blood on the altar. *BBC News*.
- Campbell, H. A., & Garner, S. (2016). *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture*. Baker Academic.
- Central Intelligence Agency. (2024). *The World Factbook: Nigeria*.
- Conciliation Resources. (n.d.). *Social media and violent and non-violent mobilisation in Nigeria: What role for mediation?*
- Davidson, R. M. (2019). "You Shall not Kill" or "You Shall not Murder"? The Meaning of *Ratsakh* in the Sixth Commandment. *Reflections*, 67(July), 2-12.
- Falola, T. (2018). *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hester, J. P. (2003). *The Ten Commandments: A Handbook of Religious, Legal, and Social Issues*. MacFarland.
- Iyanda, S. (2020). The doctrine of sanctity of human life in Judaism and Christianity: Lesson for the Nigerian nation. *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, 10(1), 17-30.
- Obasanjo, S. B., Ifah, S. S., & Osiogun, U. C. (2023). Patterns and causes of mob justice in Nigeria. *FUOYE Journal of Criminology and Security Studies*, 1(1), 1-18.
- Ojedokun, U. A., Tade, O., & Aderinto, A. A. (2019). Trends and patterns of homicides arising from interpersonal violence in Nigeria (2006-2016). *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(17-18), 8456-8470.
- Okyere-Manu, B. D. (2021). *African Values, Ethics, and Technology: Questions, Issues, and Approaches*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Olupona, J. K. (2018). *African Religions and the Challenges of Modernity*. Fordham University Press.

Paradigm Initiative. (2024, February 10). *Online Violence Against Women in Nigeria During Covid-19*.

The Catholic Church. (2012). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Vatican Publishing House.

Worldometer. (2025). *Nigeria population*. Worldometer. <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/nigeria-population/>

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

**Samuel C. Nwankwo**

*Department of Theology, Wesley University Ondo, Nigeria*

✉ [samuel.nwankwo@wesleyuni.edu.ng](mailto:samuel.nwankwo@wesleyuni.edu.ng)

**Michael Olusola Makinde**

*Department of Computer Science, Wesley University Ondo, Nigeria*

**Received:** June 16, 2025

**Accepted:** August 13, 2025

**Published:** November 19, 2025

## Citation:

Nwankwo, S. C., & Makinde, M. O. (2025). "Thou Shalt Not Kill:" Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Sanctity of Human Life in Nigerian Society in the Age of Digital Technology. *SustainE*, 3(2), 550-569. In A. A. Atwoju, E. O. Oyekanmi, A. A. Akinsemolu, & D. M. Duyile (Eds.), *Sustainability, innovation, and development: A Festschrift in honour of Rt. Rev. Prof. Obeka Samuel Sunday* [Special issue]. <https://doi.org/10.55366/suse.v3i2.25>

❏ **Disclaimer:** The opinions and statements in this article are the author(s)' sole responsibility and do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints of their affiliated organisations, the publisher, the hosted journal, the editors, or the reviewers. Furthermore, any product evaluated or claim made by its manufacturer is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

OPEN  ACCESS

Distributed under Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0