Worshipping on Zoom:
a digital ethnographic study of African Pentecostal churches and their liturgical practices during Covid-19

Giuseppina Addo

Media and Communication Studies: Culture, Collaborative Media, and Creative Industries

One-year Master thesis | 15 credits

Submitted: Spring 2020

Supervisor: Erin Cory

Examiner: Anders Høg Hansen
I dedicate the work of this thesis to my beloved mother, Yaa Amponsah.

I am eternally grateful to you for your strength and unconditional love.

To my dad, Sam, who is at peace with the ancestors, you are forever lifted in my memory. There is no greater love than the one you have given me.

I thank Erin Cory, my thesis supervisor (my thesis doula, as I call you). This work could not have been birthed without your assistance, your support, your encouragement, and expertise. I am truly grateful.
Abstract

Drawing on theoretical concepts of affordance and affect, and by conducting a digital ethnographic research on African Pentecostal communities in Northern Italy, the research analyses how offline liturgical practice are translated in online platforms such as Zoom and Free Conference Call during the Covid-19 global pandemic. It is argued that online affordances such as the chat box and emojis are used by believers to communicate affective moments during worship services, while the mute button is used as a tool by leaders to wield their power to restore order and surveillance. Thus, some of the traditional power dynamics between worshippers, as well as performative aspects of Christianity are brought into the digital space. We also find that digital platforms can in fact, constraint religious practices, however believers use creative ways to circumvent some of the obstacles by re-appropriating the digital tools available to express spirituality and to intimately connect with fellow worshippers.

Key words: affordance, affect, African Pentecostalism, Covid-19
# Table of contents

1. **Introduction** .................................................................................................................... 5

2. **Background** .................................................................................................................... 7
   - African Pentecostal churches ............................................................................................ 7
   - The role of music and dance ............................................................................................ 8
   - The role of the spirit and of the Holy Spirit ...................................................................... 8
   - African Pentecostal churches in Italy ............................................................................... 9

3. **Literature review** ............................................................................................................ 10
   - Performative Christianity .................................................................................................. 10
   - Praise and Worship ........................................................................................................... 10
   - Praise dance ..................................................................................................................... 12
   - Preaching ......................................................................................................................... 13
   - Cyber churches ................................................................................................................ 13
   - Online performance and connections ........................................................................... 14

4. **Theoretical background** ................................................................................................ 16
   - Affect theory .................................................................................................................... 16
     - Affect in religion ............................................................................................................. 17
     - The physical embodiment of affect .............................................................................. 19
   - Affordance theory ............................................................................................................ 20
     - Different types of affordance ....................................................................................... 21
   - Connecting affect to affordance ..................................................................................... 22

5. **Methodology** .................................................................................................................. 23
   - Digital Ethnographic Research ....................................................................................... 25
   - Research design .............................................................................................................. 26
   - Methodological reflections ............................................................................................. 28

6. **Analysis** .......................................................................................................................... 30
   - Bodies and performance - Affective voices .................................................................... 32
   - Worship in the chat box ................................................................................................... 35
     - Emotions and emojis ..................................................................................................... 35
     - Generational gap .......................................................................................................... 38
   - Surveillance ...................................................................................................................... 41
   - Mic on - mask off ............................................................................................................. 41
   - Camera on ......................................................................................................................... 44
   - Altar call - online healing moments .............................................................................. 46
7. Discussion and concluding remarks ................................................................. 47
8. Future research and recommendations .......................................................... 49
Bibliography ........................................................................................................ 51
Appendix ................................................................................................................ 53

Figures

Figure 1. Example of digital evangelism on WhatsApp ............................................. 27
Figure 2 Affective moments in the chat box during a church service ...................... 41
Figure 3 Example of private and intimate connections through the chat box .......... 42
1. Introduction

Online church worship or cyber churches refers to the way Christian groups have been able to facilitate their religious activities thanks to the internet. While this phenomenon has been observed mainly in the United States and in the United Kingdom since the early 2000s, it is gaining prominence as a global practice in recent months due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Italy, which at the time of writing this thesis was one of the countries most affected by the virus, has introduced strict measures to limit contagions. In early March, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte introduced new legislations forbidding all forms of social gatherings, including religious ones.

Thus, online worship has become the only choice available to communities that want to maintain religious fellowship. Yet, some Christian traditions do not consider online fellowship as a legitimate practice. In 2002 the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Social Communication released an official document titled “The Church and the internet”. In the text they argued that “the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel (...)” (Vatican City, 2002). Moreover, research by Hutchins (2011) on online Anglican believers confirms this statement. He noted that members were unwilling to transfer core religious practices, such as Eucharist, into the online space. In their view these should be only performed offline in physical churches in order to maintain their religious legitimacy.

Therefore, as we can see, online worshipping has been viewed as a complementary activity to the offline practice and never as a substitutive. However, the global pandemic of Covid-19 is challenging this core belief. Indeed, as we find ourselves in unprecedented times, many religious groups are being forced to wrestle with this change.

The religious group which has been selected as the subject of my study is the African Pentecostal church. Particularly fascinating are their church services where there is exceptional emphasis on sensory and aesthetic components such as music and dance. Moreover, in their view, the Holy Spirit provides a central role in the faith as
agentic force in delivering “spiritual gifts” as well as supernatural endowments (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005). Therefore, it seems apparent that the shift to an online platform would have a significant impact on key components of their religious identity, and practices.

In investigating this I attempting to answer the following questions:

*To what extent are the offline religious practices of African Pentecostal worshippers reproduced in the digital environment? And what are the new social relations that emerge between worshippers in the digital landscape?*

Drawing on theoretical concepts of affordance and affect, I conduct digital ethnographic research on African Pentecostal communities in Northern Italy as they engage in the online worship service as well as other religious activities such as Bible schools and prayer meetings. Moreover, the data is supplemented by ethnographic interviews of believers belonging to different church constellations in the northern regions. The composition of the thesis is as follows:

In the background I provide an overview of African Pentecostalism and some of the key components informing their religious practices; in the second part I provide a selection of contemporary literature on performative Christianity and I identify some of the studies relating to cyber churches and televangelism; in the third part I situate my research in the theories of affect and affordances and highlight areas where the two theories find common ground; in the fourth part I identify my research questions and the methodological approach for data selection; in part five I reflect upon ethical issues of privacy in the research; in the sixth part the data is extracted and discussed by combining theory and literature; finally, I dedicate the last parts to reflections and concluding remarks, as well as recommendations for future research.

In this thesis I attempt to offer a modern outlook on existing literature regarding digital media and their role in religious practices. The research stands at a critical juncture between what might be known as “pre Covid era” and “post Covid era”. We currently have no insight on when the pandemic will end, as well as its potential social ramifications. Thus, digital fellowship might be the new modus operandi for religious communities across the globe. In that respect, the thesis provides valuable insight to religious communities, as well as to media studies.
2. Background

African Pentecostal churches

Pentecostal churches were born in the United States at the beginning of the 19th century. The doctrine takes inspiration from Protestantism, which emphasises the pursuit of a personal connection with God through the reading of the Bible. However, Pentecostalism differs from other Christian denominations as it brings great focus to the Holy Spirit, which is seen as an important agent in the Holy Trinity.

Ghanaian religious scholar (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005:12) defines Pentecostalism as:

“Christian groups which emphasise salvation in Christ as a transformative experience wrought by the Holy Spirit and in which pneumatic phenomena including ‘speaking in tongues’, prophecies, visions, healing and miracles in general, perceived as standing in historic continuity with the experiences of the early church as found especially in the Acts of the Apostles, are sought, accepted, valued, and consciously encouraged among members as signifying the presence of God and experiences of his Spirit.”

Pentecostalism spread widely in Africa in the late 1970s following missionary endeavours in Nigeria and Ghana, and subsequently in the rest of the continent. However, Asamoah-Gyadu argues that, in the process of assimilation of Christianity, the indigenous population extracted the spiritual components of the religion and adapted it to their traditional practices (2005:13). As the indigenous population yearned for a deeper spiritual experience and connection with the divine, they placed the Holy Spirit at the centre of the Christian message, initiating a “second Christianisation” or “renewal” (ibid).

In the next section we will explore in detail this role of the Holy Spirit and how it was appropriated within the indigenous traditions. We will also look at the role of music and dance and its cultural value to the worshippers.
Music serves as a very important element in the liturgy of African Pentecostal churches. For example, Buttici (2012) notes that African Pentecostal churches in Italy invest considerable amounts of resources in the musical performance in their churches. In their views the music guarantees an intense and vibrant liturgical experience.

Through her participant observation research in African Pentecostal churches in Turin, she notes that during the various music interludes, members are encouraged to dance and move freely across the worship space as well as connect with each other through brief dance improvisations. These music sessions feature intense percussions of drums, congas, and tambourines, as well as powerful vocals from the choir.

Moreover, feelings of euphoria and joy are expressed through active physical engagement and performances (Ibid.: 63). Thus, making the argument that music does not only provide an important tool in the expression of religious feelings, but it is also a valuable cultural entertainment product.

In their book “Music in the Life of the African Church”, King et. al (2008:6), argue that a distinctive feature of churches in Africa is in its expressive means to link song, dance and drama. They argue that this artistic link is used as a tool to communicate to the divine and to other worshippers. Thus, we can perceive the role of music as an integral part of the African Pentecostal identity. Not only for its cultural value, but also for the spiritual and communal benefit to the worshippers.

The role of the spirit and of the Holy Spirit

In this section I will bring more prominence to the role of the Holy Spirit, as understood from a Pentecostal doctrine, as well as the role of spirit within indigenous practices in West Africa.

The Holy Spirit, as previously mentioned, represents an essential part in Pentecostalism. The signs of his presence are manifested in the form of prophecies, healings, glossolalia and "falls" similar to trance (Buttici 2012; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005), which feature in many of the ritualistic practices of the church.

Pentecostalism has been able to prosper in Africa because one of the key features is spirituality which finds resonance with many traditional pre-colonial religious practices. As Asamoah-Gyadu explains, within the West African context “humankind not only
stands in need of the powers and blessings of the benevolent beings, but may actually appropriate their protection from evil spiritual forces through covenant relationships with the transcendent benevolent helpers” (2005:17). Thus, it is in this dichotomous relationship between good spirits versus bad spirits that the African Pentecostal doctrine operates. As Formenti (2007) argues, the threat posed by demons and evil spirits is one of the recurring themes of Pentecostalism in West African countries such as Nigeria.

Moreover, the medium through which the two forms of spirituality are expressed, is the physical body. For example, great emphasis is placed on the spiritual gift of healing, which consists of a series of techniques, ranging from the laying on of hands, to collective prayer, to forms of exorcism (called deliverance), aimed at channelling divine power and eradicating internal evil (Buttici 2012; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Formenti 2007).

Thus, we can perceive the physical body as a bridge connecting the transcendent to the physical realm, a stage where spiritual manifestations can take place and can be observed by fellow believers.

**African Pentecostal churches in Italy**

Through the missionary endeavours in West Africa, Pentecostalism was able to spread across the continent assuming a new identity as it adapted to the unique cultural landscape. Consequently, it proliferated outside the continent through migratory flows, travelling from Africa to Europe as migrants embarked on the journey to find new employment opportunities or reunite with families in Europe (Formenti 2007; Buttici 2012).

Formenti (2007) notes that the first African Pentecostal churches appeared in Turin, in Northern Italy in the 90s with the first wave of migration from Nigeria. She observed that the diaspora communities expanded the doctrine through the use of multimedia tools such as video cassettes and tapes, and through the transnational movements of international leaders and preachers.

In looking at the specific ethnic components of the churches, Butticci (2012) argues that in Italy the majority of Pentecostal churches have Ghanaian, Nigerian and Congolese origins. In terms of numbers, she notes that there is one Pentecostal church for every 150 immigrants of Christian faith. However, attempting to estimate the number of churches is quite challenging as their presence can be volatile. As she explains, new churches emerge following charismatic leaders or disappear being
incorporated into others (Ibid: 20). Moreover, due to the irregular migration status of some of the members, attempting to provide official numbers becomes quite arduous (Formenti 2007: 28).

Nevertheless, Butticci estimates that the Nigeria community of believers has the biggest presence on the Italian territory with an average of 400 churches (2012: 20). In general, across the West African communities, individual churches report around 30 believers in their congregation, with some of the more prominent churches reporting about 150 worshippers (Ibid.)

Through this data we can conclude that in Italy, although African Pentecostalism is still viewed as a religious minority against the Catholic majority, it has a dynamic network of believers on the territory, which could positively impact its growth in the future.

2. Literature review

Performative Christianity

As we will see in the section regarding the theoretical perspective, Corrigan (2004) makes the connection between religion and performance. In his view religious emotions are performed according to social rules and culturally derived guidelines (Corrigan 2004:16). Therefore, in this this section, we will explore some of the key performative aspects of Pentecostalism and their roles in the liturgy. Thus, worship, praise dance and preaching will be explored.

Praise and Worship

As mentioned in the background, music is a key medium in Pentecostalism. It corresponds to the “a specific set of rituals in which participants express devotion to God and experience divine presence in the context of a community, whether physically present or imagined” (Ingalls and Yong 2015: 18). Thus, for the believer worship is not a solitary expression of faith but rather, a communal collaborative effort between bodies.
Moreover, praise and worship are very intentional activities in the liturgy, and not a mere sing along. They provide a viable route to a central goal of Pentecostal spirituality, which is transformation (Prosen 2018: 262). For believers, this process of spiritual transformation is facilitated by the help of other worshipping bodies as they join together in connection to the divine, a “unio mystica” as Land (2010) calls it.

It is important to state that this devotional activity is not understood among Pentecostals as a ritualistic practice. As Lindhardt (2011) notes, “ritual” is a word that Pentecostals generally eschew because of its association with what they consider the “prescribed, formal, spiritually empty liturgy of mainline churches” (in Prosen 2018:273). Since Pentecostalism stresses the importance of the individual connection with the divine, in their view spirituality should be expressed in total freedom and void of liturgical formalities.

Nevertheless, the act of worship is embedded with different steps that believers follow when communicating with the divine. This religious roadmap, which recalls the journey of the Israelites in the Old Testament, sees the worshipper moving from the outer courts of the Jewish tabernacle (with prayers of forgiveness), into the Holy of Holies (a state of contemplation and divine adoration). Land (2010:67) describes it as a “biblical drama of participation in God’s history”. Thus, making the case that Christianity is, in fact, a performative experience in which spirituality and ritual play vital roles. Spirituality as a “lived religious experience, and ritual as the practices and performances that dramatize and vitalize that spirituality” (Albrecht 999 in Prosen 2018:270).

We can observe the performative aspect of worship in Hillsong, which is perhaps the most recognizable brand of worship production with a global influence on Pentecostal churches.

Abraham (2018) researched the notion of sincerity in worship services and focused on the band’s worship performance. As he observed, Hillsong congregational albums undergo a meticulous post-production phase where performance and musical arrangement are refined and enhanced. This view is confirmed by Wade and Hynes (2013), who note that the band’s worship service is a “carefully choreographed spectacle” designed to provide an ecstatic religious experience which can provoke strong physio-emotional responses in the listener (in Abraham 2018: 9).

As Marti (2017) outlines, Hillsong represents, above all, a particular kind of worship, which is highly subjective and highly standardized. In his view, their worship
services seek to create and inspire born-again evangelical Christians by employing elements from the wider pop culture industry and use it in their religious production (in Abraham 2018:2).

Hillsong has been successful in adapting to shifting trends in the culture industry. However, this poses an interesting dilemma in religious spaces, as we will see in the next section concerning praise dance. According to believers, religious practices should remain sacred and void of worldly infiltrations. However, it is interesting to note that it is through the use and appropriation of performative elements or other forms of sensory engagement that the worship experience is enriched.

Praise dance

Another performative component within Pentecostalism is the concept of praise dance. Praise dance, or liturgical dance, is a genre characterized by the use of interpretive dances as vehicles of liturgical worship, testimony, and evangelism. It elevates creative skills and aesthetic sensibilities normally found outside the purview of religious traditions (Elisha 2018). The aim of praise dancers is to set the atmosphere for the encounter with the Holy Spirit through the performance. Dancers use props such as colourful flags and wear colourful liturgical garments, which in all effects, reinforce this religious supportive role they have. Interestingly, Hovi (2011:135) calls praise dancers “spiritual cheerleaders”, which I believe is quite apt.

Aside from the use of colourful props, we see that the body is also an important vehicle in the performance. Not only is it seen as the vessel or canvas, through which Christianity is performed, but it also the stage where affective moments are displayed. As Coleman (2000) argues, “Christians engage in a process of ‘spiritual bodybuilding’ and learns to read the body as a text that can give an inductive proof of the power of the ingested Word, the biblical message” (in Hovi 2018:135).

Meyer (2010) argues that the “movement styles and self-identification as evangelical emissaries are based on neo-Pentecostal ethics and aesthetics (in Elisha 2018:381). However, this movement is controversial as it is often seen as a “worldly entertainment that compromises the sanctity of worship” (Ibid).

As seen in the previous section concerning Hillsong music performances, there is ongoing debate on the challenges that religious actors face when assimilating what some believers consider secular practices, into the sacred religious field. On the one
hand, these performative practices supply believers with the creativity and sensory engagement needed in the liturgy. However, on the other hand, these are the same elements found in the culture industry and widely used by non-believers for non-religious purposes. Therefore, their use become a contentious issue.

Preaching

Finally, a key component in Pentecostalism is preaching. Preaching, just as in worship and dance, can often evoke strong emotional connections. Since preaching aims to exhort, edify, warn and correct, it requires finely tuned rhetorical skills in order to successfully affect the audience (Reinhardt 2017:73).

In his research in a Ghanaian ministry training centre, Reinhardt investigated how mimaetically acquired rhetorical skills, eventful performances, and charisma are articulated. He identified the concept of “performance flow” and the catalysing force of “charisma” in delivering the message (Ibid.: 240). In the research he noted that speech is influenced by the affective force of “Spirit” both from the person delivering the message, as well as the person receiving it.

Traditionally, radio and television have been instrumental in expanding the platform of the preachers by connecting large audiences to the message. Today, thanks to the internet, believers from all over the world are presented with an array of spiritual goods to choose from. However, it is interesting to observe that the very structure of the internet can encourage the emergence of diverse religious traditions and religious practitioners may even reinterpret some of the communal rituals in ways that may challenge offline ecclesiastical organizations (Hutchings 2011). In the next section I will review the body of literature relating specifically to online churches or cyber churches.

Cyber churches

Recent research conducted on online fellowship have focused on the virtual world and 3D realities. Using digital ethnography, Hutchings (2011) analysed online churches such as the Church of Fools, the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life and the i-church. He studied the online interaction between believers as they engaged with each other using cartoon-like avatars in their virtual services. Hutchings identified clear parallels with some of the television ministries in the in the 1950s in United States and argued
that believers online participate in networks of communities and connections to pursue valuable spiritual and social encounters.

Within the Ghanaian context, Asamoah-Gyadu (2005b:17) argues that television is influential in balancing power. In his view television has the potential to erode vestiges of denominational loyalty” since believers have access to other interpretations of the message of Christianity beyond the local church pastor. This point finds consensus with Hutchings observation of online churches. So, we can perceive the new agency afforded to believers through these new forms of digital spirituality. Thus, believers are empowered to select and choose the religious teachings that can best respond to their spiritual need.

Moreover, televangelism, and televangelists specifically, have masterfully honed the skills in bridging the physical distance with the believer watching from home. As Asamoah-Gyadu states, “It is expected that through the screen these viewers can experience what those who were actually physically present also received”. Thus, one can make the argument that spiritual connections do not require physical presence and that religious experiences can be consumed from remote.

It appears, however, that members do recognise the limits of online ritualistic practices. Hutchings (2011:1127) noted in his study that believers seeking an online Anglican space are unwilling to compromise their core theological belief when it came to the ritual of the Eucharist, which they felt needed to be carried out offline. This view is also echoed by the Vatican in 2002 which viewed the internet only as a complementary tool to the offline religious fellowship.

Online performance and connections

Although it does not relate to religious experiences, the book “Skype: Bodies, screens, space” by Robyn Longhurst (2017), brings valuable insight to this thesis as it analyses social dynamics in digital spaces, thus providing an interesting framework for how worshippers relate to one another online.

Longhurst explores people’s use of the video camera and how individuals “embody the screen space”. She makes the argument that people are able to foster emotional connections through mediated interactions. In fact, the absence of the physical connection does not seem to pose significant obstacles in the interaction between
people, as the digital platform still allows for physical experiences, albeit re-imagined for the online context. Users cannot touch, taste or smell each other online however, connections can still be obtained through affective moments. One does not necessarily need the physical touch of a loved one to experience the emotional fulfilment of that gesture, as affect and emotions are purely relational in her view. Thus, reinforcing the concept that our own experience on digital platforms is predicated on the level of rapport we have with the user on the screen.

Moreover, Longhurst introduces the interesting concept of “self in the box”, which refers to the window that appears at the corner on Skype as we interact with one another. She makes the argument that as individuals, we are confronted by our own image in that box, which becomes a constant reminder of how people view us and our surroundings. Depending on our interlocuter, we might feel relaxed or under surveillance, which can prompt us to adjust our camera view to revel or conceal aspects of our domestic life.

In summarizing this extensive literature review, we have seen some of the performative aspects of Pentecostalism and their presence on digital platforms such as television or the internet. Furthermore, from Hutchings (2011) and the recommendations provided by the Vatican church, we can conclude that online religious activities are used as a supplement, and not substitute for offline religious experiences. In fact, having access to the offline experience, provides the baseline for the believer to venture out and shop for alternative or supplementary spiritual goods.

While this traditional model has worked well in the past, we now find ourselves in a global pandemic, which has resulted in many churches being closed. So, it becomes increasingly difficult for believers to have the real-life physical church experience to fall back on. Christians in Italy and in many countries around the world are having to rely exclusively on the online experience for the important aspects of their Christian journey. Thus, the contribution of this research is in providing a preliminary investigation on how this new model will impact the believer. In doing so we will explore how offline religious practices are translated online, as well as how believers interact with one another in the new digital landscape.
3. Theoretical background

Having collected valuable insights from the interviews, as well as from the online participant observations, the theories that seem to emerge from the data extract are those that can answer questions relating to feelings and emotions stemming from the practice of worship, as well as the tools available in the digital environment which are used by the worshipper.

Thus, the theoretical lenses through which we can analyse the African Pentecostal communities and their shift to digital platforms are offered by both affect and affordance theories. Affect theory will certainly provide the framework for analysing the emotional landscape, whereas affordance theory with how the various digital platforms impact the experience of the worshippers.

Affect theory

Starting from the vast landscape of the study of affect, we can locate the origins of this theory to psychologist Silvan Tomkins. According to him “the affect system creates consciousness by directing the human to those sources that create the highest intensity of neural firing at any given moment” (Tomkins, 1962 in McGroarty 2006:60). So, from this first definition we can perceive that affect provides the tool for investigating the emotional response that individuals give in relations to stimuli found in the social environment.

From this first original definition, the theory has since migrated into other fields and disciplines thus adding different layers and nuances, helping to engender a vast body of literature on the study of emotions and feelings. As Supp-Montgomerie (2015: 336) notes “a central difficulty with securing a clear place for affect studies is that there is no such thing as a singular affect theory”. Affect is commonly described as relating to feelings, emotions, enthusiasm, energy, and mood depending on the research stream and discipline.

Döveling et al. (2018:2) attempt to provide some clarity in bringing a distinction between emotion and affect. They define emotion as in-build, in-person psychological construct that becomes active in social sharing, while affect is defined as something outside of a person, something that is discursive, relational, and pre-cognitive. Their central argument is that emotion is what people do, while affect is a cultural practice involving a community of people.
This clear definition of affect allows us to perceive and articulate the emotional connections prompted by religious fellowship and liturgical rites such as praying, worship songs, delivery of sermons and other Pentecostal communal practices.

Affect in religion

In situating affect in the broad study of religion, we can find 19th century Christian theologians such as Rudolf Otto who identified emotions as an essential characteristic of religion (1936 in Corrigan 2004). In his view, feelings of awe, energy and mystery constitute the foundational practices of religion.

Otto, identified the notion of “mysterium tremendum”, that is:

“a feeling that may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrilling, vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its “profane,” non-religious mood of everyday experience.” (Otto 1936 in Corrigan 2004: 9)

What Otto describes is what many believers might view as the workings of the Holy Spirit. It describes the physical response and manifestation of affects as seen in the main aspects of worship services particularly in African Pentecostal churches.

Further, James (1961) highlights the individualistic aspect of the emotional response describing it as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” (in Selbo 2019:11).

This perspective is also of interest as it situates the worshiper in his individual emotional environment, rather than viewing the experience as a collective and collaborative effort as we will see described in the next section.

Contemporary religious scholars such as Corrigan take a different perspective by looking at performative aspects of emotion.

For Corrigan (2004:16) the rules for emotional expressions are coded in the social frameworks for everyday life. Thus, he sees emotion as performed according to societal rules and expectations. He provides a vast array of examples of religious spaces where
performative elements are enacted. From the sermon on the pulpit preached to support certain emotional styles, to the way ritual is performed to evoke emotionality, to awe-inspiring cathedral windows, designed to awaken a deep emotional response. Corrigan makes the argument that religions do, in fact, offer both direct and indirect cues about emotionality to practitioners (Ibid.). Although this perspective relates to the physical spaces of religious practices, it is useful in providing the argument that online worship can also be performative as well and offer specific cues to worshipper concerning their emotional expressions.

In line with Corrigan’s argument Döveling et al. (2018) also posit that emotions are cultural practices and normalised performances. In the context of digital media, they claim that emotions are mediatised as collective imagination and appraised in such a way that users check how well their emotional reactions correspond to the feelings of their peers. Therefore, since emotions are cultural products governed by implicit norms, they are aligned and negotiated according to the expectations of what and how we should feel and express them. Döveling et al. call this “emotion contagion” (2018:4). Although they refer to hashtag solidarity movements on social media, this view can be applied to religious groups as well, as affective moments are shared and experienced collectively through the bonds of worship and expressed according to religious norms.

Furthermore, Döveling et al. (Ibid.) identify three levels of social media use in relations to affect and emotional bonding. Thus, they recognise a micro level (where the digital media is used for personal ends and the attention is inward, for example a personal loss), a meso level (here groups of individuals bond over a specific theme or issue), and finally, a macro level (a globalised emotional flow negotiated collectively through discourses and imagery, for example black lives matter movements or climate change protests).

According to Dövelin et al., all levels intersect and feed into each other. Their main argument is that just as these levels are intersecting, diffuse, and multi-directional, so are the offline practices of emotion enmeshed with the online ones (2018:3).

In the context of this study, we can perceive that as believers collectively worship online, they form emotional alignments which take space on the meso and the macro level. Thus, they connect as part of a local community, but also as part of a global community of Christians around the world who are dealing with the same challenges caused by the global pandemic.
The physical embodiment of affect

The works of Baruch Spinoza have contributed to the debate on affect and how it is manifested in subjects. For Spinoza (2001 [1675]), “the mind is subject to the passions, and the passions always arise in response to an idea” (in Supp-Montgomerie 2015: 336). These passions are then linguistically and physically manifested in what we classify as anger, joy, sadness etc. Drawing inspiration from Spinoza, French theorist Deleuze (1978) argues that affect emerges out of the social situation of all bodies: “every body is affected by and affects other bodies” (Ibid.:337). For Deleuze, affect is a state of a body which is influenced by other surrounding bodies. We can see this in Hillsong live worship concerts for example, or in many Pentecostal spaces as believers pray collectively.

Deleuze argues, however, that “unlike emotion, affect is not the state of a body but the waves of energy that move through and among bodies in constant ebb and flow; affect calls us into being, marks our dissolution, links us, and separates us” (Ibid.). This view contradicts James’ point which views affect as a solitude experience (James 1961 in Selbo 2019:11).

It is precisely this physical element around which much of the modern research on affect has insisted upon. In “An Inventory Of Shimmers” Seigworth and Gregg (2010:1) begin the chapter by defining affect as:

“an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves”.

Here affect is described as a visceral force that goes beyond emotion, and in the religious context, it falls in line with Otto’s “mysterium tremendum”.

The body is the prime medium through which affect is unleashed. However, the body is not a mere “spectator” or “affect’s victim”. Rather, in Seigworth and Greeg’s views, the body reciprocates or co-participates in the passing of affect. It has the potential to affect and be affected just as Deleuze envisioned.
We are yet to understand as to what extent and capacity this bodily experience is manifested, as Spinoza maintained: “No one has yet determined what the body can do” (1959 in Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 3). In Christian Pentecostal spaces the affective nature of the Holy Spirit is manifested corporeally through the believer who according to Scriptures must render themselves available for the workings of the Spirit to perform. So, we can see that there is a collaborative partnership between body and spirit, as both are interconnected to bring affect into existence

**Affordance theory**

We can locate the origins of affordance theory in ecological psychology, where Gibson explains how people perceive the properties or objects in the environment to perform actions. According to Gibson “Affordances, in spite of being inherent in the objects or artefacts, are not their properties and they are relational to the actors and are required to be perceived to produce intended actions (Gibson, 1979 in Eshraghian and Hafezieh 2017: 3).

In Gibson’s view affordance are inherent properties of the environment, however they require active engagement from the animal to produce the intended benefits. Gibson first elaborated the concept of affordance in reference to the animal kingdom. However, the theory was later elaborated to analyse human interactions with the natural and social environment.

In recent years, the concept of affordance has been applied to the context of social media as scholars adopted the concept to explain the role of social media in organisations, and how it is used by individuals (Ibid.)

Apart from the relational property view of affordance as first theorised by Gibson, later scholars have addressed the changing technological landscape by introducing other types of affordances. As Markus and Silver argue (2008: 627), “the continual emergence of new technologies inevitably requires ongoing conceptual development.” (Ibid.)

This has contributed to the emergence of different types of affordances from the literature, each one bringing a perspective on how individuals navigate their environment.
Different types of affordance

In this section I will highlight four perspectives of affordance. Namely: perceived affordance, technological affordance, social affordance and communicative affordance.

Perceived affordance was developed in the field of design and Human and Computer interaction (HCI) through the writings of Donald Norman. Norman’s aim was to explore the relationship between human cognition and the design of devices and everyday things. Norman proposes the concept of “perceived affordance” to suggest that designers can and should indicate how the user is to interact with the device (1990 - 1999 in Bucher and Helmond 2018)

Norman modified the concept of affordance from Gibson’s relational approach to accommodate design interests, suggesting that artefacts could be designed to suggest or determine certain forms of use through the notion of ‘perceived affordances’ (ibid). The question was no longer how organisms see, as was the case in Gibson’s work, but rather how certain objects could be designed to encourage or constrain specific actions. In Norman’s view power is placed in the hands of designers who have the power to enable and constrain certain action possibilities through their design choices.

Another view regarding affordance comes from Gaver (1996), who writes about the “technology of affordance”. For Gaver, affordances are not just waiting to be perceived; rather, they are there to be actively explored (in Bucher and Helmond 2018:8).

Thus, according to Gaver, “affordances exist not just for individual action, but for social interaction as well” (ibid). He notes: “whether a handle with particular dimensions will afford grasping depends on the grasper’s height, hand size, etc. Similarly, a cat-door affords passage to a cat but not to me” (Ibid.). Whereas Gibson’s aim was to propose a theory of visual perception and Norman’s primary concern was to enhance good design, Gaver sought to “challenge researchers to avoid the temptation of ascribing social behaviour to arbitrary customs and practices, and to focus instead on discovering the possibly complex environmental factors shaping social interaction” (Ibid.:9). In doing so, Gaver considered the concept of affordances as a “useful tool for user-centered analyses of technologies” (ibid).

The third view of affordance deals with how technology impacts social relations and social practices. Social affordances are “the social structures that take shape in association with a given technical structure” (Bucher and Helmond 2018: 5). Wellman
et al. (2003) use the term to talk about the ways in which the internet may influence everyday life, for instance our ability to receive emails and access solutions online. According to Bucher and Helmon, however, the notion of social affordance can also be understood in a much more general or relational sense without necessarily invoking technology explicitly (2018: 10).

In fact, they return to Gibson’s original point which sees the benefits that animals bring to other animals. Thus, affordances are found in the environment in the form of social relations as individuals co-exist and behave around one another (Ibid.).

A fourth view of affordance is “communicative affordance,” as conceptualised by Hutchby (2001). Hutchby develops the concept of communicative affordances referring to the “possibilities for action that emerge from (...) given technological forms” (2001 in Bucher and Helmon 2018:10). So, he views affordances as both functional and relational. Functional in the sense that they are “enabling, as well as constraining”, and relational in terms of drawing “attention to the way that the affordances of an object may be different for one species than for another” (Ibid.).

These four perspectives on affordance provide the perfect fusion of ideas which will be used to navigate through the new digital landscape on which the worshippers have found themselves. Pulling from each one of these strings to critically analyse the data will bring forward the different nuances needed to capture this specific moment in the believer’s journey.

Moreover, through the dialog between affect and affordance I want to investigate how environmental factors such as the digital platform used during fellowship can facilitate or limit the affective nature of Pentecostal Christian practices.

Connecting affect to affordance

On one side of this conversation we have affect which deals with the expressions of faith by believers and, on the other side, affordance which is the digital platform where the religious practice and fellowship is conducted.

In physical fellowship we see and experience people’s emotions through their bodily movement and physical expressions, especially during climatic moments of worship. In those moments, spirituality is not only expressed through prayer, but also through other physical expressions such as weeping, shouting, raising of hands, kneeling, rolling on
the floor and acts that believers do in submission to the Spirit. Thus, “emotions emerge through embodied and dialogical movements in the inter-world between people in their physical and social environment” (Jesen and Pedersen 2016:84).

On the other end we see affordance, which looks at how individuals engage with the solutions presented in the environment. However, affordances are not just objects, they can also be the way human beings relate to one another. As Hodges argues: “In talking with each other, humans create affordances, opportunities that invite the other into seeing and moving in certain directions that look promising” (Hodges 2007 in Jensen and Pedersen 2016: 82). The sheer bodily movements of fellowship, for example, can inspire different types of actions or response in another believer.

In bridging the gap between affordance and affect, Slaby et al (2013) posit that “emotions disclose what a situation affords in terms of potential doings, and the specific efforts required in these doings, and potential happenings affecting me that I have to put up with or otherwise respond to adequately.” (in Jensen and Pedersen 2016: 85). Their argument here is that pursuing affordances depends on the “affective stance” of the individual, so depending on the emotional needs of a person, different affordances can respond to different needs. These solutions, or limitations, are found in the environment, so it is incumbent on the individual to take advantage of them. They argue that according to the individual’s abilities, these affordances can be “situational” (solutions found in the environment), or “agentive”, (actions that the individual is able to do).

In connecting the two theories of affect and affordance we can examine how the digital environment can enable or limit online worshippers to express their spirituality. But also, how worshippers influence other believers with their presence and the spiritual moments they experience as a collective body.

4. Methodology

In this study I have selected a methodological approach which, I believe, will aid in understanding not only the online environment in which Pentecostal communities
worship, but also the social relations and practices that emerge as a result of their presence on the digital platform.

Before I delve into the methodological choices, it is important to reflect critically on the components of the project and locate the research in the appropriate paradigm. As Lather (1986) posits, a research paradigm “constitute the abstract beliefs and principles that shape how a researcher sees the world, and how s/he interprets and acts within that world” (in Kivunja and Kuyini 2017: 26). Thus, paradigms are important as they account for every decision made throughout the research which, consequently, influence the process and the interpretation of data.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a paradigm comprises four elements namely: epistemology (what counts as knowledge and how it can be acquired); ontology (the philosophical assumptions guiding our understanding of the social phenomenon); methodology (the approach and procedure for data collection) and axiology (the ethical issues involved in our research) (in Kivunja and Kuyini 2017: 26-28).

In understanding the research subjects and their liturgical practices both online and offline, it becomes clear that interpretivism is the appropriate paradigm to locate this research in. The underlying assumption in this paradigm is that the social world is made of shared interpretations that social actors produce and reproduce in their everyday lives. Thus, this paradigm is also known as constructivism, as beliefs are viewed as multiple and socially constructed (Blaikie and Priest 2019 and Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). In this case the social milieu we are analysing is religion, which is, in fact, as powerful social construct in which believers engage according to a set of rules and interpretations.

Within the framework of this paradigm, understanding of the social context is linked to the understanding of the individuals being studied, therefore interaction between researcher and research participants is inevitable. To gain a better understanding of the online religious environment in which the communities engage in the worship activities, the methodological approach used to collect qualitative data was digital ethnography and ethnographic interviews. Later in the section I will reflect on my own role as a researcher and the impact of the choices on the research.
Digital Ethnographic Research

Digital ethnography as an approach builds on ethnography which takes as its object of consideration the very lived experiences of people to produce detailed situated accounts (Varis 2016: 55). This means that digital ethnography guards itself from making sweeping generalizations about the universality of the digital experience and narrow assumptions.

The data gathered captures the accounts produced by the research subjects as they operate in the digital space during their worship practices. To this end, attending all worship services was important as this fully immersive approach afforded me the possibility to access the worshippers in their environment and gain a broad understanding of their interaction with each other.

For this reason, the concept of experience as it relates to ethnography is central in this research. According to Pink et al (2016:20) experience refers to “how it is embodied and lived through sensory and affective moments”. They argue that often the experiences are difficult to express and articulate through language, in our case, of how spirituality is expressed by the believer, Therefore “attempts to understand and interpret its meaning and significance rely on the ethnographer's immersion in site of other people’s experiences” (Ibid.)

A full immersive perspective calls for an insider approach which underscores my own membership status in the community observed. Access to any social world is important and must be done through the language of the participants, thus social reality has to be discovered from the ‘inside’ rather than being filtered through or distorted by an expert’s concepts and theory (Blaikie and Priest 2019). Therefore, the concept of experience can be linked to a perspective which sees the researcher as fully participant in the social environment.

The insider approach refers to when research is conducted with a group of which the researcher is a member of in terms of identity, language, and experience. The complete membership role gives the researcher a certain amount of legitimacy allowing acceptance by the group, resulting in the richness of the data collected (Dwyer and Buckle 2009:58).

Naturally, the question that arises from this is whether it is necessary to be an insider in order to know a group. According to Fay (1996), membership is not a
guarantee for knowledge. As he notes, “knowing implies being able to identify, describe, and explain” (in Dwyer and Buckle 2009:59). Therefore, ability to the identify the data, provide a nuanced description of it, as well as being able to explain through theory is central to the research.

Research design

As stated in the previous section the insider perspective has afforded me with the ability to gain access to the group. I have been a full member of one of the African Pentecostal church communities in the North for 20 years. Therefore, I had a full grasp of the worship practices in my church. However, not all communities are the same and I do not attempt to make such claim. Within the same region there are wide varieties of local African Pentecostal churches, as well as communities spread across the national territory. To gain more knowledge and capture differences and nuances, I participated in church services and activities from other African Pentecostal churches who were also worshipping online.

As I observed, the benefits of the new digital arena afforded worship communities with the unique opportunity to engage in more robust forms of evangelism. Through social media channels such as Facebook and WhatsApp, churches were able to spread the links to their online services. These were then shared via private networks of friends and families (Figure 1.).

Between February and May 2020, I was able to attend around 50 online church services from various churches disseminated on the Italian territory. The online services included Sunday services, prayers meetings, Bible studies, church conferences and religious speaking engagements, with each meeting lasting an average of 2 hours.
In examining my insider knowledge as I attended these meetings, I followed Asselin’s advice to gather data with “eyes open” (Asselin 2003 in Dwyer and Buckle 2009: 55). Essentially, looking at the phenomenon from a foreign perspective as it allows us to understand the subculture and bracket any assumptions (ibid). So, at this stage of the research my interest was in simply observing the meetings in order to find communalities and consistent patterns.

Moreover, to bring personal perspectives into the data I conducted N.20 interviews selected from snowball sampling from members in the African Pentecostal communities. These included perspectives from 4 leaders (2 ushers, 1 worship leader, 1 pastor) and 16 congregation members. All aspects of the church services were carried out in English, this include Bible readings, worship songs, teachings, prayers and preaching. Some churches offered translation services to native Italian members or worshippers from other African countries who do not speak English. During the interviews, majority of members were comfortable speaking in English, or switching between Italian and English according to the concept being described. As a bilingual myself, I was able to follow the line of thought as my interviewees described their perspectives to me.

Westby et. al (2003:5) note that “the ultimate goal of ethnographic interviewing is for clients to provide a vivid description of their life experiences”. This goes back to the central role of experience as an embodiment of sensory and affective moments (Pink et al 2016:20).
Due to the strict social distancing measures the only way to conduct the interviews was via phone and not in person, however this allowed me to extend the pool of participants to include people from other regions of Italy, thus broadening the data.

Through the richness of the data from both participant observations as well as interviews, I was able to identify a number of different themes and sub themes which were useful in the final analysis. As Blaikie and Priest (2009: 322) argue, “analysing involves transforming all units of data into successively more abstract and compact descriptions that still account for their meanings”. This systematic operation allowed for the concept and theory to emerge and developed directly from the data rather than being imposed from the outside, which is what the research paradigm of interpretivism/constructivism calls for.

Methodological reflections

“The qualitative researcher’s perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others—to indwell—and at the same time to be aware of how one’s own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand.” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994 in Dwyer and Buckle 2009:55).

The above quote from Maykut and Morehouse aptly describes the challenges of conducting a qualitative research. It also highlights the concept of subjectivity and the cost and benefits in providing an insider perspective to the research. Naturally, the key issue is how potential biases may affect the objectivity of the research. While the insider role might allow for access and openness, there are many challenges that might occur. Adler and Adler (1987) point out to the dual role of the researcher as they struggle through “loyalty tugs” between the interests of the subject being studies and the aims of the research (in Dwyer and Buckle 2009:58). Asselin (2003) has also pointed out that the dual role could cause confusion as the researcher interacts with the participants. She notes that there are significant risks of confusion when the researcher is familiar with the research setting or participants through a role other than that of researcher (in Dwyer and Buckle 2009:58)
To curb this issue, my role as a researcher during the interview process was clearly defined as I provided all my informant with an information letter regarding the research, as well as informed consent document which outlines their rights as research subjects.

Furthermore, another reflection that I made concerned the theory as this was guided from the data collected. Collins states that the key components of a research project include a critical reflection on three factors, which are theory, practice and self. In his view researcher should analyse the relationship of theory with self, self with practice and practice with theory” (2010:15). As the data determined what theoretical perspective it should be analysed from, it was important that the observations were collected meticulously. In the analysis I provide a few examples of the data collected.

In reflecting on the self, we must also account for the three criteria against which every research must be reviewed. Those are validity, reliability and generalizability. Golafshani (2003:604) argues that in qualitative research “reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in qualitative paradigm”. Therefore, in order to achieve this, it is necessary to eliminate bias to increase the researcher’s truthfulness. Further to this, the triangulation, or generalizability is achieved by searching for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study (ibid.), which is echoed by Blaikie and Priest (2009) in the previous section.

Having accounted for biases and self-reflections, it is important to note that there are still limitations that must be addressed. One being the short-term aspect of the study. As previously mentioned, the research was carried out in February 2020 as the new government ordinance relating to Covid-19 were rolling out. The data collection phase concluded in May 2020 which accounts for a brief timeframe. The analysis would have benefitted from a longitudinal study as this would have provided new perspectives and developments that this research has not been able to capture. Furthermore, it would have been interesting to conduct a comparative research analysis with another religious community and observe differences and communalities.
5. Ethics

There are several ethical considerations in this research which I attempted to address before the project started. As my research contained personal information regarding ethnicity and religious believes, thus involving ethically sensitive data, I approached the Malmö University Ethics Council to conduct a review on my study. The Ethics Council in its capacity can recommend or dissuade students from carrying out a study in a certain manner. However, it is important to highlight that the Council is not a research ethics committee as defined by scientific journals, which means that verdicts are advisory only (Malmö University Ethics Council, Canvas).

Nevertheless, the recommendations provided were useful in bringing attention to several areas of concern mainly relating to the protection of sensitive information and data. Their suggestion was to safely store sensitive data in an offline storage device. Moreover, I was advised to remind my informants that our conversation via telephone or internet might be overheard by an unexpected third party. Finally, I was advised to follow GDPR when collecting and processing personal data which envisions that computerized data must be protected from unauthorized persons.

Regarding the protection of identity of my informants, I have ensured anonymity by giving each respondent a pseudonym and by censoring all the names appearing in the screenshots, as well as links to the services and other sensitive information.

6. Analysis

Day one of the national lockdown in Italy our Pastor sent a text in the WhatsApp group informing church members that the Italian government had banned all social gatherings across the nation. Effective immediately all churches will be closed, and members will not be allowed to meet with one another due to the quarantine and social distancing measures.

Like us, many African Pentecostal communities searched for digital solutions that would allow their religious services to continue and provide a sense of normalcy in the difficult times the country was facing. The basic requirements from the digital platform were intimacy and user-friendliness.
Many of the churches have a small congregation of 30 to 50 believers, so the digital platform needed to replicate that sense of closeness and intimate connection, as well as a smart and simple set up so members who were less technologically savvy would be encouraged to join the service. In terms of affordances these were the properties church leaders said they required from the digital market. It is no surprise then, that other well-known cyber spaces such as Facebook, Instagram, and Google Hangouts were not entertained as possible solutions.

Platforms such as Facebook/Instagram and Google Hangouts have a gatekeeper structure and multi-level access. They require an account setup, email and user verification and a network of other users already present on the platform in order to enjoy the benefits.

On the other hand, platforms such as Zoom and Free Conference Call are more user-friendly. Zoom is a cloud-based software which provides virtual video communication. Users directly receive a URL link with an invitation to join the service without the need to set up an account. Free Conference Call is an international conference call service which allows meeting attendees to dial in using toll-free call numbers from specific countries or by using an internet connection. Here too users can join a service without the need to set up an account. For these reasons Zoom and Free Conference Call became the two digital communication platforms of choice for all the African Pentecostal churches I studied.

Although both platforms were designed for corporate and educational needs, they provided a home for church activities such as worship, preaching, prayer meetings and bible studies, which are considered important practices for Pentecostal believers. The migration from offline to online spaces has highlighted the emergence of new social dynamics between believers, and it has re-contextualised the practice of spirituality within online spaces.

Robyn Longhurst (2017) explores the notion of how online users of digital platform such as Skype “embody the screen space”. In her view this becomes performative as it shows who we are to other, but also how others can view us. Thus, bringing in power dynamics and performative element to the communication between people. By drawing parallels to this, I also attempt to analyse how believers perform their spirituality in

---

1 Free Conference Call has a lower bandwidth compared to Zoom, so churches using the app only conduct the service via audio and not video to avoid overloading the connection.
virtual communication spaces, and how they maintain the connection with each other as a congregation and with the divine.

Bodies and performance - Affective voices

Worship is one of the fundamental activities in Pentecostalism. As previously mentioned in the literature review, worship music is one of the mediums through which believers feel they encounter the divine (Ingall 2015). When asked what significant changes the believers experienced with the transition to online fellowship, worship music was certainly one of the areas that believers found most challenging to adjust to. For the community, worship is an act of connection with the divine, but it also represents a collaborative activity among believers.

Cora (29 years), is a worship leader at one of the local churches in the North and has been in the worship ministry since she was sixteen. Two years ago, she was promoted to the new position, and has since then overseen the music productions, the choir rehearsals and training of new talents. She said to me:

Online worship is really not the same. For starters I am not able to see the expressions on the congregation to see whether the song is being impactful or not. People’s attitude during worship can really set the tone and change the atmosphere. In this online space I don’t really have that feedback, I can only trust that the Holy Spirit is doing His part.

What Cora is describing here is the central role of the body within affect. Not just the body in the singular sense, but bodies as a collective. As Deleuze (1978) states, “affection is a state of a body which is influenced by the other surrounding bodies” (in Montgomerie 2015: 337). For believers, the lack of proximity and ability to engage with all senses renders the worship experience incomplete. In Otto’s “mysterium tremendum” the affect which he describes as a “feeling that may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide”, occupies the body of the believer in an intimate singular experience (Otto 1936 in Corrigan 2004:7). However, the importance of the proximity of bodies to each other, especially in traditions like the African Pentecostal churches, and how they are able to exchange and trade in emotions should be highlighted.

---

2 Cora’s church worships on Free Conference Call 3 times a week on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. The Sunday service is usually the most important service. See full interview with Cora in the appendix.
Another layer presented in Cora’s statement is the importance of feedback response, which in her view galvanises and gives depth to the worship experience. I noticed this during one of the services where members were asked to engage in collective prayers. Usually the congregation is asked to mute their microphones once they join the service, to ensure that background noise does not disrupt the flow of the service. However, during prayers the worship leader asked some of the online congregation to unmute their microphone in their device. When I asked her why this was done, she replied: “The person conducting the prayer needs the supportive force of the members as this creates momentum for the service. It is really difficult to pray online while only hearing your voice.”

The leader’s reflection demonstrates how affect flows through the gathering of voices, and not just the physical presence of bodies. Cora’s church members fellowshipped online, connecting only through the audio, which meant that the service was mediated through sound and not video. Therefore, the affective power of the service rested upon the voices of the individuals during prayer, in their engagement and their collaboration with the leader.

To ameliorate the lack of physical connection as they previously experienced it, believers try to reimagine and recontextualise the meaning of worshipping together by finding other collaborative strategies and adapting to the online context. The online congregation, for example, supports the worship leader by providing background prayers and by unmuting their microphones in specific moments of the service to applaud and then turn themselves back to mute once this task is completed. This collaborative performance is done specifically to aid the flow of affect. As we can observe, emotions are performed and they “make sense” in the culture they are produced in, as Corrigan (2004) and Döveling et al. (2018) explain. Therefore, since affect is a cultural practice, and is relational in nature, it makes sense for believers to attempt to reproduce those same practices online as well.

In physical spaces the worship leader and the choir collaborate with the congregation through the different stages of worship to facilitate that emotional connection with the divine. However, this collaborative element is difficult to achieve in online spaces. Live ensembles do not work well on the internet because of sound lag. Delays, distortions, and audio lag make it virtually impossible to synchronise voices in prayers and singing while having fellowship online. We can perceive the limitation of
digital platforms’ affordances here: while certainly these platforms connect believers, they have the potential to also constrain and disrupt the performance of worship.

According to Gibson, affordances do not cause behaviour but constrain and control it (1982 in Bucher and Helmond 2017). These are the limits which Cora, refers to when she says that “online worship is not the same.” The changes do not only pertain to the physical limitation of service but also to the technological limitations posed by the online environment.

That being said, I observed that for believers, the voice – of their leaders and their community – both anchored them and offered a sense of familiarity. In the month of March Italy experienced one of the highest numbers of deaths due to the Coronavirus. Naturally, the news influenced the church service, and I noticed a general mood shift with emotions running high and some members expressing feelings of anxiety and sadness while leading the service. During one of these church services the pastor tried to reassure members in quoting a scripture by saying: “Brethren do not be anxious about anything; God is in control!” He then led the church into a moment of prayer urging the congregation to speak positive declarations out loud into their devices. The tension that was felt in the beginning changed as congregation unmuted their microphones to release prayers of encouragement and words of affirmation. Many took to the chat box by re-affirm those statements, thus channelling those moments of affect in the chat box as well.

Here too the physical performance is being recreated through a soundscape of familiar voices, however it is also interesting to observe that affect is manifested in what Döveling et al. call the “meso level” of emotional flow. In digital media the meso level sees groups of emotionally resonant individuals bonding over a specific cause and finding alignment and solidarity from group members. In both instances the feelings of anxiety and then euphoria were appraised and negotiated in a relational and reciprocal manner to become “emotion contagion” as conceptualised by Döveling et al. (2018:4)

After the injunction of the pastor to speak positive statements, the feelings of the service changed, and the congregation appeared to be more hopeful and optimistic. However, while this clearly changed the mood of the service, it is difficult to know whether people’s anxieties were quelled, or whether this was part of following along the rules and expectations of emotion that are part of the experience of being at church. This moment could have happened during a physical church service as well, so once
again, it is interesting to observe that the same cultural practices in what it means to perform spirituality at church are transmitted faithfully in online settings as well.

**Worship in the chat box**

**Emotions and emojis**

Another way by which affective communication is conveyed online is through the use of the chat box and the messages that are left therein. As the services are not recorded for later viewing, members must stay present in the moment, thus the chat box provides the space where that spontaneity is expressed in real time and where believers connect with one another, just as they would at a normal church service.

In Pentecostal churches the word “amen” is not just a closing formula uttered at the end of a prayer, but it is how believers rally their support behind a specific message they endorse or a moment in the service they find particularly interesting. In online spaces this feedback is typed in the chat box during moments of worship and preaching. Scrolling through the chat boxes you can see hand clap emojis, fire emojis, and at specific points, when a message has been particularly enlightening or evocative for the believer, you can also read words like “hmmmm”, “yaaaas” or “omg!!”. These are simply reactionary and done at specific moments in connection to the service.

In offline services this spontaneity is expressed by the believer who would lift up his or her hand, or stand up and clap, nod or shout “hallelujah!” in response to those affective moments during the service. However, in online spaces those physical responses cannot be fully expressed because of the constraints and limitation of the mute button, which is often on so as to avoid sonic disruptions. Therefore, believers employ the use of the chat box to convey their emotions as they flow.

As we have seen so far, there is often an element of performative Christianity in African Pentecostal churches which can be attributed to the free structure\(^3\) of most of the services. This performance captures the emotional delivery of the preacher, the improvisation of songs in the middle of a sermon, or the intense commentary of the

---

\(^3\) Churches usually follow a scheduled program for their service. However, leaders are encouraged to operate according to the Holy Spirit, therefore some parts of the services can take over others. See appendix for example of church schedules.
prayer leader, all which can produce spontaneous verbal or nonverbal responses from the congregation.

Having attended many physical church services myself, I can attest to those “spiritual cheerleading” moments (to borrow Hovi’s term 2018:135) whereby members of the congregation support the person leading the service by encouraging their performance, by asking them to repeat or highlight key points in their speech or by inciting them to press on.

We can see a similar pattern in online spaces as well whereby this background commentary and spontaneous reactions are delivered through the chat box, which then becomes a space for emotional gatherings and collaborative efforts. These moments of digital community gathering encourage more people to engage and take part in the conversation. This also provides a constant loop of positive feedback response between the one leading the service and the online congregation.

For example, Joe who is 27 years old and is charge of the youth ministry, told me that the short messages left in the chat box are encouraging to him because they reflect the level of engagement and connection of the audience he is speaking to.

In fact, unlike moments of prayers and singing which can experience delays, lags and sound distortions, the chat box is the place where synchronous reactions happen in real time, albeit silently. These reactions are not only in response to the person leading the service, but also in connection to messages left by other members. Thus, the chat box becomes a space where believers engage with each other and connect on an emotional level. Once again, reflecting moments of “emotion contagion” (Döveling et al. 2018)

It is important to note, however that not all believers use the chat box, and the chat box is not always used for warm and deep emotional connections as we will see in the next section.

Nevertheless, going back to the ways some of the worshippers interact with/in the chat box can be viewed as what Norman (1990) calls “perceived affordance” (in Bucher and Helmon 2017: 6). The option to type a text or even the vast selection of emojis are all features that have been created by the app designers and developers, who have made them available to the online user.

However, we can see that the level of engagement the chat box provides can also be viewed as “social affordance”. In fact, according to Gibson (2015), the richest form of affordances available in the environment are those presented by other individuals (in
Bucher and Helmon 2017: 6). The way people behave or act in a specific space provide important cues for others. In this case the commentary in the chat box can prompt others to respond and engage more freely thus creating a sense of community.

On the other hand, another benefit of the chat box is in its capacity in providing an outlet for believers to communicate and connect with one another, as well as space where emotions and spirituality thrive. This is an interesting case of affordance intersecting with affect.

Indeed, the presence of the mute button compels believers to express their spirituality and emotions through the affordance of the chat box, which in turn becomes an ecosystem where those emotional connections between believers is fostered (FIG. 2).

In linking affect to affordance, Slaby et al. (2013) argue that emotions are tied to our engagement with the world around us which creates what they call “situational affordances” (in Jensen and Peter 2016: 85). In other words, individuals pursue affordances depending on an affective stance or emotional state and evaluate the affordances to respond to that need. Although they studied affordances and affect in terms of human to human interaction, we can still apply this to human-technology interaction developed in the online worship environment. In fact, in deep spiritual and emotional engagement, the believer takes advantage of the affordance provided by the chat box to release affect into the digital atmosphere. This is, in turn, picked up by other believers who are encouraged to express their spirituality, thus creating a constant cycle of emotional engagement and community.

Recently, Zoom unveiled the latest feature of its design called “meeting reactions”. Participants could react during meetings by sending a thumbs up or clapping emoji to communicate without interrupting the meeting. These reactions appear as an icon on the user’s name and disappear after 5 seconds. On the other hand, Free Conference Call has a less sophisticated interface with a modest selection of features available.

In services hosted on Free Conference Call, for example, I observed that the level of engagement in the chat box was significantly lower compared to church services on Zoom. So, perhaps the features available on the app impacted the quality of the service for worshippers.

As Norman (1990) argues, power is placed in the hands of designers and app developers. The choices they provide can expand or limit the user’s experience on the app. However, it is important to note that this power is not one-directional, rather it is collaborative. The digital market has become a highly saturated and a competitive arena,
so designers are eager to accommodate changes and present the best options available in an effort to expand and retain their customer base.

**Generational gap**

It is important to also reflect on how affordances are not engaged with universally. Young people engage with the chat box in a different way compared to older generations. While talking to some of the older folks it was apparent to me that connecting with each other through the chat box was not an important aspect of the worship experience for them.

Gina, who is 56, has been worshipping at one of the Pentecostal churches in Modena since she migrated to Italy from Ghana in the 90s. She said to me: “I never use the comment box. What is the point in typing a hand clap (emoji)?”

There is certainly a generational element that characterizes the relationship between the affordances presented on the digital platform and the user’s ability to take advantage of them. Gina’s generation is not accustomed to the use of emojis and she did not see the point in communicating her reactions during key moments in the service. This was something she did not want to externalise on a digital platform as she felt she could not yield any benefit from it.

Having participated in different virtual services I could ascertain the ones that had younger members in the congregation by scrolling through the chat box and reviewing the types of emojis used. The most popular are prayer hands emojis, hand clap emojis, crying emojis, fire emojis, laughing emojis and high five emojis. However, irrespective of the availability and possibilities for actions presented on the digital platform, we can see that affordances are put to use in different ways according to the needs of the individual. Gina’s reluctance to use emojis can be viewed in different ways.

On the one hand, through Hutchby’s concept of “communicative affordances”, the affordances of an object may be different for one species than for another” (Hutchby 1990, in Bucher and Helmon 2017: 10). While Hutchby is talking about affordances in the animal kingdom, we might be able to understand affordances in terms of generation and how some have grown accustomed to the use of specific forms of technology compared to others.
On the other hand, we can understand Gina’s reluctance to use the chat box in terms of Gaver’s notion that affordances are to be actively explored by the individual (1996 in Bucher and Helmond 2017). Individuals can decide to explore the environment around them and make use of the affordances available to them. In other words, the agentic power is on the individual who, having explored the environment around them, may decide to use the affordances or not. So, in this case it did not matter how sophisticated the digital platform was: Gina’s reluctance to use the chat box seems to suggest that the emotional benefit it afforded to other worshippers did not apply to her.

Gina’s case also contradicts Norman’s (1990) view of affordances as technologically determinist, whereby her use of the chat box becomes a key governing force for how believers expresses their spirituality and emotions while worshipping online. It is clear that not all believers use the chat box to contribute to the affective environment of the online church service. This should not be viewed as powerlessness or failure to perceive the embedded values in this technology. For people like Gina intimate connections with the divine and with the congregations can occur in other ways, perhaps through the voices of the congregation in prayer, as we have seen in the first section.

Some worshippers have perceived the affordance of the chat box and the value it brings as an outlet through which affect can be communicated. On the other hand, some worshippers might not even perceive some of the intended use of the features on the digital platform because they are less technologically savvy. In some instances some of the worshippers thought that the notification sound from the messages in the chat box was disruptive to the service if they did not have the option of muting it (or did not know how to).

As Mara (60 years) told me: “It was my daughter who showed me that you could also send messages on the platform! I didn’t realise that unlike Whatsapp groups, on Zoom you could actually send a message to specific people without others being able to see it”. Mara refers to a moment during a service where she had accidentally left her microphone on. She then received a private message from her daughter who was following the service from another country, telling her to mute herself as they could hear her conversation with her neighbour during service.

In exploring the different features available to believers worshipping on online platforms, we can agree with Norman that “affordances are of little use if they are not visible to the users” (1990 in Bucher and Helmond 2017:6). In this case Mara did not take notice of the microphone icon and the meeting host did not know how to mute
participants. Norman suggests that “good affordances” can enhance the way the design is used, thus influencing the user’s experience with the technology. Therefore, developing an interface that will facilitate the user journey is equally as important. Later in this thesis I will discuss potential design changes that, I believe, can positively impact the experience of the worshipper.
Surveillance

Mic on - mask off

In her book Longhurst (2017) introduces the concept of “self in the box” where she argues that the way we are seen through the webcam, the space around us captured or hidden by the webcam all contribute to emotional connection and affect between users. Although she mainly analyses family and professional dynamics, her take on how individuals become self-conscious of their appearance online is useful for the way it helps us to understand African Pentecostal churches engage online during worship.

Most of the online church services I have attended were delivered through audio. Occasionally the worship leader or the minister would turn their camera on, but this was not imposed on the congregation. When I asked one of the leaders why this was the case, he replied that “people don’t feel at ease in front of the camera. They might feel the pressure to act a certain way, but God is interested in the heart of a person”.

On the other hand, Cora, the worship leader, complained about “people not caring and not being disciplined enough while worshipping online”. In her view there was a “lack
of accountability” as she referred to specific moments during the service where some members “were caught” engaging in other activities. Phone conversations, kitchen sounds, television programs are some of the noise that have accidentally found their way into the online church service.

I recall a mortifying episode of a fellow worshipper snoring in the middle of an online early morning prayer service. The host of the meeting on Zoom turned on all microphones to intensify the effect of the collective prayer. Unfortunately, this exposed the heavy breathing of the person who had fallen asleep. As the prayers continued, so did the snoring which, in the meantime, had grown louder and louder making it rather impossible to disregard. The meeting host turned their microphone off and sent them a private message about the incident. Interestingly, the prayers had continued.

Subsequently the person sent a public apology in the chat to the online congregation (FIG. 3).

Figure 3 Example of private and intimate connections through the chat box
This incident underscores, once again, the importance of the digital affordance in fostering intimate and private connections, but also its use for surveillance practices. Through the affordance of the mute button the person snoring was detected and muted thus, minimizing any potential disruption to the spiritual moment. Moreover, the transgressor had the opportunity to issue an apology without interrupting the flow of the service, which could not have been entirely possible during a physical church service.

We have witnessed instances where the affordances in the digital environment have posed limitations and barriers to the church service. However, here we see its practicality in facilitating the flow of the prayer activity, in providing private intimate connections between believers, in allowing for multiple simultaneous dialogues between people, as well as in empowering leaders to direct and control the worship service by way of the mute button.

Thus, we can argue that there are unique virtues found in digital affordances that we might not be able to obtain in a physical encounter.

As highlighted in previous sections, collaborative partnership and community are important in the conveyance of affect within religious spaces. For Corrigan (2004) the cultural and emotional performance of religion find specific rules for emotional expressions which are encoded in the social framework. This tells us that for fellowship to occur there ought to be rules of engagement and collective consensus on how believers are to worship and relate to one another.

In online worship services, however, these rules are not fully expressed or crystallised as believer find themselves in a new social environment. While some of the practices performed in the physical church services have been exported into the online space, other practices have not been as equally successful.

When Cora complains that “online worship is not the same thing” or that there is “lack of accountability”, I sense that her frustrations are partly connected to the lack of engagement and social surveillance which have traditionally contributed to religious performance.

Believers engaging in parallel activities such as cooking, sleeping, or chatting with others raises issues of online etiquette and what it means to be fully present during digital church services. As we will see in the next section the presence of the camera shifts the online social dynamics between worshippers. Believers become aware of how
they are perceived by others which, in turn, adds a new dimension to the religious performance.

**Camera on**

As we have seen in the literature review, Sunday church services for Pentecostals represent moments of creativity and sensory engagement. Whether this is provided by the percussion instruments that accompany the choir, or the preaching style, the cultural performance aesthetic of the believers shapes the service (Butticci 2012). Sunday church services are also dedicated moments where believers fully display their cultural heritage by donning traditional attires such as *kente* cloths or *agbada* robes, or accessories such as *gele* head wraps and beads. In their view, commitment to the Lord is shown not only spiritually but also aesthetically.

During online services, however, the absence of the camera removes this aesthetic layer. Many believers confessed to me that they attend service in their nightwear or in comfortable clothing. As Stella (43 years old) told me, “On online worship you don’t feel the pressure of looking nice. I don’t remember the last time I put on my make-up. All my *kente* have been in the wardrobe for two months.”

During an online Easter Sunday celebration, the pastor announced that “since it is Easter it would be nice to see each other and exchange grace through the camera”. This sudden request sent panic waves throughout the forum. It took quite some time before the cameras went on, and when they eventually did, one could sense some uneasiness around this, even though most of the worshippers had seen each other in church for many years. Asking Stella to recall that moment she said to me: “I was still in my nightwear…it was embarrassing. My husband was making fun of me…I think it demonstrate lack of discipline really. After that day I made sure I attended the service in the same way as I would if we were in church.”

As Longhurst notes (2017), in the presence of the camera people are required to learn how to connect with one another, which parts of the bodies to display, highlight or hide on the screen and which parts of their domestic surrounding they should display.

---

4 See full interview with Stella in the appendix
Nadia, who is 30 and has been serving in the church as an usher for five years, told me: “The presence of the camera makes people act holier than thou, but the absence (of it) makes people chill too much! It’s hard to find a middle ground”.

Longhurst (2017) refers to the “self in the box” as the little box which provides a constant reminder of how our own image is viewed by others and the self-consciousness it brings. Indeed, the affordance of the video camera in virtual communication spaces changes social dynamics by imposing pressure and expectations. This new affordance overturned the rules of engagement of the digital environment, as well as the social dynamics to which believers had grown accustomed to.

In Gaver’s view “social activities are embedded in and shaped by the material environment” (1996 in Bucher and Helmond 2017: 10). He argues that technological changes afford for social relations and social structure (ibid). While this can be applied to the online worship experience as whole, we can also see how the introduction of the camera shifted the online social order.

I observed that the online church services I attended where the camera was on the congregation was dressed elegantly, maybe not in traditional attire but certainly acceptable by the social standards of “church attire”. The congregation was fully engaged and present, albeit muted. Members used the chat box to express emotional connections with the leader and with the congregation as we have seen in the previous section. However, the presence of the camera compelled believers to be present not only through the chat box, but now also physically. Believers would lift their hands during key affective moments or close their eyes during prayer times. However, I could not witness instances where believers danced, so perhaps this is still an activity that can only be fully expressed offline.

Moreover, with the presence of the camera, I did not observe believers engaging in activities that were not strictly connected to the spiritual activity. I speculate that the camera restored order and surveillance which, in turn enforced the performance of socially acceptable behaviours within the community of worship.

When Nadia refers to “believers acting holier than thou”, she refers to the notion that believers might perform Christianity and convey a sense of spirituality that, in her view, might not be genuine. The concept of genuine emotions vis-à-vis fictitious emotions within the religious sphere is certainly an interesting debate and can provide nuance to this discussion. One could, perhaps, take the structuralist approach by Durkheim (1954 in Corrigan 2004:6) which sees emotions as connected with performance and embedded
in structures of social life, thus make the argument that religious affect is also conditioned by social and cultural expectations.

Altar call - online healing moments

In physical church services altar calls are those moments where believers respond to an appeal by a minister to come forward to the altar or pulpit to freely commit oneself to Christ or receive physical or spiritual healing. Both appeal and response are spontaneous moments and are usually not included in the official church service program. They normally follow a poignant and a particularly engaging preaching by the minister who, as led by the spirit, can call for believers to approach the altar to receive prayers. For the believer, the altar call represents a unique opportunity to experience an encounter with the divine, as well as producing deep affective moments.

As we have seen in previous research, televangelists have been able to perform altar calls from remote through television screens. With the preaching and spread of the “faith gospel,” believers are required to trust and have faith in their healing and their miracles. Asamoah-Gyadu (2005) notes that although the service of the preacher takes place in a specific location, the structure and delivery are presented in the knowledge that television viewers are also watching the service. Therefore, through the screen the viewer can also receive the same healing experience as the believer who is physically present. For many believers, this understanding has eased the challenges posed by physical distance.

In online church services, this is no different. During moments of altar call, one of the preachers asked the congregation to place their hand on any part of their body which was ailing. In other services the preacher connected to the congregation by saying: “stretch forth your hand and touch the screen (of the device) as I pray for you. The Holy Spirit is not interested in the distance between us. He can still perform His miracles”. Here, rather than an obstacle, the screen is re-appropriated as a tool for the very physical connection, connecting the pastor to the believers, and believers to the Holy Spirit.

Here is also a space where affect and affordance intersect. As Slaby et al (2013) note, emotions disclose what a situation affords in terms of potential action.
In this case the affordances provided in the digital environment, including the screen, the internet connection, and all features at the disposal of the preacher are used for delivering his spiritual message of healing. The believer on the other side of the device, uses his or her faith to connect to the preacher, thus intensifying the moment of affect through the encounter with the divine.

Online church services can never fully substitute physical church services: typically, believers who participate in digital church services, do so as a complementary experience to their offline engagement (Hutchins 2011) However, in this case, the only choice available to believers is online worship. Therefore, it becomes important to find new ways to re-contextualise the meaning of worship and re-imagine the online arena as a space where spiritual moments can take place.

7. Discussion and concluding remarks

In this thesis I have analysed the unique experience of the African Pentecostal communities in Italy who have found themselves worshipping online as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. The new digital arena has presented new social dynamics between worshippers as well challenges in translating certain offline practices into the online environment.

Worship is first and foremost an affective moment, so it relates to feelings, moods, and emotional connection with the divine. Affect is also a state of the body, which as Deleuze (1978) argues it is influenced by the other surrounding bodies (in Montgomerie 2015: 337). Thus, we can observe that the lack of physical proximity can pose challenges to the worship experience. However, believers try to circumvent the physical barriers by engaging vocally during strategic moments of the service, and by taking advantage of the affordance of the chat box which is used to communicate moments of deep emotional connections.

The chat box, thus, provides an interesting case of how affordances intersect with affect as it gives a voice to the believer to communicate emotions and provide brief side commentary in the form of emojis and religious utterances. Here we find a meso level of deep emotional connections (Döveling et al. 2018), a space for a digital community
gathering where feelings are negotiated and aligned around a specific scope: spiritual fulfillment.

Moreover, the chat box functions as a space for clandestine connections for believers who can use it to link privately with fellow worshippers. In physical spaces private and informal connections do happen, but only after the end of the church service, when believers can reconnect and socialise. However, in the online space I speculate that those informal links may run parallel with the worship service. We do not know the full extent of the conversations in the private chats, nevertheless from that one example it is interesting to observed how it can be used to benefit believers.

Further while the “affective affordance” of the chat box empowers the worshippers, on the other hand, the mute button constraints and limits their experience. Because of audio lag, delays and distortions, synchronous worship becomes challenging to achieve. It is interesting to observe that is often the church leaders, who being the “host” of the online meeting, wield the power of the mute button to restore order and control the service. These two camps of power, the chat box on one side, and the mute button on the other side, highlight some of the existing power dynamics that migrate to the online environment.

Although in the physical world one cannot mute people, in offline church services the congregation is still compelled to follow the directives of the leader and be silence in key moments of worship. Compared to other Christian denominations, African Pentecostalism is less structured in terms of power and leadership, since according to believers the Holy Spirit can use anybody for its purpose. Nevertheless, there is still a clear contrast between those in a leadership position and those who are followers, thus the same power dynamics are replicated online as well.

As we have seen in the literature review, for believers the spiritual dimension supersedes the physical dimension, thus Pentecostals are often encouraged to avail themselves for the workings of the Holy Spirit (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). This means that believers are required to stay present and be connected emotionally and physically. However, as we have observed, in online worship this connection is not always persistent as believers have a free rein to engage in other parallel activities while worshiping. Naturally, in the physical space engagement is enforced through social protocols and rules of engagement, as well as community surveillance. Whereas online, the individual has the power to decide if they want to connect, how they want to connect
and the degree of that connection. This makes sense if the worship service is carried out without the webcam.

However, the presence of the camera disrupts this social order and re-instates the power into the hands of the collective from that of the individual. Thus, the affordance of the camera brings social scrutiny and self-policing thus, believers must stay engaged and emotionally connected to the service without distractions.

Furthermore, we can also speculate that the lack of aesthetic performances, so intrinsic to African Pentecostal worship might prevent active engagement. The presence of physical bodies in this performance cannot be translated as easily as voices and chat boxes. This was perhaps the most important element in the worship which was keeping believers engaged and connected.

In attempting to answer the research questions on how offline religious practices are reproduced online, and the social dynamics that come from online worship, I argue that not all offline religious practices can translate well online. For example, the lack of physical connections between believers and the ability to synchronically perform music are major obstacles. Nevertheless, worshippers are skilful in their ability to reformulate some of the offline practices and adapt them to the online environment. So, they retain the power and agency over their own spiritual life despite the unique situation they are in.

This research comes at a very interesting time as concerns about social relations online are being discussed. While there is an existing body of research concerning digital media and social connections, now more than ever these issues are going to take centre stage both inside and outside academia. Therefore, it is important to review digital platforms and to analyse areas that work and those that need to be perfected.

8. Future research and recommendations

On 18th May 2020, Italy partly lifted the lockdown measures allowing churches to reopen, albeit with some restrictions. Some of the proposed restrictions will directly impact families with children, as they will not be allowed to attend the services. Churches are now discussing ways to respond to the issue and one of the solutions is to video stream the Sunday worship services on Zoom and Free Conference Call, so believers who are not able to attend the can still partake in the church service.
Research on the live streaming of video games by Smith et. al (2013) analysed the relation between the active gamer and the passive spectating community following the live stream. There are parallels that can be drawn from this phenomenon which could be easily applied to the worship space.

Future research could analyse the relations between the church members in the physical environment and the members worshipping from home. New insight can be gained by observing how the two groups engage with each other as they find themselves on opposite ends of the screen. In addition to this, we could observe how emotional connections happen between believers online and offline and the affordances used in both physical and online environments.

Having observed the technological affordances found on the digital platform there are recommendations that can be made to improve the experience of the worshipper. Platforms such as Zoom and Free Conference Call were created to fulfil secular needs such as business meetings, conferences, and distance learning. However, if the target audience was expanded to include online worshipping, the application designers could introduce a vast selection of encoded characters and digital facial expressions to convey specific feelings relating to spirituality to improve the experience of the online worshipper. Expanding the digital language available to believers could perhaps empower them to engage differently with the online church experience.

As we have seen in previous studies of digital churches, believers can use online avatars to embody the experience of the service and to communicate with fellow worshippers online. Taking this into account, future designers could include digital assets such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) so the worshipper can “physically” and emotionally engage with the service. These digital affordances could potentially transform the religious experience of believers and expand the notion of what it means to attend church.

My final recommendations relate to data protection measures to safeguard the online worshipper. In recent times digital platforms such as Zoom have been accused of not providing adequate safety measures against data theft (Guardian 2020). Therefore, it is important that the various stakeholders involved in the creation of future applications follow GDPR and IT security steps to protect users.
Bibliography


Interview with Cora
1st March 2020
Duration: 20 min

I had informally spoken to Cora a few days earlier regarding the topic of online worship. I attended her church service which was hosted on Free Conference Call on Sunday 1st March. After the service she agreed to have a formal interview.

I: What did you think about today’s church service?
C: Church was ok…today’s was a tough one though. The connection was really bad.
I: What parts did you find most challenging?
C: I couldn’t really hear Tonya (a choir member)…she kept breaking up. I think she had internet problems.
I: Yeah I noticed you jumped in to take the lead in the worship
C: Yeah I had to. It was going really bad
I: Do you think it’s just a matter of having a stronger internet connection?
C: Not it’s not just that. It’s other things
I: Yeah I see. Could you take me through some of the issue you face when it comes to the praise and worship?
C: It’s a long list (laughs)… Online worship is really not the same. For starters I am not able to see the expressions on the congregation to see whether the song is being impactful or not. People’s attitude during worship can really set the tone and change the atmosphere. In this online space I don’t really have that feedback, I can only trust that the Holy Spirit is doing his part.
I: Yeah I get what you mean. Do you think things could be different if the camera was on?
C: Maybe but it’s still very difficult to sing together. Also I think that Free Conference is not the best for that (video camera). They have to update the app, there are too many glitches, I don’t think it’s just the wi-fi…it’s the app. Coz I noticed it’s starts acting up when there are more people connected.
I: What do you mean?
C: We don’t have those problems on Wednesdays, coz it’s less people connected…but if you’ve noticed it’s usually the Sunday services when we have more people.
I: yeah we were in 45 people on today if I recall..
C: yeah exactly! And it was working fine on Wednesday’s service.
I: Right. But apart from that, how is this whole online worship going for you?
C: Honestly… I am used to coz before the pandemic we would have some of the mid-week’s services online but obviously Sunday is different. But I think in a way God is trying to tell us something with this
I: Hmm what do you mean?
C: well I feel that he is taking the church away from us for a reason…it’s a testing time, to see who is truly there to serve him. This whole situation is teaching us a lot about how God operates, and also how some of us operate. I feel like people are not caring…they are not being disciplined enough while worshipping online…I don’t know… there is a lack of accountability. I mean you hear people doing whatever they want, and because they don’t know how to mute themselves, we can hear everything. Why would you watch tv or receive a call when you are worshipping? You don’t have to be online if you don’t want to. Seriously, you are just deceiving yourself.
I: Do you think it’s just because there is a lack of discipline?
C: Discipline…williness. Everything. They don’t feel that God is watching them. But He watches everything. He knows everything.
I: Do you think that people just miss church?
C: Of course they do but we are not ready for church, honestly we need to take a few steps back. It shouldn’t be about waiting for the leader to worship. Worship should be an everyday thing, we need to do it on our own, and not wait to be lead. The spirit can use anyone. Really anyone! But let’s see how that goes, maybe people will get used to this new environment.
I: Yeah let’s see how that goes. I understand the circumstances are not easy.
C: not at all!
I: Is there anything you would like to add?
C: No, I just hope this pandemic ends soon
I: Yeah I feel you.
Interview with Stella
18th April 2020
Duration 20 min
Stella worships at my same church in Modena. Northern Italy. I have known her for 10 years. The congregation worships on Zoom

I: How are things going for you?
S: Things are ok. And you?
I: I am good thanks! So, I wanted to know your opinion about online worship, and I am aware there are many challenges, but I wanted to ask you what aspects are you actually enjoying?
S: hmmm...yeah I like the fact that we can still connect you know...thank God we have all these apps, it would have been a disaster without them. All my friends in the UK are doing church online. Thank God we can still do it. And you know...this is great, because other people can join as well, you know people that don’t really know God.
I: Do you mean using it to evangelise?
S: Yeah! It's easier now I feel
I: In what sense?
S: well people are more relaxed you know..they don’t have the pressure to commit. If they attend a church service and they don’t like the preaching for example, they can connect to another church in the comfort of their home
I: right! Just like online shopping, but for churches (I laugh)
S: (laughs) yeah exactly!
I: So, what other aspects do you like about online worship?
S: I like the fact that you are not under the pressure to show up, that you move according to your own time. You know during (on online) worship you don’t feel the pressure of looking nice. I don’t remember the last time I put on my make-up. All my kente have been in the wardrobe for two months.
I: interesting!
S: yeah and I know some people might not feel this way, but I feel it’s more relaxed
I: right, I think I know what you mean. Also people have the option of having their camera on or not.
S: yeah If I don’t feel like having to be on camera and have other people watch me I just turn it off!
I: except last week when pastor asked everyone to have their camera on to share the grace
S: Oh my God yeah!!! (laughs)...I was still in my nightwear…it was embarrassing. My husband was making fun of me…I think it demonstrate lack of discipline really. I think I had relaxed too much! (laughs) After that day I made sure I attended the service in the same way as I would if we were in church.
I: do you think it’s important to dress up for online church?
S: I don’t. I think it’s about the mindset and also where you are
I: you mean location wise?
S: yeah, if you follow the service in bed you are not going to get much out of it I think. You need to be in the right space. It’s like going to work you know. You need to show up correctly.
I: right yeah it makes sense. So where do you usually follow it?
S: I’m in the living room usually. Sometimes I move to the kitchen.
I: Ok. I noticed that your husband connects with his own device. Do you not follow the service together?
S: No, I connect with my phone, and sometimes I need to disconnect when the baby starts crying you know
I: right. So, it’s more flexible for you this way.
S: yes, absolutely! And that’s not much different from normal church service, coz when the baby starts crying I also need to step outside.
I: true! So, there are some things that don’t really change from online to offline
S: No I guess not. Alright I need to go now, but let me know if you want to talk again
I: sure. Thank you so much for your time
Examples of church programs

Church Modena
Program Sunday 10/05/2020 With Pastor Daniel

- MC: Mrs. Hc
- 09:00 Bible Study—Deacon H
- 10:00 Adoration & Prayer—Elder H
- 10:20 Scripture Reading—N
- 10:30 Testimony—Various
- 10:40 Presentation—Rev. D
- 10:45 Ministry—Pastor Daniel
- 12:00 Sharing of the Grace—Elder Ch

Program 8th. May 2020 with Pastor Selna

- 11:30 Pre-Service Ministry—Mrs. H,
- 10:00 Justification Study—Mrs. O
- 10:30 Scripture Reading (Acts 15:14) Sister R
- 10:38 Presentation—Rev. M
- 12:00 Ministry—Rev. S
- Acknowledgment & Thanks

Announcements: Tomorrow 4pm (Regional Meeting) and Sunday 9:30am we shall fast diligently fasting and persistently appealing to the Lord for divine solutions to the Covid-19 pandemic. Also for the Church, the elections, God's divine choice, and pursuers of members.