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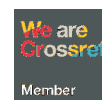
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Effectiveness of interactive pedagogy in digital catechesis in the diocese of Ruteng Flores NTT during the post covid-19 new normal

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital catechesis, especially in dioceses with limited access to in-person faith formation. This study explores the effectiveness of interactive pedagogy within digital catechesis in the Diocese of Ruteng-Flores-NTT during the post-COVID-19 new normal. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were gathered from structured interviews with catechists, clergy, and young Catholics, as well as participant observation of Zoom sessions, WhatsApp discussions, and YouTube content. The findings reveal that interactive digital methods—particularly Zoom-based catechesis—promoted higher engagement, dialogue, and deeper faith reflection, especially among youth. However, structural challenges such as poor internet connectivity and lack of catechist training limited full participation. The study highlights the importance of symbolic language, participatory learning methods, and enhanced digital competencies for catechists. These insights contribute to future strategies for effective and context-sensitive digital catechesis.

Keywords:

Interactive pedagogy
Digital catechesis
Diocese of Ruteng-Flores-NTT
Symbolic language
Post-covid-19

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted conventional systems of religious education, challenging the Catholic Church to creatively adapt its catechetical practices in light of physical distancing and social restrictions. Digital catechesis emerged not only as a practical solution during the crisis but also as a promising avenue for renewing catechetical methods in a technologically evolving world. This shift has been particularly notable in dioceses such as Ruteng in Flores, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, where socio-economic disparities, technological limitations, and cultural nuances deeply influence pastoral outreach.

Catechesis, at its core, is a process of initiating believers into the fullness of Christian life through faith formation and active participation in the ecclesial community. The Directory for Catechesis (2020) affirm that catechesis must be adapted to the cultural and social contexts of the faithful, including digital culture. The Church encourages a renewed pedagogy that prioritizes dialogue, experience, and the use of new languages, especially symbolic and narrative forms that resonate with digital natives ([Dicastery for Evangelization, 2020](#)).

Interactive pedagogy in religious education has gained increasing attention in recent years. Rooted in constructivist and participatory learning theories, it emphasizes learner engagement, critical thinking, and personal reflection. Paulo Freire's notion of dialogical education serves as a foundation

for understanding interactive pedagogy as a means of mutual transformation, where both catechist and learner are subjects in the process of meaning-making (Freire, 1970).

In the context of catechesis, interactive pedagogy involves methodologies that allow space for dialogue, creativity, symbolic expression, and mutual witness. These include storytelling, digital simulations, collaborative projects, testimonies, and multimedia presentations. Such methods are particularly effective among youth and digital natives, whose learning preferences favor interactivity, visual media, and community participation (Bato et al., 2024).

The integration of digital tools into catechesis is not merely a matter of technological substitution but involves a deeper pedagogical rethinking. Gere (2009) argues that digital culture has reshaped the cognitive and communicative habits of modern society, making it essential for catechesis to be incarnated in digital languages and platforms. This echoes Pope Francis' call in *Christus Vivit* for the Church to be present in the digital continent, accompanying young people in their online lives and offering spaces of authentic encounter and spiritual depth (Pope Francis, 2019).

Several studies have explored the effectiveness of digital catechesis during the pandemic. Altmeyer (2021) underlines the need for ecological sustainability and justice to be integrated in digital religious education. He emphasizes that digital platforms offer not only logistical convenience but also theological potential if employed with creativity and contextual sensitivity. Meanwhile, Praseno (2021) and Mindarti et al. (2022) found that digital catechesis enhances flexibility, accessibility, and youth engagement when implemented with participatory and symbolic elements.

However, other studies also highlight significant challenges, such as digital fatigue, superficial engagement, and unequal internet access, especially in rural parishes (Bato et al., 2024; Ummah, 2020). In many Indonesian dioceses, including Ruteng in Flores, East Nusa Tenggara, the implementation of digital catechesis has remained uneven, with notable gaps in catechist training, content development, and pedagogical innovation (Bato et al., 2024).

Research on interactive pedagogy within digital catechesis remains limited in Indonesia. While there are growing publications on the use of social media and digital tools in evangelization, few have focused specifically on how pedagogical strategies—such as interactivity, symbolic language, and participant-centered learning—impact catechetical outcomes. Furthermore, most existing studies do not consider the phenomenological experiences of learners and catechists in digital settings, particularly in non-urban or economically challenged areas.

This study aims to fill these gaps by focusing on the effectiveness of interactive pedagogy in digital catechesis within the Diocese of Ruteng during the post-COVID-19 new normal. It investigates how symbolic content, interactive platforms, and participatory methods shape faith formation among youth and catechists, drawing from direct testimonies and observations.

The novelty of this study lies in its phenomenological methodology, which centers on the lived experiences of catechetical actors in a specific local context. Rather than offering a generic evaluation of digital tools, this research foregrounds the subjective, embodied, and communal dimensions of digital catechesis. It contributes to the broader discourse on catechetical innovation by providing empirical insights into the potentials and limits of interactive pedagogy.

The objectives of this study are: (1) to explore how interactive pedagogy is perceived and experienced by catechists and learners in the Diocese of Ruteng-Flores-NTT; (2) to assess the impact of symbolic and dialogical strategies on engagement and understanding of faith; and (3) to identify practical recommendations for developing sustainable and inclusive digital catechesis.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it enriches the theoretical discussion on digital pedagogy in religious education by incorporating local and contextual dimensions. Second, it offers empirical evidence for Church leaders, educators, and policy makers seeking to adapt catechetical programs in post-pandemic realities. Third, it provides pastoral insights into how digital platforms can be transformed into sacred spaces of encounter, learning, and community building.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method with a phenomenological approach (Leavy, 2022; Moelung 2018), aiming to uncover the lived experiences of those participating in digital catechesis in the Diocese of Ruteng. The phenomenological lens allows researchers to understand the meaning behind participants' experiences and how they interpret the effectiveness of interactive methods in their faith journey.

Twenty key informants were selected purposively, including lay catechists, parish priests, and young Catholics (OMK) from urban and rural parishes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (via WhatsApp and face-to-face), participant observation of Zoom catechesis sessions, and analysis of catechetical materials shared on social media platforms.

The instruments used include an interview guide emphasizing phenomenological exploration, observation sheets, and digital documentation checklists. Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's model (2014): data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Triangulation and peer debriefing ensured data credibility.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. The Findings of this Study

Theme	Description	Participant Quote (Translated)
Zoom Engagement Among Youth	Zoom enabled real-time interaction and discussion, fostering a sense of presence and participation.	"I felt more engaged in catechesis through Zoom because I could ask questions and discuss directly, not just listen." (OMK, Parish of Catedral)
Symbolic Language and Content	Use of symbolic elements (videos, songs, testimonies) encouraged emotional connection and faith reflection.	"People were more active when we used videos and songs. They shared comments, questions, and even their faith experiences." (Catechist, Parish Golo Dukal)
Accessibility and Infrastructure Gap	Poor internet connectivity in rural areas hindered regular implementation of interactive sessions.	"We want to hold regular Zoom sessions, but the signal in our area is not strong enough." (Priest, Tilir Parish, East Manggarai)
Catechist Digital Literacy	Many catechists lacked skills and time to prepare or facilitate interactive content consistently.	"Some of us are still learning how to use these tools effectively. It takes a lot of time to prepare." (Lay Catechist, Parish Narang)
WhatsApp and Passive Engagement	WhatsApp was widely used but limited to content delivery, with low levels of interaction.	"We shared materials in WhatsApp groups, but the responses were usually just likes or emojis." (OMK, Parish Timung)
Positive Response to Storytelling	Story-based catechesis was highly effective in drawing attention and promoting dialogue.	"When we shared a short film about faith during the pandemic, it sparked a lot of discussion and sharing among the youth." (Youth Animator, Parish Waesambi)
Desire for Continued Use Post-Pandemic	Youth and catechists expressed hope that interactive methods would remain part of future catechesis.	"Even though the pandemic is over, I hope we keep using Zoom and videos. It makes learning more meaningful." (OMK, Parish Kumba)

These findings show that interactive pedagogy—particularly through symbolic language and real-time dialogue—was both well-received and impactful. However, implementation remains uneven due to digital access disparities and limited catechist capacity.

The findings of this study open an important discussion on the pedagogical shifts necessitated by digital transformation in the post-COVID-19 era. The analysis underscores three core dimensions: the pedagogical value of interactivity in faith formation, the strategic use of symbolic language for theological engagement, and the intersection between catechesis and evolving digital cultures—including AI-driven technologies.

Interactivity and Participatory Learning in Catechesis

The emphasis on interactive pedagogy reflects broader trends in educational theory that prioritize learner agency, collaboration, and engagement. Scholars such as Bell and Kozlowski (2022) highlight how participatory frameworks—rooted in Vygotsky’s social constructivism—enable deeper internalization of knowledge through peer-to-peer dialogue and contextual learning. In religious education, this means shifting from a teacher-centered monologue to a relational dynamic where catechist and participant mutually reflect on lived faith.

Catechesis that integrates interactive methods—e.g., breakout discussions, guided storytelling, real-time response polls—aligns with the principles of transformative learning as proposed by Mezirow (2000), who argued that reflection and dialogue are essential to changing mental models. In this context, Zoom-based catechesis provides opportunities for learners to verbalize questions, listen to others’ testimonies, and reframe theological concepts through collective discernment.

Empirical studies reinforce these theoretical claims. Bato et al. (2024) demonstrate that youth catechesis conducted via Zoom with dialogical content leads to higher cognitive and emotional retention compared to static content delivery. Similarly, Silva (2019) argues that participatory catechesis fosters a sense of belonging and ecclesial identity among youth, making them more likely to engage in parish life.

Symbolic Language and Digital Theology

The preference among young participants for symbolic rather than conceptual theological content aligns with broader understandings of narrative theology and semiotics in religious communication (Barkeley, 2023). In a visually saturated digital environment, the use of symbols—film, music, icons, testimonies—serves as a powerful bridge between abstract doctrine and personal spirituality (Dicastery for Evangelization, 2020).

According to Ricoeur’s hermeneutic theory, symbols and metaphors have a unique capacity to “say more than they mean,” opening interpretive horizons for deeper spiritual encounter (Ricoeur, 2003). In digital catechesis, symbolic language makes abstract truths more accessible, especially for digital natives whose cognition is shaped by image-based media.

This symbolic engagement echoes insights from theological anthropologists like Ammerman (2021), who note that embodied and affective experiences (including digital rituals and narratives) shape religious identity as powerfully as doctrinal teaching (Horsfield, 2015; Cheong, 2021; Van den Toren, 2022). The shift toward symbolic catechesis also reflects a broader ecclesial trend encouraged by Pope Francis, who urges the Church to be “more imaginative, more incarnational, and more poetic” in its communication of the Gospel (Pope Francis, 2019).

Hybrid and Contextual Digital Models

The experience of the Diocese of Ruteng demonstrates the importance of hybrid models that integrate online and offline engagement. In contexts where internet connectivity is limited, digital materials (videos, slides) were downloaded and used for offline discussions within Basic Ecclesial Communities (KBG). This confirms the value of contextual adaptation as proposed by Osmer (2008) in his model of practical theological reflection.

Moreover, the use of mobile-friendly platforms such as WhatsApp ensures that digital catechesis remains inclusive, albeit at the cost of interactivity. Scholars like Dillen (2022) remind us that digital equity is a pressing theological issue, not merely a technical one. Ensuring catechetical inclusion means investing not only in infrastructure but also in digital literacy training for catechists—especially in under-resourced parishes.

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Digital Catechesis

Recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) present both opportunities and challenges for the future of catechesis. AI-driven platforms, such as chatbots for theological inquiry or personalized faith learning apps, are being explored within Christian education globally (Zsupan-Jerome, 2020; Schroeder, 2022). These technologies offer adaptive learning, multilingual content, and 24/7 availability, potentially enhancing accessibility and engagement.

However, there are theological and pastoral concerns. First, AI lacks the relational and spiritual discernment that human catechists provide. As Haers and De Maeseneer (2023) warn, catechesis is not merely information delivery—it is formation in communion and lived witness. Second, there is a risk of depersonalization or relativization of doctrine if catechesis becomes over-reliant on automated content. Therefore, the integration of AI must remain rooted in ecclesial accompaniment and theological integrity.

Nonetheless, AI can be leveraged to assist catechists—through automated scheduling, lesson planning, or real-time feedback tools—thus freeing time for relational engagement. Directory for Catechesis guidelines encourage openness to technological development, provided it supports rather than supplants human pastoral ministry (Dicastery for Evangelization, 2020).

Faith Formation in a Post-Pandemic Digital Culture

The post-pandemic era has accelerated the normalization of digital engagement in all aspects of life, including faith (Tajuddin, 2021). Theologians like Campbell and Tsuria (2021) argue that “digital religion” is no longer a distinct domain but part of the everyday religious ecology. Catechesis must therefore move beyond “emergency digitization” to long-term strategies that integrate digital pedagogy with ecclesial mission (Andrews, 2021).

This requires a reevaluation of catechist formation programs. As Dhiu and Pius X (2024) contend, future catechists must be equipped not only with theological knowledge but also with digital creativity and cultural literacy. They must be able to craft content that is participatory, theologically sound, and digitally engaging. Likewise, ecclesial leaders must support ongoing training and peer mentoring, ensuring that catechetical innovation is sustainable.

Implications for Ecclesial Practice

The results of this study offer practical implications for dioceses and parishes: (1) Invest in digital infrastructure and internet access in rural parishes to ensure equity; (2) Provide digital pedagogy training and theological formation for catechists; (3) Prioritize participatory platforms (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet) for interactive sessions; (4) Develop and disseminate symbolic catechetical content: short films, testimony-based modules, podcasts; (5) Use AI tools to support (not replace) human catechists in lesson planning and learner tracking.

Furthermore, diocesan catechetical commissions should adopt contextual assessment tools to evaluate digital engagement and adapt models accordingly. Regular feedback from learners, especially youth, can guide iterative improvements.

Toward a Theology of Digital Encounter

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing theology of digital presence and communion. Digital catechesis is not just about method—it is about mission. It challenges the Church to embody its evangelizing spirit in a digitized world, to foster sacred spaces online, and to cultivate authentic encounters through symbolic and dialogical pedagogy (Heimbrock, 2022; Wang & Wenting, 2022; Srivastava & Tanya, 2022).

Pope Benedict XVI (2009) once remarked that the Church must “not be afraid to enter the digital continent.” This study affirms that such entry must be guided by a theological anthropology that honors embodiment, dialogue, community, and mystery (Campbell & Ruth, 2021). Interactive pedagogy, when grounded in these values, becomes not merely an educational tool but a sacramental gesture—a way of making God’s Word flesh in the digital age.

Conclusion

This study confirms that interactive pedagogy—especially when combined with symbolic language and digital platforms—has transformative potential for catechesis in the post-pandemic context. In the Diocese of Ruteng, Flores, East Nusa Tenggara, the implementation of Zoom-based catechesis, story-driven multimedia content, and participatory methods helped re-engage youth, facilitate deeper faith reflection, and foster ecclesial belonging.

The research highlights the critical need for catechists to be equipped not only theologically but also digitally, capable of navigating evolving technologies such as AI in pastoral contexts. It also reveals that symbolic expression—through music, testimony, and film—resonates deeply with digital natives, offering an incarnational bridge between doctrine and life.

At the same time, the study draws attention to persistent challenges: digital inequity, limited infrastructure, and lack of pedagogical training. Addressing these issues requires institutional commitment to inclusive and sustainable digital catechesis. Future directions must include hybrid approaches, AI-assisted tools with theological oversight, and an emphasis on spiritual accompaniment in digital spaces.

Ultimately, digital catechesis is not merely about modernization but about deepening communion. By rooting pedagogy in dialogical, symbolic, and incarnational principles, the Church can respond prophetically to the digital culture of our time. The Diocese of Ruteng, with its contextual innovations and commitment to formation, offers a living example of how catechesis can flourish in both local and global digital landscapes.

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