Teenagers' Perceptions and Church Leaders' Attitudes toward Pop Gospel Music in Catholic Worship in the Archdiocese of Benin City

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Abstract

This study examines teenagers' perceptions and church leaders' attitudes toward the use of pop gospel music in Catholic worship in the Archdiocese of Benin City, Nigeria. In response to declining youth participation, many parishes have adopted pop gospel music, creating tension between pastoral relevance and liturgical tradition. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants from five parishes: 10 teenagers from CYON and 10 church leaders comprising priests, youth chaplains, and music ministers. Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. Findings show that teenagers perceive pop gospel music as enhancing emotional engagement, active participation, and sense of belonging. Relatable lyrics also support personal prayer and reduce drift to Pentecostal churches. Church leaders acknowledge its pastoral and evangelistic value for youth retention but express concerns about theological depth and liturgical propriety. The study concludes that pop gospel music is a vital pastoral tool but requires regulation. It recommends: 1) a vetted Archdiocesan music directory, 2) training for music ministers on liturgical principles, and 3) a "two-space" model that allows pop gospel in para-liturgical settings while preserving traditional hymnody in the Eucharist.

Keywords: Pop Gospel Music, Teenagers, Church Leaders, Catholic Worship, Inculturation, Benin City

Introduction

Music occupies a central place in Christian worship as a vehicle for praise, doctrinal instruction, and spiritual expression. Within the Catholic tradition, sacred music has historically been guided by liturgical norms that emphasize reverence, theological depth, and musical discipline, as exemplified in Gregorian chant, classical hymns, and organ-based compositions. However, the 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed a global shift toward contemporary expressions, particularly pop gospel music, which blends popular musical idioms with Christian messages (Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music, 2002; Howard and Streck, 2013).

In Nigeria, where music is integral to both cultural and religious life, pop gospel music has gained considerable traction among Christian youth. The Catholic Archdiocese of Benin City, situated in the Niger-Delta region, reflects this trend. Faced with declining youth participation in formal liturgies and broader challenges of disengagement, many parishes have introduced

pop gospel music into youth Masses, rallies, and prayer meetings to foster relevance and participation.

While pop gospel music is credited with enhancing youth engagement and emotional connection to faith, it also raises pastoral and liturgical concerns. Questions have been raised regarding the theological depth of some lyrics, the appropriateness of performance styles in sacred spaces, and the possible dilution of liturgical solemnity. Existing studies on youth spirituality affirm that music shapes adolescents' identity, belonging, and religious attachment (Collins Mayo and Dandelion, 2010; Parker, 2018). Yet, most of this literature is drawn from Western and Protestant contexts and does not adequately address the intersection of Catholic liturgy, African musical culture, and Nigerian pop gospel.

Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence on how pop gospel music functions within Nigerian Catholic parishes, particularly regarding teenagers' experiences and church leaders' perspectives. Against this backdrop, this study examines teenagers' perceptions and church leaders' attitudes toward the use of pop gospel music in Catholic worship in the Archdiocese of Benin City.

Statement of the Problem

The Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria, including the Archdiocese of Benin City, is experiencing declining active participation among teenagers. In response, many parishes have adopted pop gospel music in youth-focused liturgies due to its contemporary appeal, relatable lyrics, and capacity to foster enthusiasm and emotional connection (Oikelome, 2010; Adebayo, 2019).

However, this innovation creates tension with the Church's liturgical tradition, which upholds reverence, doctrinal clarity, and musical propriety in worship. While pop gospel appears to address the cultural and spiritual needs of young Catholics, concerns persist among clergy, music ministers, and liturgists about its theological content, liturgical appropriateness, and long-term impact on worship discipline. Some view it as a necessary tool for youth evangelization, while others fear it undermines solemnity and doctrinal integrity.

Despite its growing use, there is a dearth of empirical research on how pop gospel music influences teenagers' worship and spiritual life within the Catholic context of Benin City. Similarly, the attitudes of priests, music ministers, and youth leaders toward its adoption remain underexplored. Critical questions remain: To what extent does pop gospel music deepen teenagers' spirituality and sense of belonging? How do church leaders perceive its use within Catholic liturgy?

Addressing these gaps is essential for informing pastoral and liturgical decisions that balance cultural relevance with fidelity to Catholic worship norms.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine teenagers' perceptions and church leaders' attitudes toward the use of pop gospel music in Catholic worship in the Archdiocese of Benin City. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Examine teenagers' perceptions of pop gospel music in relation to their worship and spiritual life.
2. Explore the attitude and opinions of Catholic priests, music ministers and youth leaders on the use of pop gospel music in Catholic worship

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do teenagers in the Catholic Archdiocese of Benin perceive pop gospel music in relation to their worship experiences?
2. How do priests, music ministers and youth leaders in the Archdiocese view the use of pop gospel music in youth-focused liturgical and non-liturgical settings?

Methodology

This study was conducted in the Catholic Archdiocese of Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. The Archdiocese comprises 94 parishes with an estimated Catholic population of 156,400, including 50,048 young adults/teenagers and 173 priests (Catholic Hierarchy, 2025). The area is characterized by active youth ministries and significant exposure to contemporary Christian music through media, schools, and neighboring Pentecostal churches.

A qualitative research design was adopted for this study. This design is appropriate because the study seeks to examine teenagers' perceptions and explore church leaders' attitudes toward the use of pop gospel music in Catholic worship. Qualitative methods enable an in-depth understanding of meanings, emotions, and experiences as expressed by participants in their own words (Creswell, 2014; Bryman, 2012).

The population of the study consisted of two groups: 1) Teenagers who are members of the Catholic Youth Organisation of Nigeria (CYON) and regularly participate in youth Masses and parish activities where pop gospel music is used, and 2) Church leaders comprising Catholic priests/youth chaplains and music ministers/choir directors responsible for music and youth ministry in selected parishes.

A multi-stage purposive sampling technique was employed. In stage one, five parishes with active youth ministries that routinely integrate pop gospel music into worship were purposively selected from the 94 parishes in the Archdiocese. In stage two, 2 teenagers were selected from each parish, one choir/band member and one regular youth worshipper, making a total of 10 teenagers. In addition, 1 priest/youth chaplain and 1 music minister were selected from each parish as key informants, bringing the total sample size to 20 participants. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, where depth of information takes precedence over numerical representation (Appinio, 2024; Sambodhi, 2025).

To ensure ethical compliance, informed consent was obtained from all participants and from parents/guardians for minors. To protect anonymity within the ecclesiastical structure,

specific parish names and detailed personal identifiers were not disclosed. Participants were profiled based on role, age range, gender, and level of church involvement.

Data were collected using semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. Two interview guides were developed, one for teenagers and one for church leaders. The guides focused on teenagers' perceptions of pop gospel music in relation to worship and spiritual life, and church leaders' attitudes and opinions on its use in Catholic worship. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis approach: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Codes were generated inductively and grouped into themes such as "enhanced participation and belonging," "emotional and spiritual engagement," and "concerns about liturgical appropriateness." Data from teenagers and church leaders were analyzed separately and then compared to allow triangulation of perspectives. Representative verbatim quotations were used to illustrate key themes and foreground participants' voices.

Results

Research Question 1: How do teenagers in the Catholic Archdiocese of Benin perceive pop gospel music in relation to their worship experiences?

Through the systematic examination of available transcripts, qualitative insights were harvested and categorized into key thematic clusters reflecting the multifaceted perceptions of adolescents. One thing common among the teenage respondents is that pop gospel music is an immediate facilitator of personal engagement for these young worshippers. For these young people, a common feeling is that standard western hymnody is distant from their daily acoustic realities and expectations. Whereas, in the teenage worship reality, the "full, conscious, and active participation", as termed by the Second Vatican Council, is directly unlocked when modern tempos are fully involved.

PT-01 highlighted how there is deep emotional resonance with contemporary rhythms: *"When Afro-gospel music are sung during youth mass, I feel alive in my heart unlike when we do standard hymns that gets everyone staring at the clock. Songs like those of Ada Ehi or Limoblaze, moves my soul to dancing and active participation in worship… it is how my spirit connects with God."* This can be linked with how musical shift directly influences worshipper retention in parishes as well attendance patterns as PT-02 opined: *"To be honest, I deliberately skipped youth mass a lot because I felt it was a boring religious activity. But ever since the parish started allowing the singing and playing of contemporary praise songs at the end of mass or during youth rallies, my attendance has been more consistent. It gives me a sense of belonging and I enjoy every minute."*

The response of PT-05 describes how contemporary Christian music extends to their everyday life beyond Sunday services: *"Pop gospel helps my personal prayer life. Since the lyrics are most likely written and sung by a Nigerian, they are easy to remember. This helps me get along during the week when I am overwhelmed with school work as I either sing them or hum the rhythms at those times. With this my culture, taste and preference connects with my faith."* PT-06 noted how the music validates their presence in the parish: *"I and my friends observe that the beat makes church much*

fun for us, and gives us the feeling that the church leadership remembers the teenagers exist and caters to their preferences in worship." Meanwhile, PT-08 shared: *"I enjoy the music because it creates a warm, emotional atmosphere where I can dance or express myself freely during worship."*

Research Question 2: To what extent does pop gospel music affect teenagers' participation and involvement in church activities within the Archdiocese?

The qualitative data shows the presence of a direct link between contemporary musical shifts, parish-wide youth recruitment, and active ministry involvement. PT-02's response exposes a direct link between this musical shift to attendance patterns when she noted that *"...ever since the parish started allowing the singing and playing of contemporary praise songs at the end of mass or during youth rallies, my attendance has been more consistent. It gives me a sense of belonging and I enjoy every minute."* In the same vein, PT-03 highlighted how the inclusion of this genre prevents inter-denominational drift among young people; in her words, *"This is one thing that keeps us engaged in the church, and helps dissuade the thought of running off to the Pentecostal churches or ministries around us that incorporate that worship."*

Beyond participant retention, it is emphasized by PT-10 that these worship experiences possess communal and evangelistic value, *"I can attribute the increase in youth retention to pop gospel music inclusion as a factor because my friends from school who are not Catholic worshippers attend our praise nights because it is always so vibrant. Thus, this becomes a powerful tool for evangelization and building of deep communal friendships among us."* PM-01 further confirms that belonging to a pop gospel youth choir, for these youths and teenagers, turns passive attendees into active pillars of the church as she puts, *"We can see this in the teenagers not just showing up for mass but taking care of church instruments, actively participating in organizing youth retreats, and building strong faith-centered friendships because something draws them to active commitment in the first place."*

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study were discussed in line with it's objectives as follows:

The data reveal that teenagers perceive pop gospel music as a vital medium for personal engagement and spiritual expression. Participants consistently reported that contemporary rhythms and relatable lyrics help them connect emotionally with God during worship. As PT-01 noted, songs by Nigerian gospel artists "move my soul to dancing and active participation," which contrasts with their experience of traditional hymnody as distant and unengaging. This aligns with Collins Mayo and Dandelion (2010) and Parker (2018), who affirm that music is central to adolescent identity and religious attachment.

Beyond Sunday liturgy, teenagers indicated that pop gospel extends into their daily lives. PT-05 stated that remembering lyrics helps during personal prayer and school-related stress, showing that the music supports spiritual continuity outside church. Furthermore, PT-06 and PT-08 described the music as validating their presence and allowing free expression, suggesting that pop gospel fosters a sense of belonging within the parish. This supports the view that when worship reflects youth culture, teenagers are more likely to see the Church as relevant to their lives.

Church leaders in the study expressed mixed but cautiously supportive attitudes. On one hand, they acknowledged the pastoral benefit of pop gospel in addressing declining youth participation. PT-02's increased attendance and PT-10's observation that non-Catholic friends attend parish praise nights confirm leaders' view of the music as an effective evangelistic and retention tool. PM-01 also noted that youth choirs have become pathways for active ministry involvement, turning passive attendees into committed members.

On the other hand, leaders expressed concerns consistent with Catholic liturgical theology about reverence, doctrinal integrity, and musical propriety. The central tension identified is between pastoral relevance and liturgical solemnity. Leaders feared that unrestricted use of pop gospel could commercialize worship and shift focus from the Eucharist to entertainment. This reflects the inculturation debate within Catholicism: how to embrace African cultural expressions without compromising the sacred character of the Mass (Howard and Streck, 2013).

The data suggest that an "all-or-nothing" approach is not viable. Both teenagers and leaders implicitly support a structured integration model. Pop gospel functions optimally in para-liturgical settings such as youth rallies, praise nights, and the entrance/recessional parts of youth Masses. In contrast, the central Eucharistic rites require the preservation of traditional, text-driven hymnody to maintain doctrinal and liturgical integrity.

Overall, the findings indicate that pop gospel music is not merely a stylistic preference but a pastoral instrument. When properly guided, it enhances participation, belonging, and spiritual engagement among teenagers, while still requiring clear boundaries to protect Catholic worship norms.

Conclusion

This study concludes that music is a primary language through which Catholic teenagers in the Archdiocese of Benin City express faith, identity, and loyalty to the Church. Pop gospel music plays a significant role in enhancing teenagers' worship experiences, emotional connection to God, and active participation in parish life. It also serves as a tool for evangelization and youth retention in a context of declining engagement.

However, the study also concludes that without clear guidelines, the adoption of pop gospel music risks undermining the reverence and doctrinal depth that define Catholic liturgy. Church leaders recognize its pastoral value but remain concerned about its potential to dilute the sacredness of the Mass.

Therefore, true inculturation in the Archdiocese does not demand the outright rejection of contemporary youth expression, nor does it permit the secularization of the Eucharist. Rather, it requires a disciplined, balanced approach where pop gospel music is intentionally integrated into appropriate spaces while the core of the liturgy retains its traditional solemnity. This balance is essential for sustaining both cultural relevance and fidelity to Catholic worship.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Archdiocese of Benin City, through the Directorate of Music and Liturgy, should create and circulate a vetted directory of pop gospel songs. This document should clearly categorize songs that are doctrinally sound and liturgically appropriate for youth Masses, and those that should be restricted to non-liturgical settings such as rallies and praise nights. This will provide clear guidance to music ministers and reduce tension between tradition and innovation.
2. The Archdiocese should organize regular workshops for youth choirs and music coordinators on Catholic liturgical principles, theological content of songs, and appropriate performance conduct. Emphasis should be placed on prayerful ministry over showmanship, and on distinguishing between worship and concert-style performance. This will help ensure that pop gospel music serves its pastoral purpose without compromising reverence.
3. Parishes should formally adopt a balanced approach to music use. Highly expressive pop gospel music should be encouraged during para-liturgical activities, youth Mass opening/closing rites, and fellowship meetings. At the same time, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, especially the Consecration, should retain Gregorian chant, classical hymns, and other traditional forms to preserve the sacred atmosphere. This model respects both the spiritual needs of teenagers and the liturgical norms of the Catholic Church.

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