HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

Sin in the digital space: Ethical dilemmas in contemporary Africa

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Dates:
Received: 07 May 2026
Accepted: 29 July 2026
Published: 12 Oct. 2026

How to cite this article:
Antombikums, A.S., 2026, 'Sin in the digital space: Ethical dilemmas in contemporary Africa', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82(1), a11472. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v82i1.11472

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The greatest gift of human intellectual ingenuity in the modern era is technology. It has transformed commerce, communication, and identity. However, this gift has also given rise to a wide range of ethical dilemmas. Digital media, in particular, has created numerous avenues for moral failure that not only undermine but also reinterpret the traditional concept of sin. This article examines the extent to which cyber-related crimes may be regarded as sin within the framework of traditional Christian thought. Many forms of cybercrime have become culturally acceptable because of their perceived economic value, raising significant ethical questions concerning structural complicity, intention, and moral agency. The article explores cyber-romance scams, Yahoo-Yahoo, and digital addiction as examples of digital practices that persist despite exhibiting many of the characteristics traditionally associated with sin. The article argues that cyber-romance scams and Yahoo-Yahoo illustrate the institutionalisation of moral decay, subtle deception, and socio-economic pathologies. At the same time, digital addiction requires more nuanced ethical evaluation because addiction can diminish agency, intentionality, and moral responsibility.

Contribution: The study nuances a moral theology that addresses the problem of cyber-ethics, aiming to reimagine righteousness in a digitalised world from an analytic theology's perspective.

Keywords: digital space; sin; moral agency; cybercrimes; ethics of responsibility.

Introduction

The emergence of technology from the Industrial Revolution up to its present digital form, including artificial intelligence (AI), represents one of the most transformative developments, showcasing human ingenuity in modern human history (Gruetzemacher & Whittlestone 2022; Pichai & Schwab 2020). Over the past three decades, technology and AI in particular have reshaped knowledge, communication, commerce, governance, and social interaction on a global scale (Abbas et al. 2024). The internet has created immeasurable and unprecedented possibilities for information exchange, economic opportunity, and social connectivity. In many respects, the digital revolution stands as a testament to human intellectual creativity and technological ingenuity. However, it challenges theistic claims about the divine being, given that some people tend to over-rely on AI for their knowledge-based questions. Despite its blessings (Lima & Belk 2022), technological innovations have also generated new ethical challenges (Mugambi 2025) that demand careful reflection, particularly within theological and philosophical frameworks. We are now faced with daunting theological and ethical dilemmas, especially with respect to conceptualising what is morally right or wrong. In other words, what is digital sin (Mendrofa, Suryaningsih & Min 2023) from a theological perspective? Obviously, each advancement connected to human ingenuity seems to introduce new challenges from a moral point of view, requiring new responses that are probably not clearly explicated in religious texts (Floridi 2013; Mercer, Trothen & Cole-Turner 2021).

This study explores the ethical implications of cybercrimes from the vantage of Christian moral theology and the philosophy of religion. My main focus is the question of the relationship between digital action and moral accountability offline. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions: *Does disembodied action in cyberspace diminish or distort personal accountability? How should sin be understood when mediated through avatars, pseudonyms, or online anonymity? Can online behaviour be subjected to the same moral scrutiny as actions performed in physical contexts?*

The study argues that disembodied action in cyberspace does not diminish or distort personal accountability. Because sin involves not only agency but intention, mediation through avatars,

pseudonyms, or online anonymity does not exonerate the primary agent that brings about such a state of affairs. Ultimately, I argue that online behaviour should be subjected to the same moral scrutiny as actions performed in physical contexts. Because the study is conceptual and theologically oriented, it adopts an interdisciplinary framework combining the methods of analytic philosophy of religion and theology, particularly those of conceptual analysis and reflective equilibrium (Antombikums 2024), and Christian moral theology. Analytic theology and analytic philosophy provides conceptual tools for examining the nature of moral agency, responsibility, and intentionality in digital contexts, while Christian moral theology contributes a theological understanding of sin, especially its noetic effect on humans and their actions.

Conceptualising sin in classical Christian theology

To better answer the questions guiding the study, this section examines how sin has been traditionally understood in Christianity. The Bible, as the primary source of Christian thought, has its own definition of sin, which classical philosophers and theologians used in developing a Christian doctrine of sin (hamartiology). As a result, sin has been consistently understood not only as a violation of laid-down rules but also as the disruption of the tripartite concept of relationships, namely: divine–human relations and human–human and human–creation order relationships, extrapolating from Genesis 3 (Antombikums 2024, 2025). Philosophical and theological reflections on hamartiology across centuries have highlighted several essential elements of sin, which include intention, agency, moral awareness, and relational rupture. *Prima facie*, sin is understood as *missing the mark.* However, for this to make sense, sin must be understood as an action, a vice or a disposition, a state of being (Timpe 2026) and a *privation* of the good (Couenhoven 2013; Mann 2006; Stump 2003; Timpe 2026). Sin as an action is 'the deliberate choice of a lesser good in preference to a greater, chosen in spite of and against the loving, creative, and wholly good will of God' (Groenhout 2006:135; Timpe 2026:sec. 2). As a disposition, sin is 'primarily an *affective* disorder or malfunction' (Plantinga 2000:208; Timpe 2026:sec. 3). In addition, sin from the Augustinian-Calvinistic perspective is 'an ontological state' (Timpe 2026:sec. 4) of being, resulting from an inherited guilt and pollution, so that everyone in this state of being is by nature unable to act contrarily. In that case, sin may be understood not only with respect to action, intentions and dispositions but also as being perpetually subjected to a state of being outside the control of an individual. In what follows, I will examine how Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth conceived sin, and draw ethical frameworks from them for analysing cybercrimes. Augustine and Aquinas continue to exert significant influence on theologians, particularly those working in analytic and philosophical theology, including the author of this article. Furthermore, I consider their understanding of sin to be relevant to the present discussion. As for Barth, his innovative conception of sin is particularly compelling because it addresses the notions of falsehood and sloth, with the former being central to this study.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) developed one of the most influential accounts of sin in Christian theology. For Augustine, the essence of sin lies in *disordered love* (*cupiditas*). Augustine (1891) argues that sin is:

> [*R*]ejoicing in that intoxication wherein the world so often forgets You, its Creator, and falls in love with Your creature instead of You, from the invisible wine of its own perversity turning and bowing down to the most infamous things. (*Con*. II: ch. 3, 6)

In other words, human beings were created to love God above all things. However, sin occurs when humans focus on lesser goods such as wealth, power, or pleasure, loving them more than the ultimate good, which is God. Augustine argues that moral disorder arises when the hierarchy of love is inverted. Specifically, this happens when created entities replace God as the primary object of devotion and love (Augustine 2003, *City of God*, XIV).

Reasoning from the foregoing, Augustine defined mortal sin as:

> '*Dictum vel factum vel concupitum contra legem æternam*', i.e. Sin, then, is any transgression in deed, or word, or desire, of the eternal law. And the eternal law is the divine order or will of God, which requires the preservation of natural order, and forbids the breach of it. (St. Augustine *Reply to Faustus* XXII)

This definition of sin presents it as a voluntary act contingent upon the fact that it is a defect and therefore an 'aversion from God, our true last end, by reason of the preference given to some mutable good' (O'Neil 1912:n.p.). Furthermore, to explicate how sin is a privation, Augustine argues that sin originates in the will. Although the human will is created good, it became corrupted when it turned away from God towards created entities (Augustine 1958, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.4). In that case, sin is not simply ignorance or weakness but a deliberate misordering of love. Understanding sin from this perspective substantiates the argument that sin is an intentional distortion of righteousness rather than an actual entity created by God.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) expanded Augustine's conception of sin, integrating it into a systematic moral theology. Aquinas defined sin as an act that deviates from the order of reason and divine law. 'The theologian considers sin chiefly as an offence against God; and the moral philosopher, as something contrary to reason' (Aquinas 1947, *ST*, I–II, q.71, a.6). Given that the virtue of a thing is contingent upon the fact that it must be disposed in line with its nature, a vice occurs when such a thing exhibits a state of affairs in which its dispositions contradict its nature and hence is 'vituperated' – a state of being derived from vice (*ST*, I–II).

For Aquinas, human actions are morally significant because they are voluntary. A morally responsible act must involve knowledge and consent. Sin, therefore, requires three key elements: awareness of wrongdoing, deliberate intention,

and voluntary action. When the will acts against reason or against God's law, the act becomes morally disordered. Aquinas explains that a human action becomes sinful when it 'turns aside from the order of reason and the Eternal Law' (*ST*, I–II, q.21, a.1). Aquinas (*De malo* 2:2) defines sin as 'a privation of form or order or due measure. Sin is nothing else than a morally bad act', and 'an act not in accord with reason informed by the Divine law' (Aquinas 2001, *De malo* 7:3; cf. O'Neil 1912).

Karl Barth presents what might be regarded as a *Trinity* of sin. Barth refers to sin as *Das Nichtige*, translated as *nothingness* (Antombikums 2024). He argues that 'evil is a form of that nothingness which as such is absolutely subject to God' (Barth 1956 §60:406). In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth (1956) construes sin as stemming from these three interrelated dimensions: pride (*CD* IV/§60.2), sloth (*CD* IV/§65.2), and falsehood (*CD* IV/§70.2). For Barth, pride is the primary form of sin (*CD* IV/§60:413). It is the human attempt to place oneself in the position of God, seeking autonomy and self-sufficiency apart from divine grace (*CD* IV/§60). Pride manifests when people try to justify themselves, determine their own truth, or claim independence from God.

As for sloth (*CD* IV/§65.2), Barth interprets it not simply as laziness but as spiritual indifference or refusal to respond to God's calling. While pride tries to elevate the self above God, sloth withdraws from the responsibility of living in relationship with God. It appears as apathy, despair, or avoidance of the vocation God gives to humanity. For Barth, this is a failure to embrace the freedom and responsibility that come from being created and redeemed by God. In the end, falsehood (*CD* IV/§70.2) involves living in denial of the truth about God, ourselves, and the world. Sin distorts reality by replacing truth with illusion. Human beings create false narratives about their independence, righteousness, or moral superiority. Falsehood sustains both pride and sloth because it prevents people from acknowledging their true condition before God.

James, in his epistle, argues that 'if anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them' (Ja 4:17). Therefore, sin from the aforementioned definition from Augustine to Aquinas and Barth, is a free act of commission and omission, what we do, fail to do, in words, thoughts and deeds. It involves failure to ascribe to God the glory due to Him, including how we use our time. All human vices and privations can be regarded as the noetic effect of sin because the mind, will, and affections are interconnected. There is a cyclical relationship between vice and the noetic effect of sin. The unredeemed mind cannot make right spiritual and moral judgement (Rm 8:7). The summary of the Law according to Jesus in the New Testament is love for God and neighbour as self. A misdirection of this love occurs in digital space when the command to love God and neighbour is replaced with love for personal gain. Cybercrimes lead to a relational rupture – missing the standard mark to relate with God and humans. Although cybercrime, moral failure, and sin are related but not identical concepts, this study is concerned only with those online actions that constitute sin from a Christian theological perspective, irrespective of whether they are also criminal offences.

Digital media and the question of moral agency

The term technology (which gives rise to contemporary digitisation of society) is derived from the Greek word *techne*, which has been translated differently as either craft, art, or knowledge. In contrast to knowledge *what*, which is *episteme* denoting the knowledge of things and their nature as in epistemology, *techne* is the knowledge of making or doing; that is, what might be regarded as knowledge *how*. *Techne* seems to focus on changing the existing state of affairs and creating new things. As described in ancient Greek thought, *techne* focused on mastering and exploring the science of the physical world for the betterment of humanity. In this regard, Ellul (1964) argues that the sole aim of technology is to defend humankind. Properly understood, the nature of technology should not be seen as oppositional to Christianity but rather provides it with tools not only to be viable but also to fulfil its core mandate of human flourishing (Herzfeld 2022).

However, the most important question relating to the use of technology in general and digital media in particular, as in the context of this study, is on the nature of intention, agency and moral accountability. A related issue to the foregoing concerns the responsible use of technology, particularly digital media, and how Christians, for instance, ought to conduct themselves in digital space if indeed they must remain true worshippers of Christ, worshipping Him in truth and spirit, regardless of whether they are in private or public.

Morally speaking, humans are considered free moral agents capable of bringing several states of affairs into existence by their actions. Because every consequence has a consequent which can be traced, every free moral agent must be responsible for their actions. However, it seems that the traditional ethical perception of consequent and consequence seems to leave out many ethical challenges that modern technology and digital media, in particular, present. For instance, in the context of techno-ethics, an ethics of responsibility becomes necessary because technological innovations or manufacturing occur in a multilayered context with multiple agents, notwithstanding the social consequences of the product of such technological innovations. Moreover, manufacturing involves complex processes, making it almost impossible to predict with material certainty what might turn out to be the drawback of such products. Social media has been notoriously abused today, and the question that easily comes to mind is whether the manufacturers of such apps as Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, Telegram and others foresaw that such valuable spaces could be abused or manipulated for cybercrimes or not (Doorn & Van de Poel 2012).

Neequaye (2019) argues that:

> [*T*]he traditional ethics that we have is not able to guide the future scientific developments, because it works under the assumption that … given the impossibility of long-term calculation, one should consider what is close at hand only and let the distant future take care of itself. (Jonas 1984:ix; Neequaye 2019:59)

This is because it has been traditionally understood that, given human limited knowledge, people are unable to foresee the consequences of their actions in such contexts where there are no clear immediate outcomes. Consequently, they were exonerated from the consequences of their well-intentioned actions (Neequaye 2019).

However, because technology is shaping the concept of responsibility, it must be understood as accountability for past, present, and future actions. Technologists and engineers, as well as the perpetrators of cybercrime, have somewhat equal responsibilities (a difficult subject for another discussion). Although an ethics of digital innovation binding on technologists and the like cannot be overemphasised, the ethics of the responsible use of digital space cannot be overemphasised either:

> The ethics of use focuses on the responsibility of the end user, on their capacity for prudence, on their moral formation. It presupposes that, even when faced with well-designed technologies, humans retain a space of freedom and responsibility that can be exercised virtuously or viciously … (Mattei 2025:2)

Today, social media in particular has drastically reshaped social and interpersonal interactions, which obviously have implications for socialisation and further polarised relationships in families and friends (Hogue 2007). When humans become increasingly isolated, especially because of contemporary digital isolation, they are more likely to develop a distorted ethical compass that contradicts universal ethics (Moyo 2015). In addition, when young people, especially, are perpetually drawn to their devices with no physical interaction with the nearest person besides them, it not only reveals the collapse of socialisation but also a deep-seated issue of addiction and servitude, something contrary to the divine intention of human creation in the image of God. Digital media has drastically altered moral and character formation, as the digital space creates digital culture, which is sometimes built on misinformation, consumerist culture, and postmodernism (Scherz 2021; Turkle 2011; Twenge 2017; Zhang 2025).

As mentioned in the introduction, the benefits of technology in general are enormous. However, the problem seems to lie in the philosophy of technology and the intention of technological innovations. As we continue to witness the negative effects of technology on human life, such as cybercrimes, one is sometimes compelled to ask whether technological innovation, especially social media, is truly intended for human flourishing or whether it also serves other hidden motives. Some people now argue that, looking at its materialistic inclination, technological innovation has become another form of religion. Indeed, it seems to function as a god for many, as people trust it unconditionally to solve virtually all their problems (Fourie 2020). Waters (2015) argues that as people consistently put their trust in technological innovations, their relationship with God and one another is disrupted. Today, AI seems to be omniscient, as even many preachers depend on it to prepare their sermons. Although we must acknowledge the ingenuity and blessings that come with technology, we must draw the line between awe and idolatry. The creation still remains the theatre of God's glory, and we must worship the creator rather than the creatures (Cho 2026; Fourie 2020; Mokoena 2024).

It seems to me that the Church presents a limited voice in discussing an ethics of responsibility not only with respect to technological innovations but also with respect to how such innovations, especially those that create digital space, are responsibly used. The Catholic Church, for instance, addresses this issue in Pope Francis's encyclical Laudato Si'. The encyclical argues that the problem arising from the abuse of technological innovations, especially devices, does not simply lie with the devices themselves. Rather, the crux of the matter lies in the fact that '… these devices are designed around a modern technocratic paradigm, an understanding of how persons engage the world, privileging manipulation by the autonomous will over connection and engagement' (Morozov 2014; Scherz 2021:240). The culmination of this manipulation is a neo-colonialisation of the entire human race, and favouring a privileged minority that has the power to control the whole.

Digital space and the flourishing of moral failures

As digital space continues to expand, it in turn dramatically amplifies moral failures in society because it can create strong, tempting avenues that can easily lure users. This is particularly the case as the digital space promotes offline solitude, encourages anonymity (Van der Nagel & Frith 2015), and changes how users perceive identity, agency, responsibility and ethical accountability. It has been established recently that digital space serves as a fertile ground for moral disengagement, and the consequence is the justification of grossly unethical behaviours, as people believe that distance or mediation reduces accountability (Eriyani, Suryaningsih & Min 2023; Ott 2018; Xu et al. 2025).

Because we are living in a fluid global village, online space allows individuals to interact through avatars, pseudonyms, and anonymous accounts, resulting in the creation of mediated or 'disembodied' presence that significantly differs from traditional face-to-face interactions. This shift has several implications for moral philosophy and religious ethics, particularly the concept of sin (Boiliu, Jura & De Carvalho 2025; Campbell & Tsuria 2021). The issue is about the nature of accountability, responsibility and intentionality when certain states of affairs are executed in cyberspace rather than in physical space. The argument is that digital

space creates some distance between the agent and the consequences of their actions, which in turn could weaken moral restraint and culpability (Floridi 2013; Grudin 2001; Sommer 2002). If this is accepted as a valid argument, then one is faced with the question of what sin is in digital media in contrast to sin in a traditional context. For instance, if sin traditionally involves the abuse of human freedom in relation to God, neighbour, and creation, how should such abuse or misuse of freedom be understood when mediated through digital technologies?

In Africa, as everywhere else in the world today, the aforementioned question becomes daunting when the current adoption of digital media colludes with the complex socio-economic precarity of people. Three decades ago, the situation was probably different from what it is today. The current dramatic growth in mobile technology, digital entrepreneurship and internet access has facilitated numerous crimes. Some of these include internet fraud, digital impersonation, identity theft, misinformation, pornography, voyeurism, and digital addictions (Akanle, Adesina & Akarah 2016). In addition, social engineering and automated teller machine (ATM) card skimming are now prevalent. The last two decades have witnessed a tremendous rise in the abuse of cyberspace, raising ethical questions not only for religious-minded individuals but also for the cosmos as a whole (Essien 2018). Not only this, the crimes associated with cyberspace have now metamorphosed and evolved exponentially, affecting not only the weak but also formidable institutions that once considered themselves watertight from a security perspective but have since suffered many attacks from cybercriminals (Abdullah et al. 2025).

In some communities, cybercrime is now socially rationalised and accepted because of unemployment, poverty, and perceived global economic injustice. For instance, some perpetrators from countries previously under colonial rule argue that they are merely 'recovering stolen wealth' from richer nations, which stole their wealth, especially through colonialism and ongoing neocolonialism (Ajayi, Adesope & Oso 2024, Wariboko & Nwanyanwu 2024). We can therefore deduce that the primary cause of cybercrime from this perspective is the uneven distribution of wealth. However, from an ethical and theological point of view, cyber fraud reflects human sin such as greed, deception, and exploitation of others. When preachers engage in a hermeneutic of manoeuvre (negotiating what the true meaning of a biblical text is in the light of current trends) in an attempt to biblically justify such actions, it raises daunting questions about integrity, responsibility, and justice in a digital age. The dilemma is how our societies and the Church can address economic hardship while still maintaining moral accountability and remaining faithful to the biblical command against stealing, bearing false witness, and idolatry in the case of addiction.

Recently, a Nigerian social media influencer named Blessing CEO (Ozaveshe 2026) fraudulently claimed to be a victim of stage-four cancer, garnering lots of sympathy, with 13 million naira donations from sympathisers. This deceitful behaviour is easier to pull off in the digital space than offline. Digital media not only reduces the need for immediate accountability, but it also seems to motivate individuals to overlook traditional moral constraints such as integrity and honesty. Many decisions in digital space reflect the triumph of utilitarianism over deontology, virtue, and teleological ethics as the primary driver of human decisions (Barque-Duran et al. 2017). This suggests that the digital space is not merely a neutral medium, but it actively shapes ethical decision-making, including lowering the threshold for sinful behaviour, thereby encouraging moral failure. In the end, moral accountability is diffused across systems and platforms, which makes it easier not only for individuals but also for institutions to rationally justify unethical behaviours (Véliz 2021). Indeed, cybercrime is a global phenomenon. However, in many African contexts, where individuals and informal networks frequently assume welfare functions that would ordinarily be provided by the state, responses to cybercrime are shaped by distinctive socio-economic realities. Consequently, both local communities and the Church often encounter significant challenges in addressing cyber-enabled fraud, particularly *Yahoo Yahoo*, because of its perceived economic value as a source of livelihood for some individuals and households. In what follows, I will present three examples of how digital space seems to encourage moral failure.

Case Study 1: Yahoo Yahoo

While 'Yahoo Yahoo' is a term commonly used in West Africa, especially Nigeria, to describe internet fraud, the criminal practices it encompasses are not confined to the region but constitute a global form of cybercrime manifested in diverse contexts and under different labels. Yahoo Yahoo is used to describe a particular form of internet fraud, which involves deceiving victims online. Some do this through identity concealment and emotional manipulation of victims. Others are involved in romance scams and advance-fee fraud, persuading victims to deposit money with the promise of receiving greater financial returns (Kolawole 2020). Many people whom the current researcher interacted with over the years recounted their experiences with Ponzi schemes like Dobibo, Tofrow, and the like, which are now prevalent in Eastern and Western Europe. Closely related to this is what is commonly called the '419' scam.

A sum of seven billion naira was said to have been traced to a Church in Nigeria by the Nigerian anti-graft agency, known as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) (Sanusi 2024). At one of its meetings, the Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) Church allegedly admitted that some of its prophets were in cahoots with Yahoo Boys, performing rituals to ensure the fraudsters succeeded in defrauding people. The Church met and called such prophets to repent of such practices. The president of the Church allegedly argues that Yahoo Boys also sponsor Church programmes, making it very complex and challenging for Pastors to call them to repentance (Olakuleyin 2025, Ezediuno 2024).

Yahoo is a person (esp. a man) who commits fraud on the internet (Oxford University Press 2025). Yahoo-plus is an advanced-level cybercrime. Olayinka (2019), in a quantitative study of Yahooism, argues that:

> All the respondents reported that yahoo-plus is when a yahoo-boy adds anything spiritual to yahoo-yahoo. They explained that it is almost impossible to scam anyone without the spiritual influence because victims are getting wiser and more familiar with their strategies. (pp. 346–347)

Recent media reports illustrate how some religious leaders have engaged the phenomenon of *Yahooism* in highly controversial ways. For example, a Nigerian pastor was reported to have prayed that *Yahoo Boys* would gain access to the bank details of corrupt politicians in order to defraud them, arguing that such politicians had themselves exploited the public by embezzling public resources. The same report further claimed that the pastor prayed that *Yahoo Boys* would also obtain access to the accounts of pastors who misappropriate Church offerings (Instablog9ja 2022). Although these reports originate from a media platform rather than a peer-reviewed source, they nevertheless provide insight into contemporary public discourse surrounding the moral framing of cyber-enabled fraud in Nigeria. Similarly, another pastor reportedly responded to widespread condemnation of *Yahooism* by arguing that the practice has a biblical antecedent in the book of Genesis and, therefore, cannot be regarded as inherently condemned by Scripture (Instablog9ja 2024). This interpretation represents an attempt to invoke biblical narratives in defence of cyber fraud, raising important hermeneutical and theological questions regarding the appropriation of Scripture to legitimise unethical practices. Such claims underscore the need for critical theological engagement with popular biblical interpretations and their influence on contemporary moral discourse:

> I am here to shock you this morning that many Yahoo Boys, Yahoo Girls, Yahoo Men, Yahoo Women are going to make Heaven. Can I give you an example? (Yes, sir, echoed the congregants). When you read the Book of Genesis, chapter 27, from verses 1–44, there was once a man who existed, whose name was Jacob. The meaning of Jacob is deceiver, and Jacob is the first Yahoo man who existed on earth. Jacob deceived his father and collected the birthright of his brother, Esau and went away with it. He took it as a jackpot because when Esau came back and said, 'Baba, I have prepared the benefit [*meal?*], give me a blessing', the father said, 'None of the blessings is remaining'. That is where the jackpot started from. Jackpot is collecting all plus all, and that is what Yahoo do to some people. The man who started it, his name is Jacob, and Jacob is in Heaven. *Person wey im papa dey heaven dey go hell fire? If you hear me say, 'I hear you' (I hear you, sir,* echoed the congregants). The father of Yahoo is Jacob, and today, all over the world, if Yahoo takes people to hellfire, every family is going to lose a child to hell. How do I mean? There is what we call Government Yahoo, there is Pastors Yahoo, there is Business Yahoo, there is Contract Yahoo, [and] there is Family Yahoo. Let me define Yahoo before I move on: Yahoo is the ability to *deceive* and *collect* from another man. (*manshadaraba,* someone speaks in tongues) … And we are going to see in the Bible that God created the Yahoo, He created the man, they deceived … : wisdom and strength belong to God. *The person wey fit do Yahoo no be small sense im get, na* wisdom! (Instablog9ja 2024:n.p.)

Case Study 2: Internet romance scam

Cassiman (2019:15) argues that 'Trickery is almost considered a kind of civic virtue in post-colonial Ghana: the trickster's "cunning and irreverent adaptability create a model of appropriation for navigating social transformations"'. The tricksters reportedly justify their actions by appealing to perceived socio-economic inequalities between themselves and their victims. They contend that the resources obtained were given voluntarily by the victims, despite the fact that such transfers were secured through calculated deception, manipulation, and fraudulent practices. This rationale serves to frame their conduct as a form of redress for economic disparity while downplaying the coercive and exploitative nature of their methods. As mentioned above, another argument put forward is that their practices were justifiable in the context of colonialism. They argue that the colonialist exploited and stole their wealth, and therefore, they were merely recovering their stolen wealth. This is clearly a strawman argument that is easily refuted, as individuals cannot be held accountable for systemic injustice, and even if it were possible to hold the system accountable, extra-judicial means of wealth recovery are in themselves unjust (Cassiman 2019; Moore 1998).

The assumption that love necessarily precludes evil thoughts and malicious intentions appears plausible at first glance. Closer examination, however, reveals that this assumption is difficult to defend in light of the complexities of human behaviour and moral agency. The phenomenon of internet romance scams illustrates this tension particularly well (Coluccia et al. 2020). Loving someone comes with a cost: the willingness to sacrifice or give oneself for the beloved or lover. It also involves trust and openness. It would be considered strange if someone is unwilling to support their loved ones in whatever way they can (Sorell & Whittyy 2019). Alexander Bilz, Shepherd and Johnson (2023) argue that there are about 334 articles written on internet romance scams. Although those relationships are romantic, the intentions are deadly: the scammers don't fall in love; only the victims do. Romance is only a contingent plan meant to lure the victim, but the target is money. Online romance and dating habits (Lazarus et al. 2023), targeting rich older women from the West, who are considered to have a social security system that was established by the blood of Africans, have become a serious business for many young men and women not only in some parts of Africa, but virtually in all the continents of the world today. Some consider this form of cybercrime a form of retributive justice, or 'karma', as they call it (Cassiman 2019).

A Ghanaian woman allegedly defends internet romance scams by arguing that they provide young men with an alternative to armed robbery. She further argues that their victims are Westerners whose countries historically extracted wealth from Africa, thereby framing the scams as a form of

historical redress. She argues that cybercrime is good for now as long as it provides the necessities of life for the scammers (Todaybasetv 2016). 'Rather than being condemned, fraudsters are often seen as resourceful and intelligent, further perpetuating the social legitimacy of their criminal activities' (Lazarus et al. 2023:12). Unfortunately, the aforementioned lady presupposes that armed robbery is at the top of the ladder on the hierarchy of crime compared to cybercrime. However, in my estimation, internet romance scams are more damaging, given that it involves manipulation rather than the use of force (Whitty & Buchanan 2012, 2016). The scammers present themselves as legitimate friends or helpful individuals before striking.

Unfortunately, it seems that many ethical debates are formulated from a humanistic perspective and therefore lack the theological grounding to confront contemporary cybercrimes (Hile, Msughter & Aliyu 2023; Mathu 2025). Technological apps that create digital media platforms are not just tools; they are cultural spaces with their distinctive moral consciousness. As a result, they are shaping contemporary human life and resulting in moral ambiguity. Therefore, moral philosophy and moral theology must uphold an ethic that celebrates human creativity but rejects its misuse.

Case Study 3: Digital addiction

Ordinarily, one would expect that every free moral agent would conduct themselves in a digital space responsibly, showcasing their authentic character and identity. However, this is not always the case. From an ethical perspective, '… authenticity means maintaining integrity between who we are and how we act – both offline and online' (Beyers 2013:7). In my estimation, the origin of moral failures in the digital space traces back to digital addiction. Excessive engagement with social media, gaming, or online content can lead to compulsive patterns of behaviour that undermine personal well-being and social relationships (Badejo 2017). Digital addiction raises moral questions about freedom, discipline, and self-control (Montag & Walla 2016; Sutton 2020). Christian moral theology, particularly in the tradition of virtue ethics, emphasises the importance of temperance. Temperance refers to the capacity to regulate desires and maintain balance in one's life (Dimauro 2025; Kenney 2016). When individuals become enslaved to digital technologies, their freedom and moral agency are diminished. Instead of using technology as a tool for constructive purposes, they become controlled by habits that may harm their spiritual, emotional, and relational health.

Over-reliance on AI diminishes human dignity, which is rooted biblically in the *Imago Dei* [image of God], by eroding moral agency and reducing human value to mere functionality. Digital media tempts humans to abdicate responsibility for crucial decisions and neglect the unique human capacity for conscience, creativity, and a spiritual relationship with God. In addition, over-reliance on AI technology and digital media in particular can destroy the notion of the dignity of labour, thereby redefining what should constitute divine purpose and meaning in a digital age.

Digital addiction is not merely a behavioural disorder or technological challenge but a distortion of human dignity in relation to our vocation to love God, neighbour, and self. Digital addiction is a manifestation of disordered desire [*concupiscentia*], in which a created entity, namely digital media, assumes an ultimate significance that belongs to God alone. The moral problem, therefore, is not the existence of digital media *per se* but its capacity to reshape habits, desire, and identity in ways that undermine the cardinal virtue of temperance, erode practical wisdom [*phronesis*], and diminish one's freedom necessary for authentic moral agency. By fostering compulsive consumption, perpetual distraction, and algorithmically mediated self-validation, digital addiction can weaken contemplative receptivity to divine grace, fragment interpersonal communion, and impede participation in the ecclesial practices through which Christian character is formed. This explains why digital addiction must be understood differently from other cybercrimes because agency and intentionality are eroded.

Moreover, the commodification of human attention in the contemporary digital economy raises significant questions of structural sin and moral responsibility, which have implications not only for individual users but also for technological systems that are intentionally designed to exploit cognitive vulnerabilities for commercial gain. In that case, a Christian ethical response must move beyond appeals to individual self-control and instead advocate a holistic vision of digital discipleship grounded in virtue formation, communal accountability, and the cultivation of self-disciplines that reorient human desire towards its proper end in God. We must emphasise that genuine freedom is not realised in unrestricted digital autonomy but in the Holy Spirit-enabled capacity to order one's affections according to the love of God, restoring our dignity and placing technology in its rightful place as a servant of human flourishing rather than its master.

An analytic theological perspective

In ethical discourse (Bok 2011; Carson 2010; Isenberg 1964; Martin 1986; Playford, Roberts & Playford 2014) from a deontological point of view, especially as it relates to the thought of Immanuel Kant, moral actions are judged not by outcomes but by adherence to moral duties and universal principles. Kant's (1993) *categorical imperative* requires that we must act only according to maxims that can be universalised. If deception ('Yahoo') were universalised, that is, if everyone acted with 'the ability to deceive and collect from another man', as argued by the pastor above, then trust, contracts, and social order would collapse. Furthermore, the argument that Jacob's deception legitimises fraud not only commits a naturalistic fallacy but also a fallacy of equivocation – it moves from what is

described in Scripture to what *ought to be done*. The Bible often describes human sin without endorsing it. In fact, Jacob's deception leads to family division, exile, and suffering (Gn 27–32), which indicates moral disorder rather than divine approval.

From a biblical point of view, falsehood, lies and deception are all sins, and there are no grounds for justifying any of them, even in the so-called context of situational ethics. Sin is sin regardless of the intention. The commandment 'You shall not bear false witness' (Ex 20:16, NIV) establishes truthfulness as a universal duty. Furthermore, Proverbs states that 'The Lord detests lying lips' (Pr 12:22, NIV). These texts align with deontological ethics: deception is wrong in itself, not merely because of its consequences. However, there are several instances in Scripture when people engage in deception. For instance, Abraham in Genesis 20, for fear of being killed, told Abimelech that Sarah was his sister. Isaac did the same in Genesis 26 when he said that Rebekah was his sister without revealing that she was also his wife. The midwives in Exodus 1, Rahab in Joshua 2, and possibly the Magi in the story of Jesus' birth all engaged in acts of deception that appear to have received divine approval. Although deception is a sin, it seems that when the intention is not to harm or cheat another person, it lacks the same degree of condemnation as deception that causes relational rupture or harm.

In addition, from a virtue ethics perspective, morality concerns the formation of good character and the cultivation of virtues such as honesty, justice, and integrity (Aristotle 2009). This argument is even more compelling when examined through the lens of Christian virtue ethics, which extends beyond the assumptions of naturalistic and humanistic ethical frameworks. At its core, virtue ethics is concerned with the formation of perfect moral character and the cultivation of human excellence (Wood 2018). Within the Christian tradition, however, virtue ethics is fundamentally teleological: its ultimate end [*telos*] is conformity to the image of Christ. Christian moral formation is therefore not simply the pursuit of becoming a better moral self, but the ongoing process of becoming more like Christ through humility, love of God, and love of neighbour, thereby participating in the divine life (cf. Pt 2 1:4). Christian virtue ethics is thus oriented towards the question: *What would Christ do in this situation?* (Salzman & Lawler 2018; Wood 2018).

Christian virtue ethics is rooted in the doctrine of sanctification, whereby the virtues are understood not merely as habits acquired through human effort but as dispositions cultivated through the transformative work of the Holy Spirit (Kotva 1996). Moral formation is therefore inseparable from regeneration and spiritual transformation, through which believers are progressively conformed to the image of Christ. This process is manifested in the fruit of the Spirit (Gl 5: 22–23) and entails a continual dying to self so that Christ may live in and through the believer (cf. Gl 2:20). Accordingly, Christian virtue ethics is best understood as a Spirit-enabled process of character formation that integrates divine grace with faithful human participation (Wood 2018).

Building on this theological framework, Christian ethics should be adequately conceptualised as an identity-based ethic rather than locating ethical obligation primarily in rules, consequences, or even virtues considered in isolation; an identity-based approach grounds moral action in the believer's new identity in Christ. Passages such as Ephesians 2 portray ethical transformation as flowing from God's redemptive action and the believer's incorporation into Christ, so that moral conduct is the expression of God's grace operating in the lives of believers. This proposal, which I am currently developing, seeks to provide a more coherent theological account of Christian ethics by integrating virtue and sanctification within a distinctly Christocentric framework.

The defence of 'Yahoo' as 'wisdom' fundamentally distorts the concept of virtue by equating cunningness with moral excellence. As far as the Scriptures are concerned, true wisdom is clearly distinguished from cunning deceit. It is knowing and reverencing the Lord. James argues that 'Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic' (Ja 3:15, NIV) – a strong contrast with 'the wisdom that comes from heaven [which] is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere' (Ja 3:17, NIV). As a result, the claim that 'The person wey fit do Yahoo no be small sense im get, na wisdom!' is directly contradicted by biblical teaching.

This study argues from an analytical theological lens that disembodied action online does not diminish or distort personal accountability. Human beings remain free moral agents and are responsible not only for their immediate actions but also for the foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences of those actions, regardless of where they are carried out. Digital mediation may create a sense of distance between the agent and the action, and it may distort one's perception of responsibility, but it does not diminish moral accountability. Responsibility belongs to the person who wills and performs the action, not to the medium through which the action is expressed.

Generally, moral character is formed through repeated actions. Virtue is a habitual disposition towards the good, while vice develops through repeated actions that oppose the good. This principle applies equally to digital life. Online behaviour, repeated over time, contributes to the formation of one's character in the same way as offline behaviour. Habits of cruelty, deception, pride, sloth, or lust cultivated online shape the moral character of the individual regardless of physical embodiment. The digital environment, therefore, does not suspend the process of moral formation; rather, it becomes another sphere in which virtue or vice is cultivated.

A second question concerns whether an avatar, pseudonym, or anonymous identity changes the moral nature of an action.

Put differently, if a person conceals their identity or acts through a digital representative to bring about a particular state of affairs, does that disguise remove moral responsibility? This study argues that it does not. Although the digital identity may differ from the person's public identity, the intention behind the action originates in the real moral agent. Consequently, the sin remains attributable to the individual who wills the act.

This conclusion is consistent with Kantian deontological ethics. Moral responsibility belongs to rational agents who act according to or against duty, not merely to physical bodies. In fact, from a Christian perspective, we are not only responsible for our actions but also for our thoughts and inactions. Moral obligations do not disappear because a person acts anonymously or through an avatar. If deception, hatred, or exploitation cannot be universalised as moral principles, they remain morally impermissible whether they occur online or offline. Digital anonymity may conceal identity from other people, but it cannot remove one's moral accountability before God or one's moral responsibility for one's actions.

The third research question asks whether online behaviour should be judged by the same moral standards as offline conduct. This study argues that it should. Ethical evaluation depends upon intention and consequences rather than the medium through which an action is performed. While digital mediation changes the form of an action, it does not change the intention of the moral agent. Consequently, online actions retain the same moral significance and the same potential for sin as actions performed in physical settings. This conclusion is also supported by the Christian tradition, particularly in the writings of Augustine and Aquinas, as discussed above. Because online actions involve knowledge, consent, and deliberate choice, they remain genuine moral actions. A change in the medium does not constitute a change in moral responsibility because the human will remains the source of moral action.

In contrast to other cybercrimes, addiction requires separate consideration. Addiction can reduce freedom and impair moral judgement, and therefore pastoral and ethical reflection must acknowledge the complexity of compulsive behaviour. Nevertheless, addiction does not change the moral nature of actions simply because they occur online. Digital environments can intensify existing dispositions and reinforce patterns of vice through repeated exposure and habitual practice. For this reason, addiction should be approached with both moral seriousness and pastoral compassion. While individuals remain responsible for seeking healing and resisting behaviours that harm themselves and others, the Church is equally called to respond with grace, support, and restoration rather than condemnation alone.

Conclusion

Secular legal systems already recognise that individuals remain responsible for actions carried out through digital technologies, just as natural law and Christian ethics have consistently affirmed moral accountability regardless of the medium through which an action is performed. The command to love God and to love one's neighbour as oneself affirms that it is contrary to our nature to bring about states of affairs that threaten or harm the life of another person. It is therefore deeply concerning that certain forms of online vice increasingly receive scriptural justification. Such attempts are better understood as expressions of disordered self-love shaped by contemporary consumerist culture than as faithful interpretations of Christian ethics. Whether acting directly or indirectly, openly or anonymously, we remain morally accountable for the intentions we form, the relationships we damage, and the consequences our actions produce. Digital mediation may obscure accountability in the eyes of others, but it does not remove responsibility before God or neighbour. In this sense, we remain morally complicit, or at times vicariously responsible, for the states of affairs we intentionally bring about. A viable ethical framework for discussing cybercrimes is contingent upon imitating or becoming like Christ.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Aku S. Antombikums: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position

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