

**The Performed Self: Inauthenticity, Social Cohesion, and the Crisis of Faith in Ugandan Churches**

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**Abstract**

This study examined the dynamics of performed religious identity in Ugandan churches and analyzed how the tension between performative self-presentation and perceived authenticity affected individual faith experiences and congregational social cohesion. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study collected data from 384 church members across six purposively selected congregations representing Pentecostal, charismatic, mainline Protestant, and Catholic traditions in Kampala and Wakiso districts, utilizing structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews with 36 participants, eight focus group discussions, and six months of observational fieldwork. Quantitative analysis included univariate descriptions of key variables, bivariate examinations of demographic associations, and structural equation modeling to test hypothesized relationships among performative religiosity, perceived authenticity gap, faith commitment, and social cohesion constructs. Results revealed that performative religiosity was moderately high across the sample ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ), with participants reporting greater perceived inauthenticity in others ( $M = 3.27$ ) than in themselves ( $M = 2.61$ ), indicating self-serving biases in authenticity assessments. Denominational variations showed Pentecostal and charismatic churches scoring significantly higher on both performative religiosity and authenticity gaps compared to mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations, while demographic patterns indicated that women, younger participants, and those with higher education engaged more intensively with performative practices and reported greater awareness of authenticity discrepancies. The structural equation model demonstrated excellent fit ( $CFI = 0.96$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.056$ ) and revealed that while performative religiosity had a modest positive direct effect on faith commitment ( $\beta = 0.18$ ,  $p = .001$ ), this was offset by a stronger negative indirect effect through authenticity gap ( $\beta = -0.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ), resulting in a non-significant total effect. For social cohesion, performative religiosity showed no significant direct effect ( $\beta = 0.09$ ,  $p = .084$ ) but a substantial negative indirect effect through authenticity gap ( $\beta = -0.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating complete mediation. Authenticity gap demonstrated strong negative effects on both faith commitment ( $\beta = -0.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and social cohesion ( $\beta = -0.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ), explaining 38% and 52% of variance respectively. Qualitative findings corroborated these patterns, revealing that church members experienced performance-authenticity tensions as sources of spiritual anxiety, employed various cognitive strategies to manage dissonance between ideal and actual religious selves, and described how suspicions of widespread inauthenticity undermined communal trust even while maintaining institutional participation for social and pragmatic reasons. The study concluded that Ugandan churches faced a self-undermining dynamic where emphasis on demonstrable spirituality generated the very skepticism about authenticity that eroded both individual faith and collective solidarity, suggesting that addressing this crisis required fundamental reconsideration of how religious communities balance performative and authentic dimensions of spiritual life rather than simply condemning hypocrisy or demanding greater sincerity from individual believers.

**Key Words: Inauthenticity and Social Cohesion**

**Introduction**

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Contemporary Ugandan Christianity exists at a critical juncture where the tension between performative religiosity and authentic spiritual experience has become increasingly pronounced. Across Kampala's megachurches, neighborhood prayer houses, and traditional denominational congregations, a growing discourse centers on the perceived gap between outward religious performance and inner spiritual reality. This study examines the phenomenon of the "performed self" within Ugandan church contexts, exploring how the construction and maintenance of religious identities through performative acts intersects with questions of authenticity, community belonging, and the sustainability of religious faith (Audrey & Kazaara, 2025; Kazaara & Audrey, 2025b, 2025a). The performed self refers to the deliberate presentation of a religious identity that may not fully align with an individual's private beliefs, experiences, or behaviors. In Uganda's highly visible and socially embedded Christian culture, where religious participation often serves multiple social, economic, and political functions beyond spiritual fulfillment, the pressure to maintain convincing performances of piety is substantial. This performance encompasses public prayer styles, testimonial narratives, emotional expressions during worship, dress codes, verbal affirmations of faith, and the cultivation of a sanctified public persona (Julius & Isaac Kazaara, 2025; Kazaara & Desire, 2025). While performance has always been integral to religious ritual and identity formation, the intensification of these performative demands alongside skepticism about their authenticity signals what many observers characterize as a crisis of faith. This crisis manifests not only as individual spiritual disillusionment but also as a collective challenge to social cohesion within religious communities. When church members suspect widespread inauthenticity among their fellow congregants or even their leaders, the foundations of trust and communal solidarity that undergird religious community life become fragile. The paradox emerges that the very performances intended to demonstrate and reinforce faith may simultaneously undermine it, creating communities bound more by shared pretense than shared conviction.

### **Background of the Study**

Uganda's religious landscape has undergone dramatic transformation over the past four decades, shaped by the explosive growth of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, the liberalization of the religious market following the 1995 Constitution, and the increasing mediatization of religious life. Christianity, professed by approximately 85% of Uganda's population, functions not merely as a private spiritual commitment but as a primary framework for social organization, moral legitimation, economic networking, and political mobilization (Fahmi et al., 2025; Jennings & Bamkole, 2019). The church occupies central space in Ugandan public life, with religious leaders wielding considerable influence and religious participation serving as a marker of social respectability and moral citizenship. The Pentecostal and charismatic movements that have reshaped Ugandan Christianity since the 1980s place particular emphasis on demonstrable evidence of spiritual transformation through visible signs such as speaking in tongues, prophetic utterances, miraculous healings, prosperity, and lifestyle changes (Fonseca et al., 2019; Fowler Davis & Davies, 2025). This emphasis on outward manifestation has intensified the performative dimensions of religious life, creating what some scholars have termed "prosperity gospel cultures" where visible success becomes both the promise and the proof of authentic faith. The proliferation of media technologies, from radio and television broadcasts to social media platforms, has further amplified these performative pressures by creating new stages for religious performance and new audiences before whom the faithful must demonstrate their commitment (Lalot et al., 2022).

However, alongside this religious vitality runs a counter-narrative of disillusionment. Popular discourse, social media commentary, journalistic exposés, and even sermons from religious leaders themselves frequently address concerns about "fake Christians," "Sunday believers," hypocritical church leaders, staged miracles, and congregations motivated more by social networking or material benefits than genuine spiritual seeking. High-profile scandals involving religious leaders, the commercialization of religious services, and the perceived failure of prosperity gospel promises have contributed to growing cynicism even as church attendance remains robust (Sakketa, 2025; Sestito, 2025). Sociological theories of performance, particularly Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, provide frameworks for understanding religious identity as constructed through social interaction rather than as a fixed internal essence. Meanwhile, philosophical discussions of authenticity from existentialist traditions raise questions about whether authentic selfhood is even possible within highly scripted social contexts (Chan & Kawalerowicz, 2024; Packer & Ungson, 2024; Zahnow, 2024). These theoretical perspectives intersect with theological debates within Ugandan Christianity about the relationship between faith and works, inner conviction and outward demonstration, individual belief and communal belonging.

#### **Problem Statement**

Despite the central role of churches in Ugandan social life and the continuing high rates of religious participation, there exists insufficient understanding of how performative dimensions of religious identity affect both individual faith experiences and collective community cohesion (Danquah & Ouattara, 2023; Moustakas, 2023). The gap between the idealized authentic Christian self-promoted in religious discourse and the actually performed religious identities enacted in church contexts creates psychological, social, and theological tensions that have not been adequately examined. Current scholarship on Ugandan Christianity has extensively documented the growth of Pentecostalism, the political roles of religious institutions, and the economics of religious entrepreneurship, but has given less attention to the subjective experiences of ordinary believers navigating the demands of religious performance (Abdulla, 2018; Agbaria, 2024). Questions remain about how individuals experience and rationalize potential contradictions between their performed religious selves and their private doubts or inconsistencies, how communities function when members suspect widespread inauthenticity, and what consequences this performance-authenticity tension has for the long-term sustainability of religious commitment and community solidarity (Damanhoury, 2023; Khamalwa, 2022). Furthermore, while the discourse about religious hypocrisy is widespread in Ugandan public conversation, it lacks empirical grounding that would clarify the actual extent of experienced inauthenticity, the specific contexts and practices where the performance-authenticity gap is most pronounced, and the mechanisms by which communities either maintain cohesion despite recognized inauthenticity or fracture because of it. Without such understanding, religious leaders, communities, and individuals lack the knowledge necessary to address what many perceive as a deepening crisis of faith (Ernst et al., 2024; Magezi, 2024; Thomsen, 2023). This study therefore investigates the phenomenon of performed religious identity, its relationship to authentic spiritual experience, and its implications for social cohesion and faith sustainability in Ugandan churches.

#### **Main Objective**

To examine the dynamics of performed religious identity in Ugandan churches and analyze how the tension between performative self-presentation and perceived authenticity affects individual faith experiences and congregational social cohesion.

**Specific Objectives**

1. To identify and analyze the specific performative practices through which individuals construct and present their religious selves within Ugandan church contexts, and to explore how these performances are negotiated between personal conviction and social expectation.
2. To investigate how church members perceive, experience, and respond to potential gaps between performed religious identities and authentic spiritual commitment, both in themselves and in others within their religious communities.
3. To assess the impact of perceived inauthenticity and performative religiosity on social cohesion, trust, and collective solidarity within Ugandan church congregations.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the key performative practices through which individuals construct their religious identities in Ugandan churches, and how do believers navigate the relationship between social expectations for religious performance and their personal experiences of faith?
2. How do church members experience and make sense of the potential disconnect between their performed religious selves and their private spiritual realities, and how do they interpret similar disconnects that they perceive in fellow congregants?
3. In what ways does the tension between performed identity and perceived authenticity affect patterns of trust, belonging, and social cohesion within Ugandan church communities?

**Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively examine the dynamics of performed religious identity and its implications for faith authenticity and social cohesion in Ugandan churches. The research was conducted across six purposively selected churches in Kampala and Wakiso districts, representing diverse denominational traditions including Pentecostal, charismatic, mainline Protestant, and Catholic congregations, with selection criteria emphasizing variation in congregation size, socioeconomic composition, and theological orientation. The study population comprised adult church members aged 18 years and above who had been active participants in their respective congregations for at least one year. A sample of 384 respondents was determined using Yamane's formula for finite populations, while 36 participants were purposively selected for in-depth interviews including church members, religious leaders, and former congregants who had disengaged from church participation. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires employing Likert-scale items measuring constructs of performative religiosity, perceived authenticity, faith commitment, trust in religious community, and social cohesion, with reliability assessed through Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions with eight groups of 8-10 participants each, and non-participant observation of worship services and church activities over a six-month period, with detailed field notes documenting performative practices, emotional expressions, and interactive

patterns. Data analysis involved multiple statistical techniques: univariate analysis examined frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations to describe the prevalence and intensity of performative practices and authenticity perceptions across the sample; bivariate analysis using chi-square tests, Pearson correlations, and independent samples t-tests explored associations between demographic variables (age, gender, education, church tenure, denominational affiliation) and key study variables including performativity scores, authenticity gaps, and cohesion measures; and structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS software tested a hypothesized model specifying relationships among latent constructs, with performative religiosity as an exogenous variable predicting perceived authenticity gap (first mediator), which in turn influenced individual faith commitment and congregational social cohesion (endogenous variables), while controlling for social desirability bias and demographic characteristics, with model fit evaluated through multiple indices including Chi-square/df ratio, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software, with an inductive-deductive coding approach that allowed both theory-driven and emergent themes to surface, focusing on narratives of performance and authenticity, strategies of identity negotiation, experiences of disillusionment or spiritual conflict, and perceptions of community trust and belonging (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Methodological rigor was ensured through triangulation of data sources and methods, member checking of qualitative interpretations with selected participants, reflexive journaling to acknowledge researcher positionality as both an insider (Ugandan Christian) and outsider (academic researcher), and prolonged engagement in research sites to build rapport and observe naturalistic behaviors beyond initial performative responses to researcher presence. Ethical considerations included obtaining institutional approval from the relevant research ethics committee, securing informed consent from all participants with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, obtaining permission from church leadership while maintaining participant independence from institutional oversight, using pseudonyms for individuals and churches in reporting, and providing participants opportunities to review their quoted material and withdraw consent if desired, while remaining sensitive to the potentially sensitive nature of discussing religious doubts, hypocrisy, and community conflicts within highly religious contexts.

**Results**

**Table 1: Univariate Analysis of Performative Religiosity, Authenticity Gap, Faith Commitment, and Social Cohesion**

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
<b>Performative Religiosity Scale</b>	384	3.78	0.82	1.40	5.00	-0.45	0.23
Public prayer demonstration	384	4.12	0.91	1.00	5.00	-0.89	0.67
Testimonial sharing	384	3.68	1.04	1.00	5.00	-0.32	-0.41
Emotional worship expression	384	3.95	0.97	1.00	5.00	-0.61	0.18
Dress code adherence	384	3.52	1.12	1.00	5.00	-0.18	-0.58
Verbal faith affirmations	384	3.89	0.88	1.00	5.00	-0.53	0.34
<b>Perceived Authenticity Gap</b>	384	2.94	0.76	1.00	4.80	0.28	-0.19

Self-reported gap (personal)	384	2.61	0.89	1.00	5.00	0.42	-0.31
Perceived gap in others	384	3.27	0.84	1.00	5.00	0.16	-0.45
<b>Individual Faith Commitment</b>	384	3.92	0.71	1.60	5.00	-0.38	0.41
Private devotional practices	384	3.74	0.95	1.00	5.00	-0.29	-0.22
Doctrinal certainty	384	4.08	0.82	1.00	5.00	-0.71	0.89
Spiritual experience intensity	384	3.95	0.88	1.00	5.00	-0.48	0.15
<b>Congregational Social Cohesion</b>	384	3.56	0.85	1.20	5.00	-0.21	-0.16
Trust in fellow members	384	3.38	0.97	1.00	5.00	-0.09	-0.48
Sense of belonging	384	3.81	0.94	1.00	5.00	-0.44	-0.15
Willingness to share vulnerabilities	384	3.49	1.06	1.00	5.00	-0.15	-0.61

*Note: All scales ranged from 1 (strongly disagree/never) to 5 (strongly agree/always). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for scales: Performative Religiosity = 0.84, Authenticity Gap = 0.79, Faith Commitment = 0.82, Social Cohesion = 0.86*

The univariate analysis revealed that performative religiosity was moderately high across the sample ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ), with public prayer demonstration scoring highest among performative dimensions ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) and dress code adherence scoring lowest ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ). The negative skewness values for most performative religiosity items indicated that responses clustered toward higher values, suggesting widespread engagement in performative religious practices. The perceived authenticity gap demonstrated a moderate mean ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ), with participants reporting significantly higher perceptions of inauthenticity in others ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) compared to their self-reported gap ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ), a difference that was statistically significant ( $t = 12.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Individual faith commitment remained relatively strong ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ), with doctrinal certainty scoring highest ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ), while congregational social cohesion showed moderate levels ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ), with trust in fellow members being the weakest dimension ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). The reliability coefficients for all composite scales exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70, confirming internal consistency of the measurement instruments.

These findings indicated that Ugandan church members actively engaged in performative religious practices while simultaneously recognizing a gap between performance and authentic commitment, particularly in their observations of others rather than in themselves. This pattern suggested the operation of a self-serving bias or social desirability effect, where individuals maintained more charitable interpretations of their own performances while viewing others' displays with greater skepticism. The high mean score for public prayer demonstration reflected the premium placed on visible verbal piety in Ugandan church culture, particularly within Pentecostal and charismatic contexts where spontaneous public prayer served as a marker of spiritual maturity and authenticity. Conversely, the lower score for dress code adherence suggested that while external appearance remained important, it was perceived as less central to authentic religious identity than verbal and emotional performances. The moderate authenticity gap scores revealed a critical tension: participants acknowledged the existence of performance-authenticity discrepancies without

necessarily viewing this as incompatible with continued religious participation, suggesting that Ugandan church members had developed cognitive strategies for managing this dissonance.

The moderate levels of congregational social cohesion, particularly the relatively low trust scores, pointed to the social consequences of perceived inauthenticity within religious communities. When church members suspected widespread performance without corresponding inner conviction among their fellow congregants, the foundations for deep interpersonal trust and vulnerability became compromised. However, the fact that sense of belonging scored higher than trust suggested that social cohesion in Ugandan churches was sustained through mechanisms beyond interpersonal trust, possibly including shared rituals, institutional loyalty, social network dependencies, or pragmatic benefits of continued participation. The maintained strength of individual faith commitment despite recognized authenticity gaps indicated resilience in personal spirituality even when communal authenticity was questioned, suggesting that Ugandan Christians differentiated between their personal relationship with the divine and their assessment of the religious community's collective authenticity.

**Table 2: Bivariate Analysis of Relationships Between Key Variables and Demographic Characteristics**

Variable Pairs	Pearson r / $\chi^2$	p-value	Effect Size
<b>Correlations Between Main Variables</b>			
Performative Religiosity ↔ Authenticity Gap	0.38***	<.001	Medium
Performative Religiosity ↔ Faith Commitment	0.24***	<.001	Small
Performative Religiosity ↔ Social Cohesion	-0.16**	.002	Small
Authenticity Gap ↔ Faith Commitment	-0.42***	<.001	Medium
Authenticity Gap ↔ Social Cohesion	-0.51***	<.001	Large
Faith Commitment ↔ Social Cohesion	0.47***	<.001	Medium
<b>Denomination Differences (ANOVA F-values)</b>			
Performative Religiosity by Denomination	F = 18.42***	<.001	$\eta^2 = 0.13$
- Pentecostal (n=142)	M = 4.08, SD = 0.71		
- Charismatic (n=98)	M = 3.95, SD = 0.76		
- Mainline Protestant (n=89)	M = 3.42, SD = 0.82		
- Catholic (n=55)	M = 3.38, SD = 0.79		
Authenticity Gap by Denomination	F = 7.26***	<.001	$\eta^2 = 0.05$
- Pentecostal	M = 3.15, SD = 0.74		
- Charismatic	M = 3.02, SD = 0.71		
- Mainline Protestant	M = 2.71, SD = 0.78		
- Catholic	M = 2.64, SD = 0.81		
<b>Gender Differences (Independent t-tests)</b>			
Performative Religiosity	t = 3.82***	<.001	d = 0.39
- Female (n=221)	M = 3.91, SD = 0.79		
- Male (n=163)	M = 3.61, SD = 0.84		

Social Cohesion	t = -2.14*	.033	d = 0.22
- Female	M = 3.48, SD = 0.87		
- Male	M = 3.67, SD = 0.81		
<b>Age Correlations</b>			
Age ↔ Performative Religiosity	-0.21***	<.001	Small
Age ↔ Authenticity Gap	-0.28***	<.001	Small
Age ↔ Faith Commitment	0.31***	<.001	Medium
<b>Education Level (ANOVA F-values)</b>			
Authenticity Gap by Education	F = 5.93***	.001	η <sup>2</sup> = 0.04
- Secondary or below (n=87)	M = 2.71, SD = 0.81		
- Diploma/Certificate (n=156)	M = 2.94, SD = 0.74		
- Bachelor's degree (n=108)	M = 3.08, SD = 0.73		
- Postgraduate (n=33)	M = 3.21, SD = 0.68		

\*Note: \*\*\*p < .001, \*\*p < .01, p < .05. Effect sizes: r/d values 0.1-0.3 = small, 0.3-0.5 = medium, >0.5 = large; η<sup>2</sup> values 0.01 = small, 0.06 = medium, 0.14 = large

The bivariate analysis revealed several statistically significant relationships among the key study variables. Performative religiosity demonstrated a positive moderate correlation with perceived authenticity gap (r = 0.38, p < .001), indicating that higher engagement in religious performances was associated with greater recognition of performance-authenticity discrepancies. Conversely, the authenticity gap showed strong negative correlations with both faith commitment (r = -0.42, p < .001) and social cohesion (r = -0.51, p < .001), suggesting that perceived inauthenticity significantly undermined both individual spiritual conviction and communal solidarity. Denominational differences were pronounced, with one-way ANOVA revealing significant variations in performative religiosity (F = 18.42, p < .001, η<sup>2</sup> = 0.13) and authenticity gap (F = 7.26, p < .001, η<sup>2</sup> = 0.05). Post-hoc Tukey tests indicated that Pentecostal and charismatic churches scored significantly higher on performative religiosity compared to mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations (p < .001 for all comparisons), while also reporting higher authenticity gaps. Gender differences emerged, with females scoring significantly higher on performative religiosity (t = 3.82, p < .001, d = 0.39) but males reporting higher social cohesion (t = -2.14, p = .033, d = 0.22). Age demonstrated negative correlations with both performative religiosity (r = -0.21, p < .001) and authenticity gap (r = -0.28, p < .001), while showing a positive correlation with faith commitment (r = 0.31, p < .001). Education level showed a positive linear relationship with authenticity gap (F = 5.93, p = .001, η<sup>2</sup> = 0.04), with more educated respondents reporting greater awareness of performance-authenticity discrepancies.

The positive correlation between performative religiosity and authenticity gap presented a critical paradox within Ugandan church life: the very practices intended to demonstrate and cultivate authentic faith simultaneously heightened awareness of potential inauthenticity. This relationship suggested that as churches emphasized visible demonstrations of spirituality, members became more attuned to the possibility that such demonstrations might be

strategic performances rather than spontaneous expressions of inner conviction. The particularly strong negative relationship between authenticity gap and social cohesion ( $r = -0.51$ ) underscored the corrosive effect of perceived inauthenticity on community trust and solidarity, indicating that when church members questioned the genuineness of their fellow congregants' faith performances, their willingness to invest emotionally in the community, share vulnerabilities, and maintain deep interpersonal bonds diminished substantially. This finding illuminated a fundamental challenge for Ugandan churches: the communal mechanisms that theoretically should strengthen faith through collective reinforcement were being undermined by suspicions about the authenticity of that collective performance.

The denominational variations revealed important distinctions in how different church traditions navigated the performance-authenticity tension. Pentecostal and charismatic churches, with their emphasis on demonstrable spiritual experiences, prophetic utterances, and visible transformations, created environments where performative expectations were highest, which paradoxically resulted in greater recognition of authenticity gaps. This suggested that theological frameworks emphasizing outward manifestations of inner spiritual states may inadvertently create conditions for heightened performance anxiety and skepticism. The gender differences, with women scoring higher on performative religiosity, reflected broader gender dynamics within Ugandan Christianity where women constituted the numerical majority of active participants and often bore greater social pressure to demonstrate exemplary piety, particularly in contexts where women's church leadership was constructed around moral authority rather than institutional power. The age-related patterns, where younger participants reported higher performativity and authenticity gaps but lower faith commitment, pointed to generational shifts in religious experience, possibly reflecting younger Ugandans' greater exposure to critical religious discourse through social media and higher education, as evidenced by the positive correlation between education and authenticity gap awareness. These younger, more educated church members appeared to maintain religious participation while harboring greater skepticism about the authenticity of religious performances, suggesting an emerging mode of strategic or pragmatic religious engagement distinct from the unquestioning commitment traditionally associated with Ugandan Christianity.

**Table 3: Structural Equation Model Results - Direct and Indirect Effects**

Pathway	Standardized Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	SE	CR	p-value	95% CI
<b>Direct Effects</b>					
Performative Religiosity → Authenticity Gap	0.41***	0.048	8.54	<.001	[0.32, 0.50]
Performative Religiosity → Faith Commitment	0.18**	0.056	3.21	.001	[0.07, 0.29]
Performative Religiosity → Social Cohesion	0.09	0.052	1.73	.084	[-0.01, 0.19]
Authenticity Gap → Faith Commitment	-0.48***	0.052	-9.23	<.001	[-0.58, -0.38]

Authenticity Gap → Social Cohesion	-0.56***	0.048	-11.67	<.001	[-0.65, -0.47]
Faith Commitment → Social Cohesion	0.31***	0.046	6.74	<.001	[0.22, 0.40]
<b>Control Variables</b>					
Age → Faith Commitment	0.14**	0.042	3.33	<.001	[0.06, 0.22]
Education → Authenticity Gap	0.12*	0.045	2.67	.008	[0.03, 0.21]
Pentecostal/Charismatic Religiosity → Performative Religiosity	0.28***	0.051	5.49	<.001	[0.18, 0.38]
Female Gender → Performative Religiosity	0.16**	0.048	3.33	<.001	[0.07, 0.25]
<b>Indirect Effects (Mediation)</b>					
Performative Religiosity → Authenticity Gap → Faith Commitment	-0.20***	0.026	-7.69	<.001	[-0.25, -0.15]
Performative Religiosity → Authenticity Gap → Social Cohesion	-0.23***	0.028	-8.21	<.001	[-0.28, -0.18]
Authenticity Gap → Faith Commitment → Social Cohesion	-0.15***	0.026	-5.77	<.001	[-0.20, -0.10]
<b>Total Effects</b>					
Performative Religiosity → Faith Commitment (total)	-0.02	0.054	-0.37	.711	[-0.13, 0.09]
Performative Religiosity → Social Cohesion (total)	-0.22***	0.048	-4.58	<.001	[-0.32, -0.12]
<b>Model Fit Indices</b>					
$\chi^2/df$	2.18				
CFI	0.96				
TLI	0.95				
RMSEA	0.056 [0.048, 0.064]				
SRMR	0.042				
R <sup>2</sup> for Faith Commitment	0.38				
R <sup>2</sup> for Social Cohesion	0.52				
R <sup>2</sup> for Authenticity Gap	0.26				

\*Note: \*\*\*p < .001, \*\*p < .01, p < .05. N = 384. Model included correlated errors for items within the same construct and controlled for social desirability bias. Bootstrap estimates based on 5,000 samples.

The structural equation model demonstrated excellent fit to the data across all major indices:  $\chi^2/df$  ratio of 2.18 (below the recommended threshold of 3.0), CFI of 0.96 and TLI of 0.95 (both exceeding 0.95), RMSEA of 0.056 with 90% confidence interval [0.048, 0.064] (below 0.06), and SRMR of 0.042 (well below 0.08), collectively indicating that the hypothesized model adequately represented the relationships among constructs. Performative religiosity exerted a significant positive direct effect on authenticity gap ( $\beta = 0.41, p < .001$ ), confirming that increased engagement in religious performances heightened awareness of performance-authenticity discrepancies. The direct effect of performative religiosity on faith commitment was positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.18, p = .001$ ), but its direct effect on social cohesion was non-significant ( $\beta = 0.09, p = .084$ ). However, the indirect effects revealed a more complex pattern: performative religiosity negatively affected both faith commitment ( $\beta = -0.20, p < .001$ ) and social cohesion ( $\beta = -0.23, p < .001$ ) through the mediating pathway of authenticity gap, indicating complete mediation for social cohesion and partial mediation for faith commitment. The total effect of performative religiosity on faith commitment became non-significant when accounting for both direct and indirect pathways ( $\beta = -0.02, p = .711$ ), demonstrating that the positive direct effect was entirely offset by the negative indirect effect through authenticity gap. Authenticity gap demonstrated strong negative direct effects on both faith commitment ( $\beta = -0.48, p < .001$ ) and social cohesion ( $\beta = -0.56, p < .001$ ), while faith commitment showed a positive effect on social cohesion ( $\beta = 0.31, p < .001$ ). The model explained substantial variance in the endogenous variables: 26% for authenticity gap, 38% for faith commitment, and 52% for social cohesion, indicating robust explanatory power particularly for understanding variations in communal solidarity.

The structural equation modeling results revealed a critical dialectic at the heart of performative religiosity in Ugandan churches: while religious performances had modest positive direct associations with faith commitment, possibly through mechanisms of self-persuasion or ritualized belief reinforcement, this benefit was overwhelmed by the negative indirect pathway through heightened authenticity gap awareness. This finding suggested that the performance-focused culture of contemporary Ugandan Christianity, particularly pronounced in Pentecostal and charismatic traditions, generated a self-undermining dynamic where the very emphasis on demonstrable spirituality created skepticism about whether such demonstrations reflected genuine inner states. The complete mediation effect for social cohesion was particularly illuminating, indicating that performative religiosity had no beneficial direct impact on community solidarity once the authenticity gap was accounted for; instead, performances contributed to cohesion only insofar as they were perceived as authentic, and actually damaged cohesion when they heightened suspicions of inauthenticity. This pattern contradicted functionalist assumptions that religious rituals necessarily strengthen social bonds regardless of participants' subjective beliefs about authenticity, instead demonstrating that in contemporary contexts where authenticity has become an explicit value and topic of discourse, perceived inauthenticity actively corrodes communal trust.

The substantial variance explained in social cohesion ( $R^2 = 0.52$ ) underscored that the performance-authenticity tension represented a primary driver of community solidarity or fragmentation in Ugandan churches, more so than denominational affiliation, demographic characteristics, or even individual faith commitment levels alone. The negative pathway from authenticity gap through faith commitment to social cohesion revealed a cascading process of

disillusionment: perceived inauthenticity not only directly undermined trust in the community but also eroded individual spiritual conviction, which further weakened communal bonds. This suggested that addressing the crisis of authenticity in Ugandan churches required more than simply encouraging individual sincerity; it necessitated rethinking the structural emphasis on performative demonstrations that created environments where authenticity became both highly valued and perpetually doubted. The control variables provided additional nuance: older participants and those in Pentecostal/charismatic traditions maintained higher faith commitment despite awareness of authenticity gaps, possibly due to greater investment in their religious identities or theological frameworks that accommodated the performance-authenticity tension, while higher education predicted greater authenticity gap awareness, reflecting critical reflexivity that challenged taken-for-granted religious performances but did not necessarily lead to disengagement, suggesting an emerging pattern of "critical participation" among educated Ugandan Christians.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the dynamics of performed religious identity in Ugandan churches and revealed a fundamental tension between the performative demands of contemporary Christian practice and the authenticity ideals that believers simultaneously valued, with significant implications for both individual faith commitment and congregational social cohesion. The findings demonstrated that while performative religiosity was widespread across Ugandan church contexts, particularly in Pentecostal and charismatic congregations, this emphasis on visible demonstrations of spirituality paradoxically heightened awareness of potential inauthenticity both in oneself and in fellow church members. The structural equation modeling results confirmed that perceived authenticity gaps mediated the relationship between performative practices and both faith commitment and social cohesion, revealing a self-undermining dynamic where the very performances intended to demonstrate and cultivate genuine faith instead generated skepticism that eroded spiritual conviction and community trust. Denominational variations indicated that traditions emphasizing demonstrable spiritual experiences faced greater challenges with authenticity perceptions, while demographic patterns showed that younger, more educated, and female church members navigated particularly complex negotiations between social expectations for religious performance and personal spiritual integrity. The strong negative impact of perceived inauthenticity on social cohesion underscored that Ugandan churches faced a genuine crisis not merely of individual faith but of collective solidarity, as suspicions about widespread performance without conviction undermined the interpersonal trust necessary for vibrant religious community. These findings challenged simplistic narratives of religious hypocrisy by revealing the structural and cultural pressures that produced performance-authenticity tensions, while also questioning functionalist assumptions that religious rituals automatically strengthen social bonds regardless of authenticity perceptions. The study suggested that addressing this crisis required fundamental reconsideration of how Ugandan churches balance the legitimate communal functions of religious performance with the equally legitimate individual yearnings for authentic spiritual experience, moving beyond moralistic condemnations of hypocrisy toward more nuanced understanding of how religious identity is constructed, performed, and experienced within highly scripted yet deeply meaningful social contexts.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Theological and Pastoral Reframing of Religious Performance and Authenticity**

Church leaders and theological educators should develop and disseminate teaching frameworks that acknowledge the inherent performative dimensions of religious life while articulating healthier relationships between outward practice and inner conviction, moving beyond simplistic authentic-inauthentic binaries to recognize that religious identity is legitimately constructed through both sincere practice and social performance. This recommendation involves creating spaces for honest conversation about spiritual doubts, inconsistencies, and the gap between ideals and lived experience without stigmatizing such admissions as evidence of failed faith, thereby reducing the pressure for constant performative perfection.

#### **Institutional Reforms to Reduce Performative Pressure and Enhance Community Trust**

Churches should implement structural changes that reduce the social and material incentives for inauthentic performance, including reassessing leadership selection processes that prioritize charismatic public performance over sustained character development, reducing the financial dependence of church operations on performative displays of prosperity, and creating smaller, more intimate fellowship groups where members can develop trust relationships beyond the performative context of large congregational gatherings.

#### **Educational Initiatives for Critical Religious Literacy**

Religious institutions, in collaboration with educational organizations, should develop programs that equip church members with critical analytical skills for navigating the complex relationship between religious performance, social identity, and spiritual authenticity, particularly targeting youth and educated populations who demonstrated both high authenticity gap awareness and continued religious participation. These initiatives should include curricula that explore the sociology and psychology of religious experience, helping believers understand how social contexts shape spiritual expressions without necessarily invalidating them, and providing frameworks for distinguishing between harmful performative hypocrisy and the normal human experience of aspiring toward ideals not yet fully embodied.

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