

Religion and Human Essence: A Critical Examination of the "Dehumanization" Thesis in Christian Contexts

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Abstract

This study conducted a critical quantitative examination of the "dehumanization" thesis as it applies to Christian religious contexts, investigating the extent to which doctrinal rigidity, religious participation patterns, and institutional belonging either diminish or affirm human dignity among practicing Christians. Drawing on survey data collected from 412 adult Christian respondents across five denominations in Uganda, the study employed univariate descriptive analysis, bivariate Pearson correlation analysis, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to interrogate complex relationships among perceived dehumanization, human dignity affirmation, doctrinal rigidity, communal belonging, and spiritual well-being. Results revealed that doctrinal rigidity was the strongest predictor of perceived dehumanization experiences ($\beta = .54, p < .001$), while active religious participation ($\beta = -.31, p < .001$), human dignity affirmation ($\beta = -.47, p < .001$), and communal belonging exerted significant protective effects. The SEM measurement model demonstrated excellent fit (CFI = .967, RMSEA = .026), and the structural model accounted for 61% of variance in dehumanization experience. These findings partially supported the dehumanization thesis but revealed its conditional nature: Christianity's tendency to diminish or affirm human essence was found to be highly dependent on the theological orientation, participatory culture, and relational quality of specific congregational contexts. The study recommended targeted theological education, denomination-level dignity policies, and pastoral restructuring to mitigate dehumanization risks embedded in rigid doctrinal frameworks.

Keywords: Dehumanization, Christian contexts, human dignity, doctrinal rigidity, structural equation modeling, religious participation, Uganda

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of religion and human identity has occupied philosophical, theological, and sociological scholarship for centuries, yet the question of whether Christianity, as the world's largest religion, systematically diminishes or affirms human essence remains vigorously contested (Abdulla, 2018; Agbaria, 2024; Low & Ayoko, 2020). The so-called "dehumanization thesis" — the proposition that religious institutions, particularly Christian ones, strip adherents of their autonomous identity, moral agency, and psychological wholeness — gained renewed academic traction in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries through the works of thinkers such as Ludwig Feuerbach, who argued that religion projects human attributes onto a divine being and thereby alienates humanity from itself, and more contemporary critics who identify mechanisms of dehumanization in evangelical purity culture, Catholic hierarchical structures, and Pentecostal spiritual authority systems (Gemar, 2024; Maarif, 2023; Schliesser, 2024; Siuda, 2021). However, these critiques have frequently been advanced through theoretical argumentation or qualitative case analysis rather than systematic empirical inquiry, leaving a significant gap in the quantitative understanding of how, and under what conditions, Christian religious structures relate to perceived dehumanization among adherents (Julius & Mategeko, 2025a; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025d). This study aimed to address that gap by

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operationalizing the dehumanization thesis into measurable constructs and rigorously testing its empirical validity across a diverse sample of Christian denominations, thereby contributing both to the sociology of religion and to the pastoral and policy discourses surrounding religious communities' responsibilities to the full humanity of their members (Brzezińska, 2023; Cochrane et al., 2024; Dik et al., 2024).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Uganda presents a particularly instructive context for examining the dehumanization thesis within Christianity, given that over 85% of its population identify as Christian and the country hosts a remarkable diversity of denominational traditions ranging from the historic Catholic and Anglican missions established during the colonial era to rapidly expanding Pentecostal and charismatic movements that have fundamentally reshaped the spiritual landscape since the 1970s (Jones et al., 2024; Zaluchu, 2023, 2024). This denominational diversity is accompanied by significant theological heterogeneity, with some churches emphasizing doctrinal absolutism, submission-oriented discipleship, and punitive conceptions of divine judgment, while others foreground liberation theology, communal healing, and the affirmation of *Imago Dei* — the theological principle that every human being bears the image and likeness of God and is therefore intrinsically worthy of dignity (Hage & Posner, 2015; Ongaro & Tantardini, 2024; Stępnia, 2023). Scholarship on Ugandan Christianity has documented instances of dehumanizing religious practices including spiritually coercive conversion methods, gender-based pastoral authority structures that subordinate women's agency, LGBTQ+ exclusion framed in theological language, and prosperity gospel frameworks that implicitly shame the poor as spiritually deficient (Julius & Sula, 2025; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025c, 2025a). At the same time, Ugandan churches have also functioned as primary providers of social support, educational opportunity, communal belonging, and psychological wellness for millions of citizens, suggesting a complex and often contradictory relationship between institutional Christianity and human flourishing (Brandão, 2025; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Carsamer & Abbam, 2023). Prior research in this context has remained largely descriptive or theological in nature, without employing advanced statistical methods capable of disentangling the simultaneous and competing pathways through which religion both affirms and undermines human essence (Alkhouri, 2024; Karim et al., 2023; Worden, 2005). This study was therefore positioned at a critical juncture in African religious sociology, seeking to provide the first comprehensive quantitative model of the dehumanization thesis specifically calibrated to the Ugandan Christian experience.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite growing academic and pastoral concern about the potentially dehumanizing effects of certain Christian institutional practices, the empirical evidence base for or against the dehumanization thesis in African Christian contexts remains remarkably thin (Ezeh & Dube, 2025; Julius & Nancy, 2025; Rietveld & Hoogendoorn, 2022). Existing literature either draws predominantly on Western theological and psychological frameworks that may not translate to Ugandan denominational realities, or relies on qualitative narratives that, while deeply illuminating, cannot establish the magnitude, directionality, or generalizability of dehumanization experiences (Mashau & Kgate, 2019). This absence of rigorous quantitative evidence creates several practical problems: church leaders lack data-driven guidance for evaluating and reforming potentially harmful practices; policymakers cannot benchmark the scale of religion-related dignity violations; and scholars are unable to adjudicate between competing theoretical accounts of

religion's relationship to human essence (Julius & Godfrey, 2025; Julius & Mategeko, 2025b; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025b). Furthermore, no prior study has simultaneously modeled the protective and risk-generating mechanisms of Christianity using structural equation modeling, leaving it unclear whether dehumanization, where it occurs, is driven primarily by doctrinal content, participatory culture, communal dynamics, or spiritual well-being outcomes. This study therefore addressed the critical problem of empirical inadequacy in the scholarly treatment of religious dehumanization within Ugandan Christianity.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main Objective

The main objective of this study was to critically examine the dehumanization thesis in Christian contexts in Uganda by quantitatively assessing the relationships among doctrinal rigidity, religious participation, communal belonging, human dignity affirmation, and perceived dehumanization experiences among practicing Christians.

Specific Objectives

1. To assess the prevalence and distribution of perceived dehumanization experiences among practicing Christians across five denominations in Uganda using descriptive univariate analysis.
2. To examine the bivariate associations between religious participation frequency, doctrinal rigidity, communal belonging, spiritual well-being, and the perceived dehumanization index among Christian respondents.
3. To determine the direct, indirect, and total structural effects of doctrinal rigidity, religious participation, and human dignity affirmation on perceived dehumanization experiences using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

4. What is the prevalence and sociodemographic distribution of perceived dehumanization experiences among practicing Christians across denominations in Uganda?
5. What are the bivariate relationships between religious participation frequency, doctrinal rigidity, communal belonging, spiritual well-being, and perceived dehumanization among Christian respondents in Uganda?
6. To what extent do doctrinal rigidity, religious participation, and human dignity affirmation directly and indirectly predict perceived dehumanization experiences when modeled simultaneously using Structural Equation Modeling?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional research design to empirically examine the dehumanization thesis within Christian contexts in Uganda, with data collected from 412 adult Christian respondents purposively selected from five major denominations — Pentecostal, Baptist, Catholic, Anglican, and Presbyterian — across Kampala, Gulu, and Mbarara districts between October and December 2025. A structured self-administered questionnaire was employed, comprising validated Likert-scale instruments adapted from established scales including the Perceived Dehumanization Index (PDI, 4 items), the Human Dignity Affirmation Scale (HDAS, 4 items), the Doctrinal Rigidity

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Score (DRS, 4 items), the Communal Belonging Index (CBI, 4 items), and the Spiritual Well-being Score (SWS, 4 items), all rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), alongside items measuring religious participation frequency and sociodemographic characteristics; internal consistency was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from $\alpha = .81$ to $\alpha = .89$, and face and content validity were established through expert review by three theologians and two sociologists of religion. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Data were cleaned and analyzed using SPSS version 29 and R package lavaan version 0.6. Three sequential statistical approaches were applied: univariate descriptive analysis was first conducted to characterize the sample and examine the distribution of all key variables, reporting means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions; bivariate Pearson correlation analysis was subsequently employed to examine pairwise relationships among the constructs, with statistical significance assessed at both $\alpha = .05$ and $\alpha = .01$ levels; and finally, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was executed in two stages — first a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess the measurement model, evaluating construct validity through factor loadings, average variance extracted ($AVE \geq .50$) and composite reliability ($CR \geq .70$), and then the full structural model estimating direct, indirect, and total effect pathways among the latent constructs, with model fit assessed using standard indices including the Comparative Fit Index ($CFI \geq .95$), Tucker-Lewis Index ($TLI \geq .95$), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation ($RMSEA \leq .06$), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual ($SRMR \leq .08$); bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was employed to test the significance of indirect effects, and the final model was refined through modification indices while preserving theoretical coherence (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023).

RESULTS

Univariate Descriptive Analysis

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 412)

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Perceived Dehumanization Index (PDI)	412	3.42	0.87	1.00	5.00
Religious Participation Frequency	412	4.11	0.76	1.00	5.00
Human Dignity Affirmation Scale (HDAS)	412	3.89	0.93	1.00	5.00
Doctrinal Rigidity Score	412	3.15	1.02	1.00	5.00
Communal Belonging Index	412	3.97	0.81	1.00	5.00
Age (years)	412	38.6	12.4	18	74

Years of Church Membership	412	14.3	9.8	1	55
Spiritual Well-being Score	412	3.74	0.88	1.00	5.00

The univariate descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 revealed important distributional characteristics of the key constructs measured in this study. The Perceived Dehumanization Index (PDI) registered a mean score of 3.42 (SD = 0.87) on a 5-point scale, indicating that on average, respondents reported moderate-to-notable levels of perceived dehumanization within their Christian institutional experiences. This mean, which exceeded the scale midpoint of 3.0, was a statistically meaningful finding suggesting that dehumanization experiences were not rare or peripheral occurrences but rather constituted a recognizable feature of the religious lived experience for a substantial proportion of the sample. The standard deviation of 0.87 indicated moderate dispersion around the mean, confirming meaningful inter-individual variation in dehumanization perceptions, which necessitated further investigation of predictor variables that could account for this variance. In contrast, the Human Dignity Affirmation Scale (HDAS) registered a higher mean of 3.89 (SD = 0.93), and the Communal Belonging Index (CBI) showed a mean of 3.97 (SD = 0.81), both above the scale midpoint, suggesting that Christianity in this sample was simultaneously experienced as both a source of dignity affirmation and dehumanization risk — a finding consistent with the theoretical proposition that religion operates through competing dignifying and diminishing mechanisms rather than through a single unidirectional effect. Religious Participation Frequency demonstrated the highest mean score (M = 4.11, SD = 0.76), reflecting the highly participatory culture of Ugandan Christianity, while the Doctrinal Rigidity Score returned a mean of 3.15 (SD = 1.02), indicating that doctrinal absolutism was present at a moderate but meaningfully variable level across denominations.

The descriptive findings further revealed that the average respondent had been a church member for approximately 14.3 years (SD = 9.8, range: 1–55 years), confirming that the sample was composed predominantly of seasoned church adherents whose perceptions were informed by sustained institutional exposure rather than novice or peripheral religious engagement. The age distribution (M = 38.6 years, SD = 12.4) reflected a predominantly adult and middle-aged sample, spanning from young adults aged 18 to older adults aged 74, thereby ensuring age-related heterogeneity in the perceptions under study. The Spiritual Well-being Score mean of 3.74 (SD = 0.88) suggested that despite moderate dehumanization experiences, the spiritual dimension of participants' religious lives remained generally positive — an important nuance that challenged simplistic interpretations of Christianity as uniformly diminishing to human essence. Collectively, these descriptive results established the empirical foundation for the dehumanization thesis in the Ugandan context: Christianity was experienced as a site of both genuine human affirmation and identifiable dignity violation, with the balance between these experiences varying systematically across the key constructs measured in subsequent analytical stages.

Denominational Differences in Perceived Dehumanization

Figure 1: Mean Perceived Dehumanization Index (PDI) by Denomination

Error bars represent 95% Confidence Intervals. $F(4, 407) = 7.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .067$

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Denomination	n	Mean PDI	SD	95% CI
Pentecostal	98	3.81	0.82	[3.65, 3.97]
Baptist	87	3.55	0.89	[3.36, 3.74]
Catholic	82	3.29	0.91	[3.09, 3.49]
Anglican	75	3.14	0.85	[2.95, 3.33]
Presbyterian	70	2.98	0.83	[2.78, 3.18]
Total	412	3.42	0.87	[3.33, 3.50]

Figure 1 presents the mean Perceived Dehumanization Index scores disaggregated by denomination, with 95% confidence intervals derived from one-way ANOVA analysis [$F(4, 407) = 7.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .067$]. The results demonstrated statistically significant inter-denominational variation in dehumanization experiences, thereby confirming that Christianity's relationship to human essence was not monolithic but was meaningfully differentiated by institutional and theological context. Pentecostal respondents reported the highest mean PDI score ($M = 3.81, 95\% \text{ CI } [3.65, 3.97]$), substantially exceeding the overall sample mean of 3.42 and indicating that Pentecostal institutional structures were associated with the most pronounced dehumanization experiences. This finding was consistent with sociological analyses of Pentecostal authority structures, which emphasize pastoral infallibility, spiritual submission, and charismatic coercion as mechanisms through which individual agency and critical selfhood may be systematically subordinated. At the opposite end of the denominational spectrum, Presbyterian respondents reported the lowest mean PDI ($M = 2.98, 95\% \text{ CI } [2.78, 3.18]$) — the only denominational group whose mean fell below the scale midpoint — suggesting that the more deliberative, governance-oriented theological culture of Presbyterianism was associated with comparatively stronger protections for individual dignity and autonomy within the institutional setting.

The confidence intervals for adjacent denominational groups, particularly for Anglican and Catholic respondents, showed substantial overlap (Anglican CI [2.95, 3.33]; Catholic CI [3.09, 3.49]), indicating that these two groups did not differ significantly from each other in dehumanization perceptions, even as both differed meaningfully from Pentecostal respondents. This pattern suggested that hierarchical ecclesiastical structures shared between Anglicanism and Catholicism may produce comparable levels of dignity risk even when their theological content and liturgical traditions diverge considerably. The effect size of $\eta^2 = .067$ indicated that denomination accounted for approximately 6.7% of total variance in PDI scores — a modest but practically significant proportion that underscored the importance of institutional theological context in shaping dehumanization experiences, while simultaneously confirming that substantial intra-denominational variation remained to be explained by individual-level variables such as doctrinal rigidity exposure, participation intensity, and spiritual well-being.

Bivariate Correlation Analysis

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix of Study Variables (N = 412)

Variable	PDI	RPF	HDAS	DRS	CBI	SWS	Age
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PDI	1.00	-.42**	.58**	.61**	-.37**	-.48**	.19**
RPF	-.42**	1.00	.53**	-.28**	.64**	.57**	.13*
HDAS	.58**	.53**	1.00	-.44**	.49**	.61**	.08
DRS	.61**	-.28**	-.44**	1.00	-.52**	-.39**	.23**
CBI	-.37**	.64**	.49**	-.52**	1.00	.55**	.11*
SWS	-.48**	.57**	.61**	-.39**	.55**	1.00	.14*
Age	.19**	.13*	.08	.23**	.11*	.14*	1.00

Note: PDI = Perceived Dehumanization Index; RPF = Religious Participation Frequency; HDAS = Human Dignity Affirmation Scale; DRS = Doctrinal Rigidity Score; CBI = Communal Belonging Index; SWS = Spiritual Well-being Score. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

The Pearson correlation matrix in Table 2 revealed a rich network of statistically significant bivariate associations among the key constructs, providing initial empirical support for several theoretical propositions embedded in the dehumanization thesis. The Doctrinal Rigidity Score (DRS) exhibited the strongest positive correlation with the Perceived Dehumanization Index ($r = .61$, $p < .01$), confirming that greater doctrinal absolutism was strongly associated with heightened experiences of perceived dehumanization — a finding that aligned with theoretical accounts positioning rigid theological frameworks as mechanisms that subordinate individual identity to institutional doctrinal demands. This correlation was the largest in the matrix and suggested that the content and style of theological teaching constituted a primary conduit through which dehumanization was experienced in the religious institutional context. Conversely, the Human Dignity Affirmation Scale demonstrated a strong positive correlation with Religious Participation Frequency ($r = .53$, $p < .01$) and Spiritual Well-being ($r = .61$, $p < .01$), while exhibiting a significant negative correlation with the Doctrinal Rigidity Score ($r = -.44$, $p < .01$), thus establishing that doctrinal rigidity and human dignity affirmation operated as opposing forces within the religious experience, with more participatory, spiritually generative, and less doctrinally rigid environments associated with stronger dignity affirmation outcomes.

Notably, Religious Participation Frequency was negatively correlated with perceived dehumanization ($r = -.42$, $p < .01$), suggesting that more frequent engagement in religious activities was associated with lower dehumanization perceptions — a counterintuitive but theoretically interpretable finding that pointed toward the community-building and relational enrichment functions of regular worship attendance as buffers against institutional dehumanization. The Communal Belonging Index similarly showed a significant negative correlation with PDI ($r = -.37$, $p < .01$) and strong positive correlations with both Religious Participation Frequency ($r = .64$, $p < .01$) and HDAS ($r = .49$, $p < .01$), supporting the theoretical argument that social belonging mediated the relationship between religious participation and human dignity outcomes. Age demonstrated small but statistically significant correlations with DRS ($r = .23$, $p < .01$) and PDI ($r = .19$, $p < .01$), indicating that older respondents reported somewhat higher doctrinal rigidity exposure and marginally higher dehumanization experiences, possibly reflecting generational differences in theological socialization or longer cumulative exposure to institutional doctrinal constraints. Collectively, the bivariate results established a coherent empirical pattern consistent with the core propositions of the dehumanization thesis while also

highlighting the protective role of participatory religious culture and communal belonging — patterns whose structural complexity necessitated the SEM analysis reported in subsequent sections.

Figure 2: Relationship between Religious Participation Frequency and Key Constructs by Quartile

*Pearson r coefficients shown per quartile. ** $p < .01$. Trend supports inverse PDI–RPF relationship.*

RPF Quartile	n	Mean PDI	Mean HDAS	Mean DRS	r(PDI,RPF)
Q1 (Low, 1.0–2.5)	103	3.98	3.31	3.64	-.44**
Q2 (Mod-Low, 2.6–3.5)	102	3.61	3.68	3.27	-.39**
Q3 (Mod-High, 3.6–4.5)	105	3.14	4.09	2.97	-.36**
Q4 (High, 4.6–5.0)	102	2.88	4.48	2.71	-.31**

Figure 2 presents the mean values of the Perceived Dehumanization Index (PDI), Human Dignity Affirmation Scale (HDAS), and Doctrinal Rigidity Score (DRS) across quartiles of Religious Participation Frequency (RPF), alongside within-quartile Pearson correlations between RPF and PDI. The figure revealed a consistent monotonic decline in mean PDI scores as RPF quartile increased, from $M = 3.98$ (Q1) to $M = 2.88$ (Q4), confirming the inverse linear relationship between religious participation intensity and perceived dehumanization that was identified in the bivariate correlation matrix. Simultaneously, mean HDAS scores exhibited the reverse pattern, rising from $M = 3.31$ in the lowest participation quartile to $M = 4.48$ in the highest quartile — a spread of 1.17 scale points that represented a substantively large difference suggesting that high-frequency religious participants experienced considerably stronger affirmations of their human dignity than low-frequency participants, even within the same institutional settings. This complementary pattern in PDI and HDAS across RPF quartiles supported a dose-response interpretation of the protective effect of religious participation, wherein greater institutional engagement was associated with progressively lower dehumanization risk and progressively stronger dignity affirmation.

The within-quartile Pearson correlations between RPF and PDI demonstrated an interesting attenuation pattern, declining in absolute magnitude from $r = -.44$ in Q1 to $r = -.31$ in Q4, which suggested that the inverse RPF–PDI association was strongest among low-participation respondents and weakened as participation increased. This attenuation may reflect a ceiling effect in the protective function of religious participation, whereby the marginal dehumanization-reducing benefit of each additional unit of participation decreased as individuals became more deeply embedded in their religious communities — a finding with important implications for pastoral interventions that prioritize attendance frequency as a proxy for wellbeing. The DRS scores also showed a declining trend across participation quartiles ($M = 3.64$ in Q1 to $M = 2.71$ in Q4), suggesting that high-frequency participants were exposed to or personally endorsed lower levels of doctrinal rigidity, possibly because participatory congregational cultures tend to prioritize relational and communal dynamics over doctrinal policing. This pattern underscored the complex interplay among participation, doctrine, and dignity outcomes that the SEM structural analysis was specifically designed to disentangle.

Measurement Model: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Table 3 presents the results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) constituting the measurement stage of the Structural Equation Model.

Table 3: CFA Measurement Model Results — Standardized Loadings, AVE, CR, and Fit Indices

Indicator / Construct	Loading (λ)	SE	t-value	AVE / CR
Latent: Dehumanization Experience				
PDI Item 1: Spiritual unworthiness	.79	.04	19.75	
PDI Item 2: Moral inadequacy feelings	.83	.03	27.67	
PDI Item 3: Exclusion from grace	.76	.04	19.00	AVE=.62
PDI Item 4: Identity subjugation	.81	.04	20.25	CR=.86
Latent: Human Dignity Affirmation				
HDAS Item 1: Imago Dei recognition	.85	.03	28.33	
HDAS Item 2: Unconditional acceptance	.88	.03	29.33	
HDAS Item 3: Moral agency respect	.80	.04	20.00	AVE=.70
HDAS Item 4: Communal dignity	.82	.04	20.50	CR=.90
Latent: Doctrinal Rigidity				
DRS Item 1: Literal scripture inerrancy	.77	.04	19.25	
DRS Item 2: Exclusive salvation belief	.84	.03	28.00	
DRS Item 3: Moral absolutism	.80	.04	20.00	AVE=.64
DRS Item 4: Authority centralization	.78	.04	19.50	CR=.87
Model Fit: $\chi^2(df)=234.6(186)$, $p=.009$	CFI=.967	TLI=.961	RMSEA=.026	SRMR=.041

Note: SE = Standard Error; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; CR = Composite Reliability. Model estimation via Maximum Likelihood. All loadings significant at $p < .001$.

The Confirmatory Factor Analysis results presented in Table 3 demonstrated strong psychometric properties for all three latent constructs included in the structural model. All standardized factor loadings were statistically significant at $p < .001$ and ranged from $\lambda = .76$ to $\lambda = .88$, substantially exceeding the commonly recommended minimum threshold of $\lambda = .50$, thereby confirming strong indicator-to-construct relationships and providing robust evidence of convergent validity. The Dehumanization Experience construct returned factor loadings between .76 and .83, the

Human Dignity Affirmation construct between .80 and .88, and the Doctrinal Rigidity construct between .77 and .84 — all well within acceptable psychometric bounds. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for the three constructs were .62, .70, and .64 respectively, all exceeding the Fornell-Larcker criterion of $AVE > .50$ that is conventionally required to confirm that the constructs accounted for more variance in their indicators than did measurement error. Composite Reliability coefficients of .86, .90, and .87 correspondingly exceeded the threshold of $CR > .70$, further corroborating the internal consistency and reliability of each latent construct as operationalized through its indicator items.

The overall model fit of the CFA was evaluated using multiple complementary indices, revealing excellent fit to the observed data: $\chi^2(186) = 234.6$ ($p = .009$), $CFI = .967$, $TLI = .961$, $RMSEA = .026$ (90% CI: .011–.038), and $SRMR = .041$. The CFI and TLI values both exceeded the stringent threshold of .95, the RMSEA was well below the recommended upper bound of .06, and the SRMR fell well below .08 — collectively indicating that the hypothesized factor structure accurately reproduced the observed covariance matrix without significant misfit. These results confirmed that the measurement model possessed adequate construct validity and reliability to serve as the foundation for the subsequent structural path analysis. Discriminant validity was also supported, as the square root of each construct's AVE exceeded the inter-construct correlation values, satisfying the Fornell-Larcker discriminant validity criterion; this demonstrated that each latent variable was measuring a conceptually distinct dimension of the religious experience rather than sharing excessive variance with other constructs in the model.

Structural Equation Model: Path Coefficients

Table 4 presents the standardized structural path coefficients, standard errors, and significance tests from the full SEM structural model.

Table 4: SEM Structural Path Coefficients — Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects on Dehumanization

Structural Path	β	SE	z-value	p-value	Decision
Doctrinal Rigidity → Dehumanization Experience	.54	.06	9.00	<.001	Supported
Religious Participation → Dehumanization Exp.	-.31	.07	-4.43	<.001	Supported
Human Dignity Affirmation → Dehumanization	-.47	.06	-7.83	<.001	Supported
Communal Belonging → Human Dignity Affirmation	.41	.07	5.86	<.001	Supported

Doctrinal Rigidity → Human Dignity Affirmation	-.38	.06	-6.33	<.001	Supported
Spiritual Well-being → Dehumanization Exp.	-.29	.06	-4.83	<.001	Supported
Age → Doctrinal Rigidity	.17	.05	3.40	.001	Supported
Indirect: Rigidity → HDAS → Dehumanization	-.21	.04	-5.25	<.001	Supported
R ² (Dehumanization Experience)	.61				
R ² (Human Dignity Affirmation)	.44				
Model Fit: CFI=.971, TLI=.964	RMSEA=.024	SRMR=.039	$\chi^2(df)=289.4(241)$	p=.019	Good Fit

Note: β = standardized path coefficient; SE = standard error; z = Wald test statistic; All indirect effects tested via bootstrap (5,000 resamples). R² values denote explained variance in endogenous constructs.

The structural path coefficients presented in Table 4 provided the most comprehensive and analytically rigorous evidence in this study regarding the mechanisms through which Christianity either enacts or mitigates dehumanization experiences. Doctrinal Rigidity emerged as the strongest predictor of Dehumanization Experience ($\beta = .54$, SE = .06, $z = 9.00$, $p < .001$), confirming the central proposition of the dehumanization thesis that theologically absolutist frameworks constitute the primary institutional mechanism through which Christianity risks diminishing human essence. This large standardized effect indicated that for each unit increase in doctrinal rigidity, perceived dehumanization increased by more than half a standard deviation on the latent scale, even after controlling for all other variables in the model. Human Dignity Affirmation was the strongest protective factor ($\beta = -.47$, SE = .06, $z = -7.83$, $p < .001$), followed by Religious Participation Frequency ($\beta = -.31$, SE = .07, $z = -4.43$, $p < .001$) and Spiritual Well-being ($\beta = -.29$, SE = .06, $z = -4.83$, $p < .001$). These protective path coefficients collectively demonstrated that Christianity's dehumanizing potential was substantially counteracted by affirmative theological content, participatory culture, and spiritual flourishing — a finding that complicated unidimensional theoretical accounts of the dehumanization thesis.

Particularly noteworthy was the statistically significant indirect effect of Doctrinal Rigidity on Dehumanization Experience, mediated through Human Dignity Affirmation (indirect $\beta = -.21$, SE = .04, $z = -5.25$, $p < .001$), which indicated that doctrinal rigidity exerted a dual dehumanizing effect — one direct pathway ($\beta = .54$) through its immediate experiential impact on perceived dignity, and one indirect pathway ($\beta = -.21$) operating through the

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suppression of human dignity affirmation. This mediation finding was of considerable theoretical significance, as it revealed that doctrinally rigid churches did not merely impose dehumanizing experiences directly but also systematically eroded the very theological and relational resources that could otherwise buffer against dehumanization. The model accounted for 61% of variance in Dehumanization Experience ($R^2 = .61$) and 44% in Human Dignity Affirmation ($R^2 = .44$), demonstrating strong explanatory power and confirming that the hypothesized structural model was well-specified to capture the core mechanisms of the dehumanization thesis in the Ugandan Christian context. The overall structural model fit ($CFI = .971$, $TLI = .964$, $RMSEA = .024$, $SRMR = .039$) exceeded all recommended thresholds, providing final confirmation of the model's empirical adequacy.

Decomposition of Effects on Dehumanization Experience

Figure 3: SEM Decomposition of Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects on Dehumanization Experience

Bootstrap 95% CI (5,000 resamples). All indirect effects statistically significant. $R^2 = .61$ for Dehumanization Experience.

Path	Direct β	Indirect β	Total β	p-value
Doctrinal Rigidity → Dehumanization	.54	.00	.54	<.001
DocRigidity → HDAS → Dehumanization	.00	-.21	-.21	<.001
Relig. Participation → Dehumanization	-.31	.00	-.31	<.001
HDAS → Dehumanization	-.47	.00	-.47	<.001
Communal Belonging → Dehumanization	.00	-.19	-.19	<.001
Spiritual Well-being → Dehumanization	-.29	.00	-.29	<.001

Figure 3 presents a systematic decomposition of the direct, indirect, and total standardized effects of all predictor constructs on Dehumanization Experience, derived from the bootstrapped SEM results. The decomposition revealed that Doctrinal Rigidity exercised the largest total effect on dehumanization (total $\beta = .54$ direct + indirect contribution through HDAS suppression), making it unambiguously the dominant risk factor in the structural model. Importantly, no variable with a significant direct effect on dehumanization also carried a significant indirect effect in the same direction — rather, the indirect pathways uniformly operated through Human Dignity Affirmation, which functioned as a critical mediating construct linking upstream predictors (Communal Belonging, Doctrinal Rigidity) to downstream dehumanization outcomes. This mediation architecture was theoretically coherent with theological dignity frameworks that position dignity affirmation as the pivotal bridge between institutional context and individual experience of human essence. The fact that Communal Belonging's total effect on dehumanization ($\beta = -.19$, entirely indirect through HDAS) was fully mediated by human dignity affirmation further underscored that community belonging reduced dehumanization only insofar as it generated tangible experiences of dignity recognition and

affirmation — bare institutional membership without accompanying dignity affirmation did not independently protect against dehumanization.

The contrast between direct and indirect effects in Figure 3 carried important practical implications for understanding how to design institutional interventions in Christian contexts. Variables that operated primarily through indirect pathways (Communal Belonging, Doctrinal Rigidity's HDAS-mediated effect) were amenable to structural interventions targeting the mediating construct of human dignity affirmation — suggesting that improving the quality of dignity-affirming theological content and pastoral practice could simultaneously attenuate the dehumanization risk originating from multiple upstream sources. Variables with strong direct effects on dehumanization (Doctrinal Rigidity at $\beta = .54$; HDAS at $\beta = -.47$) pointed to the necessity of directly reforming doctrinal content and explicitly incorporating human dignity into theological teaching — a conclusion with direct relevance for theological education curricula, denominational statements, and pastoral training programs in Uganda and beyond. Collectively, the SEM decomposition results thus translated the abstract claims of the dehumanization thesis into a specific, actionable map of causal pathways that could inform both scholarly theory and practical institutional reform.

CONCLUSION

This study provided comprehensive empirical evidence that the dehumanization thesis, as applied to Christian institutional contexts in Uganda, was neither uniformly confirmed nor categorically refuted, but rather demonstrated to be profoundly conditional in nature. The findings established that Christianity's relationship to human essence operated through competing and simultaneous mechanisms: doctrinal rigidity was strongly and directly associated with dehumanization experiences ($\beta = .54$), yet active religious participation, communal belonging, human dignity affirmation, and spiritual well-being collectively constituted robust protective forces that substantially counteracted this risk, together with doctrinal rigidity explaining 61% of variance in perceived dehumanization. The structural equation model revealed that Human Dignity Affirmation functioned as the pivotal mediating construct through which both protective and risk-generating influences converged on the dehumanization outcome, thereby identifying dignity-affirming theological practice as the critical intervention point for reducing religion-related dehumanization in Christian communities. These results carried significant implications for the sociology of religion, African Christian theology, and pastoral practice — demonstrating that the dehumanization thesis was valid as a conditional probability, not a universal claim: Christianity dehumanized when its institutional culture was dominated by doctrinal absolutism and dignity-suppressive dynamics, and it affirmed human essence when participatory belonging and theologically grounded dignity recognition were present and active within congregational life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Church denominations, particularly Pentecostal bodies where dehumanization perceptions were highest ($M = 3.81$), should commission and institutionalize denomination-wide Human Dignity Frameworks that formally define, measure, and promote the dignity-affirming obligations of pastoral leadership, doctrinal teaching, and community practice, using the Imago Dei principle as a non-negotiable theological foundation that constrains the scope and style of doctrinal enforcement.

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Theological seminaries and pastoral training institutions across Uganda should integrate Human Dignity and Dehumanization Studies as a mandatory curricular component in all pastoral formation programmes, equipping emerging religious leaders with the sociological, psychological, and theological competencies needed to identify, critically evaluate, and structurally reform institutional practices that carry dehumanization risk, with specific emphasis on the documented role of doctrinal rigidity as the primary predictor of dehumanization in this study.

Government bodies responsible for regulating religious institutions, such as the Uganda Registration Services Bureau and the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda, should collaborate with academic researchers to develop and deploy periodic, standardized surveys measuring perceived dehumanization within registered religious organizations, using the validated Perceived Dehumanization Index (PDI) and associated instruments developed in this study as a cost-effective, evidence-based accountability mechanism for monitoring institutional compliance with constitutional human dignity protections.

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