

Research Article

Pastoral Counseling for Congregants Experiencing Fear of Missing Out Due to Social Media

Gede Widiada¹, Sara Do Hina², Apin Militia Christi^{3*}

¹ Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Bethel Indonesia, Indonesia; e-mail: gede.widiada@sttbi.ac.id

² Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Bethel Indonesia, Indonesia; e-mail: 23321019@sttbi.ac.id

³ Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Bethel Indonesia, Indonesia; e-mail: apin.militia@sttbi.ac.id

* Corresponding Author: apin.militia@sttbi.ac.id

Abstract: Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) has become a significant psychosocial and spiritual concern among congregants whose daily rhythms are shaped by social media visibility, comparison, and constant connectivity. This article examines FoMO as an object of pastoral counseling, not merely as excessive screen use but as a relational and affective pattern in which digital platforms intensify unmet needs for belonging, identity, autonomy, and meaningful participation. The study aims to construct a pastoral counseling approach for congregants who experience anxiety, compulsive checking, social comparison, diminished self-worth, and spiritual distraction because of social media. Methodologically, the article uses a constructive-integrative literature review, synthesizing peer-reviewed research on FoMO, problematic social media use, social comparison, self-determination theory, and spiritually integrated counseling alongside major works in pastoral care and practical theology. The synthesis indicates that FoMO is best understood as a need-frustration cycle that is amplified by passive browsing, online comparison, and algorithmic immediacy. Pastoral counseling can respond constructively through careful assessment, theological reframing of identity and belonging, digital habit formation, communal practices, and referral pathways when psychological risk is present. The article concludes that pastoral counseling is uniquely positioned to transform FoMO from anxious digital vigilance into discernment, embodied community, and spiritually grounded digital wisdom.

Keywords: Congregational Care; Digital Discipleship; Pastoral Counseling; Practical Theology; Social Media.

1. Introduction

Social media has become a habitual environment in which many congregants interpret belonging, visibility, success, intimacy, and even spiritual worth. It is no longer only a communication tool but a lived social space where ordinary people receive continuous signals about what others are doing, achieving, consuming, celebrating, and believing. For church communities, this development is ambivalent. Social media can extend pastoral contact, enable community announcements, support worship participation, and provide spiritual resources for members who are geographically or emotionally distant. However, the same platforms can intensify anxious comparison, compulsive checking, loneliness, sleep disruption, and the fear of being absent from experiences that appear socially rewarding. This tension has made Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) a relevant topic for pastoral counseling.

FoMO is commonly defined as a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent; foundational research links it to lower psychological need satisfaction, lower mood, lower life satisfaction, and higher social media

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engagement (Przybylski et al., 2013, pp. 1841–1848). Later studies associate FoMO with problematic smartphone use, social media addiction tendencies, online vulnerability, passive browsing, depressive symptoms, rumination, and problematic Facebook or internet-communication use (Baker et al., 2016, pp. 275–282; Blackwell et al., 2017, pp. 69–72; Buglass et al., 2017, pp. 248–255; Dempsey et al., 2019; Elhai et al., 2016, pp. 509–516; Wegmann et al., 2017, pp. 33–42). Systematic and meta-analytic literature confirms that FoMO is a consistent correlate of problematic internet and social networking site use, while causal direction and contextual moderators warrant caution (Akbari et al., 2021, pp. 879–900; Fioravanti et al., 2021; Tandon et al., 2021, pp. 782–821).

The urgency of the issue is not reducible to the amount of time spent online. Large-scale digital well-being research warns against simplistic screen-time explanations, as associations between digital technology use and adolescent well-being can be small and variable when measured broadly (Orben & Przybylski, 2019, pp. 173–182). More recent reviews similarly emphasize that the impact of social media depends on user characteristics, patterns of engagement, platform affordances, content, social context, and existing vulnerabilities (Keles et al., 2020, pp. 79–93; Valkenburg et al., 2022, pp. 58–68; Verduyn et al., 2017, pp. 274–302). A moralizing approach that treats social media itself as the primary enemy may overlook the deeper anxieties and relational hunger that FoMO reveals. Conversely, an uncritical embrace of digital connectivity may ignore how platform design can exploit comparison, anticipation, and social validation.

Pastoral counseling is concerned with the healing and formation of persons in the presence of God, within the life of the church, and in the concrete conditions of human suffering. Classical and contemporary pastoral care literature emphasizes holistic care, narrative listening, contextual awareness, spiritual discernment, and the integration of theological meaning with psychological insight (Clinebell & McKeever, 2011; Doehring, 2015; Lartey, 2003; Miller-McLemore, 2012). In relation to FoMO, pastoral counseling must attend to both the psychological mechanisms of anxiety and comparison and the theological questions of identity, desire, Sabbath, vocation, and communion. The congregant who cannot stop checking social media is not only violating a discipline of attention; he or she may be struggling with the implicit conviction that being unseen means being insignificant, that missing an event means losing belonging, or that another person's curated joy reveals one's own failure.

Previous research has produced substantial knowledge about FoMO as a psychological and digital-behavioral construct. However, three gaps remain. First, FoMO research is concentrated in psychology, communication, education, and information systems, leaving ecclesial and pastoral contexts underdeveloped. Second, spiritually integrated psychotherapy shows that religious and spiritual resources can be clinically relevant, but it does not specifically address FoMO as a social-media-related pastoral concern (Captari et al., 2018, pp. 1938–1951; Pearce et al., 2015, pp. 56–66; Worthington et al., 2011, pp. 204–214). Third, church-based discussions often move quickly to warnings, abstinence, or evangelistic use without a differentiated counseling framework. Congregants need a process that interprets anxiety, repairs belonging, forms wise digital habits, and protects mental health.

This article, therefore, asks: How can pastoral counseling be constructively formulated for congregants who experience FoMO due to social media? The proposed answer is an integrative pastoral counseling framework that combines psychological assessment, theological reframing, digital-habit formation, and congregational ecology. The article interprets FoMO as relational-spiritual distress intensified by digital comparison, develops a pastoral counseling model grounded in practical theology and psychological literature, and clarifies ethical limits, including referral when FoMO is connected to depression, anxiety disorders, self-harm risk, or severe functional impairment.

2. Literature Review

FoMO is best understood through the interaction of psychological needs, social comparison, affect regulation, and platform-mediated social life. Self-determination theory provides a useful foundation because it explains human motivation in terms of the basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000, pp. 227–268). Foundational FoMO research explicitly connects FoMO with lower satisfaction of these needs, suggesting that anxious online monitoring may emerge when individuals feel relationally disconnected, unsure of their agency, or uncertain of their adequacy (Przybylski et al., 2013, pp. 1841–1848). Research among college

students also links FoMO to social media engagement and academic motivation, reinforcing the idea that FoMO is not merely curiosity but a motivational condition shaped by need frustration (Alt, 2015, pp. 111–119).

Research has shown that FoMO is related to a wide range of digital behaviors. FoMO has been associated with problematic smartphone use together with anxiety, depression-related variables, and need for touch (Elhai et al., 2016, pp. 509–516). FoMO, alongside personality and attachment variables, has also been reported as a predictor of social media addiction tendencies (Blackwell et al., 2017, pp. 69–72). Online-specific FoMO and internet-use expectancies can contribute to symptoms of internet-communication disorder, especially when users expect online communication to reduce negative feelings (Wegmann et al., 2017, pp. 33–42). FoMO and rumination have further been found to mediate relations between social anxiety and problematic Facebook use (Dempsey et al., 2019). These findings suggest that FoMO is both affective and behavioral: it is felt as apprehension, but it is maintained through checking, scrolling, comparison, and anticipatory vigilance.

The social-comparison literature is especially important. Social media often presents curated fragments of other people's lives, making upward comparison frequent and emotionally potent. Passive social networking site use is more robustly linked to lower subjective well-being than active use, partly because passive browsing can provoke envy and comparison (Verduyn et al., 2017, pp. 274–302). Passive social networking site use also predicts social comparison, which is associated with FoMO and, subsequently, depressive symptoms and negative self-perceptions (Burnell et al., 2019). FoMO has likewise been linked to online vulnerability and lower self-esteem through social network site use (Buglass et al., 2017, pp. 248–255). For congregants, this means FoMO is not limited to fear of missed events; it may also involve the perception that others are more loved, more successful, more spiritually fruitful, or more socially included.

The broader literature on social media and mental health provides necessary caution. Reviews relate social media use to depression, anxiety, and psychological distress among adolescents, while noting that much evidence is cross-sectional (Keles et al., 2020, pp. 79–93). Meta-analytic evidence links problematic social media use with lower well-being and higher distress (Huang, 2022, pp. 12–33). Experimental evidence suggests that limiting social media can reduce loneliness and depression among undergraduates, although not all social media use is harmful (Hunt et al., 2018, pp. 751–768). Broad associations between digital technology use and adolescent well-being can be small, and review conclusions vary because of methodological heterogeneity (Orben & Przybylski, 2019, pp. 173–182; Valkenburg et al., 2022, pp. 58–68). A professional advisory committee, therefore, recommends a balanced view: effects depend on developmental vulnerability, content, design, and context (American Psychological Association, 2023).

Pastoral counseling literature adds a different but complementary lens. Pastoral care is framed as a ministry of healing and growth that attends to the whole person (Clinebell & McKeever, 2011). Contextual and postmodern approaches emphasize that pastoral caregivers interpret suffering through psychological, cultural, and theological lenses rather than through a single explanatory system (Doehring, 2015). Intercultural attentiveness is also important because social media practices differ across generations, classes, genders, ethnicities, church cultures, and local norms (Lartey, 2003). Practical theology links lived experience, ecclesial practice, and theological reflection (Miller-McLemore, 2012). In this perspective, FoMO should be read as lived theology: it reveals how a congregant imagines the self, community, value, time, and the presence of God.

The evidence based on spiritually integrated psychotherapy also matters. Meta-analyses indicate that religious and spiritually accommodated therapies can be beneficial when they are ethically aligned with client beliefs and clinical competence (Captari et al., 2018, pp. 1938–1951; Worthington et al., 2011, pp. 204–214). Religiously integrated cognitive behavioral therapy works with clients' own religious resources rather than imposing external doctrine (Pearce et al., 2015, pp. 56–66). Spiritual and religious competencies have also been proposed for psychologists, underscoring the need for humility, skill, and ethical clarity when incorporating religious resources into care (Vieten et al., 2013, pp. 129–144).

The gap, then, is not the absence of FoMO research or pastoral counseling theory. The gap is the lack of a constructive integration of FoMO into congregational life that offers pastors a structured, ethically careful approach. FoMO requires pastoral counseling because it touches identity, belonging, desire, attention, and spiritual practice. It also requires psychological caution

because it can co-occur with depression, social anxiety, problematic internet use, sleep disruption, and impaired daily functioning. A strong pastoral response must therefore avoid two extremes: reducing FoMO to sin or reducing it to a neutral psychological mechanism detached from spiritual formation.

3. Proposed Method

This article uses a constructive integrative literature review as its research design. The study is not a field investigation and does not report interviews, surveys, church statistics, or experimental data. It is conceptual research that synthesizes established academic literature in order to propose a pastoral counseling framework for congregants experiencing FoMO due to social media.

The sources of data consist of peer-reviewed journal articles on FoMO, problematic social media use, smartphone use, social comparison, digital well-being, and mental health; academic books and chapters in pastoral care, Christian counseling, practical theology, and spiritually integrated psychotherapy; and one professional advisory document from the American Psychological Association. Priority was given to publications from 2013 to 2023 because FoMO, as an academic construct, was consolidated following foundational work on its motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates (Przybylski et al., 2013, pp. 1841–1848). Older works were included only when they function as theoretical or pastoral-care foundations, such as self-determination theory and major pastoral counseling texts.

The literature collection followed a relevance-based purposive sampling approach rather than a systematic review protocol. The guiding search concepts were FoMO (fear of missing out), social media, problematic social media use, social comparison, passive browsing, smartphone use, pastoral counseling, pastoral care, spiritual integration, and practical theology. Sources were selected according to four criteria: conceptual relevance to FoMO or pastoral counseling; academic credibility; contribution to psychological, theological, or ethical interpretation; and suitability for constructing a counseling framework. Popular blogs, unsupported opinion pieces, and non-scholarly materials were excluded.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, psychological findings were coded conceptually around need frustration, comparison, affect regulation, problematic use, and mental health risk. Second, pastoral and theological sources were interpreted through the lens of identity, belonging, community, spiritual practice, contextual listening, and ethical care. Third, the two bodies of literature were brought into a constructive correlation: psychological mechanisms were not simply baptized with theological language, and theological claims were not treated as decorative additions to clinical advice. Instead, the analysis asked how each field clarifies and limits the other.

Validity in this conceptual study is pursued through source triangulation, theoretical coherence, and negative-case sensitivity. The article compares foundational research, meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and pastoral-theological sources; tests the proposed model against empirical FoMO patterns and pastoral-care aims; and acknowledges mixed evidence rather than claiming that all social media use is harmful, all FoMO is pathological, or pastoral intervention is sufficient without referral.

Ethically, this article treats congregants as persons rather than problems. It avoids fabricating empirical findings and explicitly states that no new human-subject data were collected. The proposed model respects confidentiality, informed consent, pastoral competence, and referral boundaries. When congregants show signs of severe anxiety, depression, self-harm ideation, trauma activation, addiction-level impairment, or risk to others, pastoral counseling should not function as a substitute for licensed mental health care. Pastoral counseling is presented here as a spiritually grounded and relationally informed form of care that can collaborate with professional services when needed.

4. Results and Discussion

FoMO as Relational-Spiritual Distress Rather Than Simple Overuse

The first analytic finding is that FoMO should be interpreted as relational-spiritual distress rather than as simple overuse of social media. The difference is important. If FoMO is reduced to excessive time online, the pastoral response will focus mainly on prohibition, time limits, or accountability. These measures may be useful, but they can miss the deeper structure of the problem. FoMO involves an anxious relationship to belonging. The congregant does not merely

want information; they fear exclusion from meaningful participation. The emotional question behind the behavior is often not "What is happening online?" but "Am I included, valued, wanted, and significant if I am not there?"

Self-determination theory helps explain this dynamic. Human beings need autonomy, competence, and relatedness for healthy motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000, pp. 227–268). FoMO intensifies when these needs are frustrated. A congregant with weak relatedness may interpret every untagged photo as rejection. A congregant with diminished competence may interpret others' achievements as evidence of personal failure. A congregant with diminished autonomy may feel compelled to remain available, responsive, and visible even when the behavior undermines rest. Lower need satisfaction has been associated with higher FoMO, and subsequent studies have continued to show how FoMO connects with problematic use patterns and affective distress (Akbari et al., 2021, pp. 879–900; Elhai et al., 2016, pp. 509–516; Fioravanti et al., 2021; Przybylski et al., 2013, pp. 1841–1848).

The social-comparison mechanism sharpens the problem. Social media does not display life neutrally. It often displays selected, edited, and socially rewarded moments. Passive browsing exposes users to other people's celebrations, ministries, family moments, travel, purchases, bodies, achievements, and relationships without the ordinary background of boredom, conflict, exhaustion, and ambiguity. Passive use of social networking sites is more consistently associated with lower well-being than active use (Verduyn et al., 2017, pp. 274–302). A more specific pathway has also been proposed in which passive use relates to social comparison, FoMO, and depressive symptoms (Burnell et al., 2019). For congregants, this comparison may take explicitly spiritual forms: "Their ministry is growing; mine is not," "Their family looks blessed; mine is struggling," or "Everyone else seems to have spiritual joy; I must be failing."

This interpretation does not deny personal responsibility. Rather, it locates responsibility inside a more realistic account of formation. FoMO is a habit of attention and a symptom of desire: it reveals what the person has learned to fear, pursue, and measure. A pastoral counselor who hears FoMO only as a lack of discipline may shame the congregant, intensifying the insecurity that fuels the behavior. A more constructive approach listens for the relational narrative beneath the digital practice, including the posts, conflicts, loneliness, fatigue, disappointments, or perceived rejection that trigger vigilance.

This reading also protects against technological determinism. Social media platforms amplify FoMO, but they do not create every human longing from nothing. People have always feared exclusion, compared themselves with others, and sought signs of belonging. The novelty is the scale, speed, and visibility of comparison. The feed makes absence visible. The story function makes time-limited participation feel urgent. The notification makes attention externally interruptible. The algorithm makes emotionally salient content recurrent. Pastoral counseling, therefore, must address both the inner life of the congregant and the digital architecture that trains vigilance.

Theologically, FoMO can be interpreted as a distorted longing for communion. Christian anthropology understands persons as relational, called into communion with God and neighbor. The problem is not the desire for belonging but the mediation of belonging through metrics, images, and instantaneous social confirmation. Pastoral counseling should reorder rather than crush this desire, helping congregants distinguish genuine community from endless visibility, faithful presence from anxious availability, and spiritual hunger from compulsive comparison.

A Constructive Pastoral Counseling Response: Assessment, Reframing, Practice, and Referral

The second analytic finding is that pastoral counseling for FoMO requires a structured process that integrates assessment, theological reframing, practical habit formation, and referral. Pastoral counseling should begin with assessment, not advice. The counselor needs to understand the frequency and context of social media use, emotional triggers, physical consequences, relational impact, spiritual meanings, and functional impairment. Questions may include: What situations make you check your phone? What emotions arise after scrolling? Which accounts or platforms intensify comparison? What do you fear losing if you disconnect? How does social media affect prayer, worship, sleep, work, study, family, or ministry? Such assessment is consistent with pastoral care as contextual listening and spiritual interpretation (Doehring, 2015; Lartey, 2003).

The assessment should include risk awareness. FoMO can be ordinary and transient, but it can also be associated with depression, anxiety, rumination, problematic smartphone use, and

impaired daily functioning (Baker et al., 2016, pp. 275–282; Dempsey et al., 2019; Huang, 2022, pp. 12–33). Pastors should be attentive to signs that exceed ordinary pastoral counseling, such as persistent depressive symptoms, panic, suicidal ideation, severe sleep disturbance, compulsive inability to function, substance misuse, eating disorder symptoms, trauma reactions, or self-harm behavior. In such cases, pastoral care should continue as spiritual support but must be linked with qualified mental health professionals.

After assessment, theological reframing becomes central. The goal is not to impose doctrinal slogans on psychological distress but to help the congregant reinterpret identity, worth, time, and belonging in light of faith. FoMO tells the person, "You are what you attend, display, and receive from others." Pastoral counseling can challenge this implicit gospel of visibility by retrieving a more stable account of identity before God and within the body of Christ. The congregant is invited to distinguish between being connected and being known, between being noticed and being loved, and between being updated and being present. This reframing is consistent with spiritually integrated counseling literature, which supports the ethical use of clients' own religious resources when relevant to healing and meaning-making (Captari et al., 2018, pp. 1938–1951; Pearce et al., 2015, pp. 56–66; Worthington et al., 2011, pp. 204–214).

The reframing must become a practice. FoMO is not healed by insight alone because it is sustained by repeated behavior. Pastoral counseling can, therefore, include digital habit formation. This may involve planned periods without social media, managing notifications, delaying checking, unfollowing accounts that repeatedly trigger envy, replacing passive scrolling with intentional communication, journaling emotional reactions after use, and setting Sabbath-like boundaries around rest, worship, meals, sleep, and family presence. Limiting social media use has been shown to improve some well-being outcomes among undergraduates (Hunt et al., 2018, pp. 751–768). However, pastoral counseling should frame limitation not as punishment but as liberation for attention, prayer, embodied relationships, and vocational focus.

One practical pastoral tool is the "desire audit." Instead of beginning with "How many hours were you online?" the counselor asks, "What were you seeking when you opened the app?" Answers may include reassurance, distraction, belonging, affirmation, comparison, curiosity, anger, entertainment, ministry ideas, or avoidance of loneliness. The audit links behavior with desire and spiritual formation. It then supports replacement practices such as contacting a trusted friend, praying the examen after a triggering scroll, joining a small group, practicing gratitude for another person's joy, or serving concretely when comparison turns into resentment.

Another tool is narrative reconstruction. FoMO often depends on a story: "If I am absent, I will be forgotten," "If others advance, I am falling behind," or "If I do not respond quickly, I will lose relational access." Pastoral counseling invites the congregant to identify, test, and rewrite these stories. This is compatible with spiritually sensitive cognitive approaches without requiring pastors to practice psychotherapy beyond their competence. A pastor can help a congregant notice distorted spiritual narratives and replace them with truthful, community-confirmed narratives of belovedness, finitude, vocation, and grace. Christian counseling literature emphasizes attention to prayer, Scripture, confession, and relational wisdom, while also requiring humility about professional limits (McMinn, 2011; Tan, 2011).

The pastoral counselor must also address shame. Many congregants already know their online behavior is unhealthy, but knowledge has not produced freedom. Shame may make them hide the behavior, intensify self-condemnation, or present a spiritualized image of self-control. The counselor should normalize the struggle without trivializing it: social media platforms are designed to capture attention, and many people find it difficult to disengage. Normalization opens space for repentance, understood not as humiliation but as turning toward life. Pastoral care can then support a non-performative form of change, where progress is measured by increased freedom, presence, honesty, and love rather than by a flawless record of digital abstinence.

Finally, the process should include relational accountability rather than surveillance-based accountability. The goal is not to create another monitoring system that reproduces the anxiety of being watched. A trusted pastoral companion or small group can ask about attention, sleep, prayer, embodied friendships, and emotional responses to social media. It should be consent-based, confidential, and compassionate rather than punitive.

Congregational Ecology and Digital Discipleship as Preventive Care

The third analytic finding is that pastoral counseling for FoMO cannot remain only individual. Individuals experience FoMO, but social environments sustain it. A congregation that unintentionally rewards visibility, platform performance, ministry comparison, and constant

availability may intensify the very anxiety it seeks to heal. Therefore, pastoral counseling must be connected to congregational ecology and digital discipleship. The church should ask not only how to counsel anxious users but also how its own practices form or deform digital desire.

Congregational ecology refers to the relational, liturgical, communicative, and leadership patterns that shape members' experience of belonging. If members discover events primarily through exclusive group chats, if ministries celebrate only visible personalities, if leaders model constant online availability, or if church culture equates public busyness with spiritual maturity, FoMO becomes ecclesially reinforced. The church may have taught them that spiritual relevance is tied to visibility and immediacy. Practical theology requires this move from private distress to communal practice (Miller-McLemore, 2012).

Digital discipleship provides a constructive alternative. It does not mean rejecting technology or using social media only for religious content. It means forming disciples who can inhabit digital spaces with discernment, love, restraint, and truthfulness. This includes teaching about attention as a spiritual resource, Sabbath as resistance to compulsive availability, gratitude as resistance to envy, confession as resistance to curated perfection, and embodied fellowship as resistance to disincarnated comparison. Healthy social media use requires attention to developmental needs, content, context, and active adult guidance (American Psychological Association, 2023). Churches can adapt this insight by helping families, youth groups, and adult congregants develop communal norms for digital wisdom.

Congregational practices can therefore reinforce pastoral counseling. Churches can create phone-free moments in worship and small groups as hospitality to undivided presence. Leaders can communicate events through accessible channels that do not require constant monitoring of a single platform. Testimonies can include struggle and ordinary faithfulness rather than only success narratives. Youth and young adult ministries can teach social comparison literacy, curated presentation, algorithmic amplification, and emotional triggers. Congregations can also encourage intentional rather than compulsive posting.

This communal approach also helps pastoral counselors avoid individualizing what is partly structural. FoMO research needs multidisciplinary frameworks that attend to motives, outcomes, and contextual differences (Tandon et al., 2021, pp. 782–821). In pastoral terms, multidisciplinary attention includes platform design, family patterns, peer cultures, church communication, socioeconomic pressures, and theological imagination. A young congregant may experience FoMO not only because of weak self-control but because educational, church, friendship, and consumer cultures all communicate that opportunities must be seized immediately and displayed publicly. Pastoral counseling that ignores these pressures may unintentionally blame the sufferer.

Digital discipleship should also be intercultural and intergenerational. An intercultural approach to pastoral care warns against assuming that a single digital practice has the same meaning for everyone (Lartey, 2003). For some older congregants, social media may reduce isolation. For adolescents, it may be a primary peer environment. For church workers, it may be tied to ministry visibility and institutional expectations. For economically marginalized members, seeing others' prosperity may intensify shame or aspiration. For migrants or geographically distant members, social media may preserve vital family and church connections. Pastoral counseling must therefore ask what social media does in the person's life before prescribing what should be removed.

A congregational model also clarifies leadership responsibility. Pastors and ministry leaders often model the digital habits that members imitate. If leaders post ministry life as constant success, respond at all hours, or measure fruitfulness primarily through engagement metrics, the congregation may absorb a theology of visibility. Leaders can instead model digital humility: resting without apology, posting without self-exaltation, honoring unseen service, and refusing to treat metrics as spiritual validation.

The constructive contribution of this article is therefore a four-dimensional framework. First, pastoral counseling interprets FoMO as need frustration and relational-spiritual distress. Second, it uses assessment and theological reframing to uncover the stories beneath compulsive checking. Third, it forms digital wisdom through embodied community and spiritual disciplines. Fourth, it situates individual care within congregational ecology and referral ethics. This framework addresses FoMO without becoming anti-technology, anti-psychology, or naively therapeutic; it becomes a ministry of discernment that redirects the desire for belonging toward truthful communion.

5. Comparison

Compared with previous FoMO studies, this article does not add new survey data, effect sizes, or platform-specific behavioral measurements. Its contribution lies in constructive integration. Psychological studies clarify that FoMO is associated with need frustration, passive browsing, social comparison, problematic smartphone use, and distress (Akbari et al., 2021, pp. 879–900; Fioravanti et al., 2021; Przybylski et al., 2013, pp. 1841–1848). Social media reviews warn against simplistic causal claims and emphasize differentiated patterns of use (Orben & Przybylski, 2019, pp. 173–182; Valkenburg et al., 2022, pp. 58–68; Verduyn et al., 2017, pp. 274–302). Spiritually integrated psychotherapy shows that religious resources can be responsibly included in care when aligned with client values and delivered competently (Captari et al., 2018, pp. 1938–1951; Vieten et al., 2013, pp. 129–144). Pastoral care literature provides holistic, contextual, and theological accounts of human suffering (Clinebell & McKeever, 2011; Doehring, 2015).

What distinguishes the present article is the explicit construction of a pastoral counseling response to FoMO in congregational life. The article does not treat FoMO only as a mental-health symptom, a media-use problem, or a moral failure. It interprets FoMO as a relational-spiritual distress pattern intensified by social media and then proposes a framework that links assessment, identity reframing, practice formation, communal ecology, and referral. The strength of this approach is that it is usable by pastors without pretending that pastors are clinical specialists. It also respects psychological evidence without reducing pastoral care to technique.

The limitations are clear. Because the article is conceptual, it cannot claim effectiveness in reducing FoMO among congregants. It does not compare denominational cultures, age groups, socioeconomic contexts, or specific platforms. It also does not provide a validated pastoral assessment instrument. These limitations are not minor. They indicate the need for empirical studies to test whether pastoral counseling interventions, digital discipleship curricula, or congregational practices can reduce FoMO-related distress and improve spiritual, relational, and mental health outcomes.

6. Conclusions

This article has argued that pastoral counseling for congregants experiencing FoMO due to social media should be integrative, ethically bounded, and spiritually formative. FoMO is not just excessive screen time. It is a need-frustration cycle in which the desire for belonging, significance, and participation becomes attached to digital visibility, comparison, and immediacy. The literature links FoMO to social media engagement, problematic smartphone and internet use, passive browsing, social comparison, depressive symptoms, rumination, and lower well-being. However, broad claims about social media harm must remain nuanced.

The purpose of the study was to formulate a constructive pastoral counseling approach. The proposed framework answers that purpose through four movements: assessment of digital patterns and emotional triggers; theological reframing of identity, belonging, time, and desire; practical digital habit formation; and congregational ecology that supports embodied community and digital discipleship. The article contributes theoretically by linking FoMO research with pastoral theology and spiritually integrated counseling. It contributes practically by offering pastors a non-moralizing way to counsel congregants whose social media use has become anxious, comparative, and spiritually distracting.

The study is limited by its conceptual design. It does not produce empirical data, test outcomes, or represent congregational diversity through field research. Further studies should develop and evaluate pastoral counseling protocols, examine FoMO across age groups and church cultures, and explore collaboration between pastors, counselors, psychologists, families, and ministry leaders. Future research should examine how church communication, leadership modeling, and ministry metrics contribute to or reduce FoMO. Pastoral counseling can move congregants from digital vigilance toward discernment, comparison toward gratitude, and anxious visibility toward embodied communion.

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