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Research Article

Pastoral Counseling Strategies for Congregants Experiencing Faith Degradation Due to Secular Digital Content

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Abstract: This article examines pastoral counseling strategies for congregants whose Christian faith is weakened by sustained exposure to secular digital content. The problem is not framed as a deterministic claim that digital media directly destroys faith, but as a practical-theological concern: algorithmic personalization, secular moral imaginaries, online doubt communities, entertainment habits, and fragmented attention can reshape belief, practice, belonging, and trust in church authority. The study aims to construct a counseling model that is theologically responsible, psychologically informed, and pastorally usable in local churches. Using a conceptual qualitative design, the article synthesizes literature from digital religion studies, mediatization theory, adolescent and emerging-adult religiosity, media psychology, religious coping, and spiritually integrated counseling. The analysis identifies three main findings. First, faith degradation should be diagnosed as a layered process involving cognitive doubt, affective dryness, moral dissonance, ritual discontinuity, and communal displacement. Second, pastoral counseling must move beyond prohibition toward discerning digital habits, rebuilding spiritual attention, and restoring relational trust. Third, an integrated strategy is proposed: assessment of digital-spiritual formation, narrative and theological reconstruction, communal re-embedding, and digital rule-of-life practices. The article concludes that pastoral counseling in the digital age should function as a ministry of interpretive accompaniment rather than merely corrective instruction.

Keywords: Digital Religion; Faith Degradation; Media Ecology; Pastoral Counseling; Religious Deconversion.

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1. Introduction

Digital media has become a decisive environment of contemporary formation. It is no longer simply a channel through which believers receive information; it is a social, affective, and moral ecology in which identities are negotiated, authorities are compared, and everyday attention is disciplined. Reports from around the world before 2024 already indicated the scale of this environment. DataReportal reported 5.16 billion internet users and 4.76 billion social media users worldwide in early 2023, while Indonesia alone had 212.9 million internet users and 167 million social media users in the same period (DataReportal, 2023a, 2023b). These figures do not prove religious decline, but they clarify why churches can no longer treat the digital sphere as peripheral to pastoral care. Congregants now encounter sermons, apologetics, anti-religious critiques, lifestyle influencers, political religion, sexual ethics debates, entertainment, and algorithmically curated secular moral narratives in the same handheld space.

The object of this article is the pastoral problem of faith degradation among congregants who are repeatedly shaped by secular digital content. The term faith degradation is used cautiously. It does not refer only to formal apostasy, nor does it equate doubt with sin or intellectual inquiry with rebellion. It refers to a gradual weakening of Christian belief, practice, affective attachment, moral confidence, and communal belonging. In pastoral settings, this

may appear as reduced prayer, loss of desire for worship, distrust of church teaching, fatigue with Scripture, moral dissonance, hidden consumption patterns, or a sense that the Christian life has become less plausible than the digital alternatives encountered daily. The phenomenon overlaps with deconversion, but it is broader than deconversion because many congregants remain institutionally present while inwardly detached.

Research on digital religion has established that religion and digital media are not separate domains. Heidi A. Campbell shows that digital religion studies have shifted from asking whether religion can exist online to examining how online and offline religious practices co-construct one another (Campbell, 2017). Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria similarly argue that digital religion must be understood as religious practice within digital media culture, not merely as religion transferred into digital formats (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Stig Hjarvard develops the theory of the mediatization of religion to explain how media institutions not only represent religion but also increasingly influence the forms of authority, narrative, and plausibility through which religion is encountered (Hjarvard, 2011). These studies help understand digital religion, but they do not, by themselves, offer a pastoral counseling strategy for congregants whose faith has been weakened by secular content ecosystems.

The literature on digital media and mental health also cautions against simplistic causal claims. Amy Orben and Andrew K. Przybylski found only small negative associations between digital technology use and adolescent well-being across large datasets (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Candice L. Odgers and Michaeline R. Jensen argue that public anxieties about digital media often exceed the level of causal certainty supported by the evidence (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). At the same time, Betul Keles et al. identify associations between social media use, depression, anxiety, psychological distress, social comparison, and approval seeking (Keles et al., 2020). Patti M. Valkenburg et al. likewise show that the relationship between social media and adolescent mental health is complex, heterogeneous, and not reducible to screen time alone (Valkenburg et al., 2022). The pastoral implication is not that every digital practice is harmful, but that digital environments can intensify vulnerability when they interact with loneliness, identity conflict, anxiety, moral confusion, and fragile belonging. The Office of the Surgeon General similarly urges greater attention to social media's risks for youth mental health without reducing the issue to a single mechanism (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023).

Previous studies on religious development and deconversion also provide important clues. Małgorzata Łysiak et al. found that parental care and social support function as protective factors against adolescent deconversion processes (Łysiak et al., 2020). Sam A. Hardy et al. further show that declines in religious practice and religious importance across adolescence can predict later religious deidentification (Hardy et al., 2023). Lene Arnett Jensen emphasizes that religiosity, spirituality, and secularism develop culturally; they are learned within social worlds rather than merely chosen as private opinions (Jensen, 2021). These findings suggest that digital secular content affects faith not simply by presenting arguments against Christianity, but by reorganizing the social and cultural conditions in which faith feels believable, livable, and emotionally supported.

The research gap is therefore practical and integrative. Existing scholarship explains digital religion, mediatization, adolescent religiosity, social media risks, and spiritually integrated therapy, yet local churches still lack a concise counseling framework for congregants whose faith has been thinned by secular digital exposure. Many church responses remain reactive: warning against screens, condemning secular media, offering isolated apologetic answers, or prescribing devotional routines without diagnosing the deeper formation of desire, attention, narrative, and belonging. Such responses may be partially valid, but they can fail when congregants are not merely uninformed but disoriented, ashamed, lonely, intellectually unsettled, or emotionally overidentified with secular digital communities.

The research problem addressed in this article is: What pastoral counseling strategy can constructively address faith degradation associated with secular digital content without fabricating empirical data, demonizing technology, or reducing faith struggles to individual weakness? The proposed solution is a conceptual, practical-theological strategy that joins digital-spiritual assessment, empathic narrative counseling, theological reconstruction, communal re-embedding, and digital rule-of-life formation. The contribution is threefold: it clarifies faith degradation as a multidimensional pastoral construct; it translates interdisciplinary findings into counseling practice; and it proposes a church-based strategy that treats digital media as a formative ecology rather than merely a source of temptation. The article proceeds with a literature review, a proposed conceptual method, three analytical findings, a comparison with prior research, and conclusions for theory, practice, and future inquiry.

2. Literature Review

The first theoretical lens is digital religion. The field rejects a simple divide between online and offline religion. Campbell argues that digital media can extend traditional authority, create alternative religious publics, expose believers to rival narratives, and produce new forms of individualized spiritual practice (Campbell, 2017). Campbell and Tsuria further explain that digital religion should be understood as religious practice within digital media culture rather than as religion merely transferred into online formats (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme offers an important contribution through her study of U.S. and Canadian millennial adults, showing that digital religion neither universally replaces in-person religion nor is irrelevant to it (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2022). Digital religious practices often coexist with offline religious socialization, while passive consumption of digital content is more common than active religious posting. This matters pastorally because secular digital content often competes not only with formal doctrine, but also with habits of passive attention. A congregant may not intentionally reject the faith; rather, Christian imagination may be displaced by thousands of repeated images, jokes, stories, and moral cues that make secular assumptions feel normal.

The second lens is mediatization. Stig Hjarvard argues that media become agents of social and cultural change, including in the religious sphere (Hjarvard, 2011). In this frame, secular digital content is not only a set of ideas but a patterned environment with its own grammar: speed, novelty, personalization, visibility, emotional intensity, and algorithmic reinforcement. Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing, and Lada A. Adamic show that social media can expose users to diverse content while also shaping selective exposure through platform-based interaction (Bakshy et al., 2015). Massimo Cinelli et al. similarly demonstrate that different social media platforms can facilitate echo-chamber dynamics through patterns of interaction and information diffusion (Cinelli et al., 2021). Seth R. Flaxman, Sharad Goel, and Justin M. Rao also show that online news consumption can simultaneously increase exposure to diverse perspectives and intensify ideological segregation (Flaxman et al., 2016). Pastoral counseling must therefore ask not only what the congregant watched, but how the platform trained the congregant to attend, compare, react, and interpret. A young adult whose feed repeatedly associates freedom with sexual autonomy, authenticity with institutional distrust, and intelligence with skepticism may slowly experience Christian obedience as psychologically implausible before any explicit doctrinal rejection occurs.

The third lens concerns religious development, doubt, and deconversion. The literature shows that faith change is often gradual and relational. Małgorzata Łysiak et al. conceptualize deconversion as a process involving faith abandonment, moral criticism, emotional suffering, loss of transcendental experience, and withdrawal from community (Łysiak et al., 2020). Their findings on parental care and social support suggest that warm relational embeddedness can protect against abandonment of faith. Sam A. Hardy et al. demonstrate that decreases in religious practices and religious importance during adolescence can precede religious deidentification in young adulthood (Hardy et al., 2023). Lene Arnett Jensen further frames religiosity and secularism as culturally developmental realities (Jensen, 2021). These studies correct a narrow apologetic model of pastoral care. Arguments matter, but attachment, practices, social support, moral identity, and cultural belonging also shape faith degradation.

The fourth lens is media psychology and well-being. The evidence does not support crude technological determinism. Amy Orben and Andrew K. Przybylski show that broad measures of digital technology use account for only a small proportion of the variance in adolescent well-being (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Candice L. Odgers and Michaeline R. Jensen warn against panic-driven conclusions regarding digital media and youth mental health (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). However, the more relevant pastoral question is not whether screen time alone causes faith degradation, but how digital practices interact with a person's vulnerabilities and spiritual formation. Betul Keles, Niall McCrae, and Annmarie Grealish associate social media use with depression, anxiety, psychological distress, comparison, and approval seeking (Keles et al., 2020). Patti M. Valkenburg, Adrian Meier, and Ine Beyens note that reviews of social media effects are inconsistent, partly because effects depend on individuals, contexts, and types of use (Valkenburg et al., 2022). David Smahel et al. also emphasize that young people's digital lives contain both opportunities and risks (Smahel et al., 2020). This balanced evidence supports a nuanced counseling response: assess patterns, meanings, and vulnerabilities rather than imposing a universal ban.

The fifth lens is pastoral and spiritually integrated counseling. The Christian counseling tradition has long insisted that spiritual distress cannot be reduced to symptoms alone.

Kenneth I. Pargament, Harold G. Koenig, and Lisa M. Perez show that religious coping includes both positive and negative forms (Pargament et al., 2000). Pargament further argues for psychotherapy that takes the sacred seriously in assessment and intervention (Pargament, 2011). Laura E. Captari et al. found in a comprehensive meta-analysis that religiously and spiritually adapted psychotherapy can be effective, especially when aligned with clients' values (Captari et al., 2018). Carrie Doehring emphasizes that Christian counseling should integrate theology, psychology, ethical sensitivity, and the person's lived story (Doehring, 2015). John Swinton and Harriet Mowat provide practical-theological support for moving from description to interpretation, normative reflection, and pragmatic action (Swinton & Mowat, 2016). The gap is that these resources rarely address secular digital content as a daily formative power requiring specific pastoral assessment and discipline.

3. Proposed Method

This article uses a conceptual qualitative design rather than field research. It is best classified as a constructive literature-based research article with a practical-theological orientation. No interviews, surveys, experiments, or observational datasets were conducted. The study, therefore, does not claim to measure the prevalence of faith degradation among Indonesian church members or to prove a causal relationship between secular content and religious decline. Its purpose is more limited but pastorally necessary: to construct a coherent counseling strategy by synthesizing reliable academic literature across digital religion, mediatization, developmental psychology of religion, media psychology, and pastoral counseling.

The data collection technique was structured literature mapping. The first stage identified literature explaining the digital environment: digital religion, online-offline religious practice, mediatization, algorithmic selection, and echo chambers. The second stage mapped literature on religious weakening: deconversion, religious deidentification, adolescent religiosity, and social support. The third stage mapped counseling literature on religious coping, spiritually integrated psychotherapy, pastoral care, Christian counseling, and the practical-theological method. The fourth stage integrated these clusters into a pastoral framework by asking what a local church counselor needs to notice, interpret, and do when a congregant reports a decline in faith after intensive engagement with secular digital content.

The analysis used thematic synthesis. Concepts were extracted from the literature and organized around recurring pastoral functions: diagnosis, interpretation, intervention, and formation. Diagnosis concerns how faith degradation is recognized without overpathologizing doubt. Interpretation concerns how secular digital content shapes plausibility, desire, attention, and belonging. The intervention concerns counseling practices needed to address cognitive, affective, moral, and communal dimensions. Formation concerns long-term habits that reconnect digital life with Christian discipleship. These themes were then refined through practical-theological reasoning, especially Osmer's fourfold Movement of describing what is going on, interpreting why it is going on, discerning what ought to be going on, and proposing how the church should respond.

Validity in this conceptual study is pursued through the triangulation of disciplines, transparency about limits, and the avoidance of fabricated evidence. The argument does not rely on invented interviews, fictive tables, or unverified statistics. Claims about digital use are restricted to public reports and peer-reviewed studies. Claims about pastoral strategy are framed as constructive proposals grounded in existing literature rather than empirical findings from a local congregation. The study also maintains conceptual modesty: secular digital content is treated as a significant formative influence, not as the only cause of faith degradation. Family dynamics, church trauma, intellectual doubt, moral conflict, psychological distress, and poor discipleship may all contribute to the same pastoral condition.

Ethically, the article assumes that pastoral counseling must protect congregants from shame-based surveillance. Digital struggles often involve hidden practices, sexuality, political polarization, envy, anger, or anti-religious content. A counselor who responds with accusation may deepen secrecy and disaffiliation. The ethical posture proposed here is consent-based, confidential, noncoercive, and spiritually accountable. Counselors should distinguish pastoral care from clinical treatment, refer congregants to licensed professionals when severe depression, anxiety, addiction, self-harm, abuse, or trauma is present, and avoid using spiritual authority to suppress honest questions. The goal is not to control digital behavior but to help congregants recover truthful agency before God, the church, and their own conscience.

4. Results and Discussion

Faith Degradation as a Layered Digital-Spiritual Process

The first major finding is conceptual: faith degradation caused or intensified by secular digital content should be treated as layered rather than singular. In pastoral conversation, weakened faith is often misread as laziness, rebellion, intellectual pride, or moral compromise. These may sometimes be present, but they are insufficient as diagnostic categories. ,\ Movement away from faith as involving intellectual, emotional, moral, experiential, and social dimensions (Łysiak et al., 2020). This multidimensional view better matches what pastors often encounter: a congregant may still affirm Christian doctrine but no longer pray; another may still attend worship but distrust church authority; another may accept biblical teaching abstractly but feel morally aligned with secular narratives of autonomy; another may be exhausted by digital comparison and unable to sustain contemplative attention.

Secular digital content functions powerfully because it repeatedly offers a rival account of the good life. It may not directly say that God does not exist. More commonly, it normalizes a world in which God is unnecessary for identity, desire, status, pleasure, ethics, and belonging. Peter L. Berger's concept of plausibility structures remains useful here because beliefs are sustained by social worlds that make them credible (Berger, 1967). Digital platforms now provide alternative plausibility structures at high speed and intimate proximity. A congregant can move within seconds from a Sunday sermon clip to cynical commentary about church hypocrisy, from Christian worship to eroticized entertainment, from devotional content to influencer narratives of self-creation. The problem is not exposure alone but repeated immersion in an environment where Christian claims are recontextualized as outdated, oppressive, naive, or emotionally less rewarding.

Stig Hjarvard's mediatization theory sharpens this point. If media are agents of cultural change, then the church cannot merely add religious content to the feed and assume the problem is solved (Hjarvard, 2011). The medium's rhythm still trains the person: fast consumption, emotional reaction, fragmented attention, and constant comparison. Heidi A. Campbell shows that online and offline religious practices interact rather than exist as separate domains (Campbell, 2017). Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria further argue that digital religion must be understood as religious practice within digital media culture, not merely as religion transferred into digital formats (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Therefore, secular digital content degrades faith not only by presenting secular propositions but by habituating the body and imagination away from practices that sustain Christian life: silence, confession, Scripture meditation, embodied worship, accountable friendship, and sacrificial service. A person trained by infinite scroll may find ordinary prayer boring, not because prayer has lost meaning, but because attention has been conditioned to novelty.

The analysis also shows that congregants' vulnerability differs. Candice L. Odgers and Michaeline R. Jensen warn against universalizing digital media effects or drawing panic-driven conclusions about youth mental health (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Amy Orben and Andrew K. Przybylski likewise show that broad measures of digital technology use account for only a small proportion of the variance in adolescent well-being (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). One believer may engage secular critique and deepen theological maturity; another may encounter the same material while isolated, anxious, or wounded by church conflict and experience rapid spiritual destabilization. The pastoral counselor should therefore assess the interaction among content type, usage pattern, emotional state, relational support, theological literacy, and church experience. Secular comedy mocking faith, atheist debate videos, influencer lifestyle content, pornography, consumerist self-help, and ideological political feeds do not affect faith in identical ways. Their pastoral significance depends on what they promise, what wound they touch, what practice they displace, and what identity they reinforce.

This layered diagnosis leads to a practical implication: counseling should begin with mapping rather than correction. The counselor can ask: What types of secular content are most formative? When are they consumed? What emotions precede and follow consumption? What Christian practices have declined? What beliefs feel less plausible? What community ties have weakened? What moral tensions have intensified? Such questions transform the session from accusation to discernment. They also allow the counselor to distinguish cognitive doubt from affective numbness, moral resistance from unresolved trauma, and digital overuse from deeper loneliness. Faith degradation is then addressed as a spiritual formation issue embedded in media ecology, not merely as an information deficit.

Pastoral Counseling as Interpretive Accompaniment and Theological Reconstruction

The second finding concerns the counseling posture. Pastoral counseling for digitally shaped faith degradation should function as interpretive accompaniment. This means that the counselor walks with the congregant in naming how digital narratives have interpreted the self, God, church, morality, suffering, and freedom. Prohibition has a limited place, especially where content is exploitative or compulsive, but prohibition alone rarely reconstructs faith. If a congregant's imagination has been persuaded that secular autonomy is the only path to authenticity, a command to reduce screen time may appear as another proof that Christianity is restrictive. The deeper counseling task is to help the person identify the digital liturgies that have been forming desire and then reconsider them in light of the gospel.

Narrative work is central. Carrie Doehring emphasizes that pastoral care listens to lived stories and the theological meanings embedded within them (Doehring, 2015). Many congregants experiencing faith degradation carry hidden narratives: "The church is unsafe," "God is silent," "Christian morality is anti-human," "I am more honest online than in church," or "Secular people seem freer and kinder." These narratives may contain partial truth, distortion, pain, or legitimate critique. A defensive counselor may rush to correct them. An interpretive counselor first explores their origin, emotional force, and relation to digital content. Only then can theological reconstruction occur. The aim is not indoctrination but truthful re-narration: helping the congregant see how Christian faith can address the same longings for freedom, justice, intimacy, and authenticity without surrendering to secular reductionism.

Theological reconstruction requires integration of cognitive, affective, and practical dimensions. Mark R. McMinn argues that Christian counseling must engage psychology, theology, and spirituality with humility (McMinn, 2011). Laura E. Captari et al. provide empirical support for the value of religiously and spiritually adapted therapy when congruent with clients' values (Captari et al., 2018). Kenneth I. Pargament likewise treats the sacred as a genuine dimension of human coping and healing (Pargament, 2011). Applied pastorally, this means that counseling should include space for honest doubt, lament, confession, and renewed practice. A congregant influenced by secular critique may need apologetic engagement; a congregant numbed by entertainment may need attention training; a congregant wounded by institutional hypocrisy may need lament and justice-oriented pastoral response; a congregant caught in sexualized digital patterns may need accountability, trauma-sensitive care, and embodied community.

Religious coping theory helps distinguish constructive from destructive spiritual responses. Kenneth I. Pargament, Harold G. Koenig, and Lisa M. Perez identify diverse forms of religious coping, including collaborative, benevolent, punitive, and spiritual-discontent patterns (Pargament et al., 2000). A congregant whose digital exposure has intensified anger toward God or shame about failure may use negative religious coping: perceiving God as rejecting, interpreting struggle as punishment, or abandoning prayer because of guilt. Pastoral counseling should not intensify this pattern through condemnation. Instead, it should invite collaborative coping: the person learns to bring digital temptations, doubts, and desires into prayer, theological reflection, and accountable relationships. The counselor's role is to mediate a more truthful image of God as holy and merciful, not to replace divine agency with pastoral control.

This approach also reframes apologetics. Secular digital content often operates through short-form content: clipped debates, memes, outrage threads, and emotionally charged stories. Responding only with counter-content can keep the congregant trapped in the same reactive economy. A more constructive strategy uses apologetics within spiritual direction. The counselor may help the congregant identify genuine questions, separate intellectual doubt from moral injury, read high-quality theological sources slowly, and practice patience with unresolved complexity. The goal is not to win every online argument but to rebuild a resilient Christian imagination. In this sense, pastoral counseling becomes a school of interpretation: it teaches congregants to examine what digital content loves, fears, mocks, promises, and conceals, and then to discern those narratives in the light of Scripture and the Christian community.

An Integrated Strategy: Assessment, Re-Embedding, and Digital Rule of Life

The third finding is constructive: churches need an integrated counseling strategy rather than isolated advice. The strategy proposed here has four movements. The first is a digital-spiritual assessment. The counselor maps the congregant's digital ecology, spiritual practices, emotional triggers, theological questions, and relational supports. The second is narrative and theological reconstruction, as described above. The third is communal re-embedding. The

fourth is a digital rule of life. These movements are both sequential and cyclical, because new digital habits will expose deeper wounds and raise new theological questions over time.

Communal re-embedding is essential because the literature on deconversion and religious development consistently points to the protective role of social support. Malgorzata Łysiak et al. found that low social support was associated with stronger tendencies toward faith abandonment and moral criticism (Łysiak et al., 2020). Sam A. Hardy et al. showed that declining religious practice and religious importance can precede later religious deidentification (Hardy et al., 2023). Digital secular content becomes more powerful when the congregant's offline faith community is weak, judgmental, intellectually shallow, or emotionally unavailable. A counseling strategy must therefore reconnect the person with trustworthy Christian relationships: mature mentors, small groups, intergenerational friendships, worship participation, service, and safe spaces for questions. This does not mean forcing public disclosure. It means rebuilding the plausibility of faith in relation.

A digital rule of life translates counseling insight into habit. Borrowing from Christian spiritual formation, a rule of life is not legalism but a structured pattern that protects desire for God. For digitally induced faith degradation, the rule should include at least five practices. First, content auditing: the congregant identifies which feeds, creators, genres, and times of use weaken faith, intensify envy, normalize sin, or produce contempt. Second, attention fasting: the congregant establishes bounded periods without algorithmic media, especially before prayer, sleep, worship, and relational conversation. Third, replacement rather than mere removal: empty time is filled with Scripture, embodied activity, service, reading, or face-to-face fellowship. Fourth, dialogical processing: difficult secular claims are brought into mentoring conversations instead of being privately absorbed. Fifth, missional digital presence: the congregant learns to use digital media intentionally for learning, witness, care, and creativity rather than passive consumption.

This rule must be individualized. Patti M. Valkenburg, Adrian Meier, and Ine Beyens support a differential rather than uniform understanding of media effects, showing that digital media effects depend on persons, contexts, and types of use (Valkenburg et al., 2022). A university student researching secular philosophy, a teenager struggling with pornography, a professional immersed in political outrage, and a new believer addicted to lifestyle influencers require different plans. The counselor should avoid turning digital discipline into a metric of holiness. The key question is not simply "How many hours?" but "What is this practice doing to love of God and neighbor?" This question integrates theology with psychological realism. It also prevents churches from confusing digital minimalism with discipleship. A person can reduce screen time and remain spiritually proud; another can use digital tools wisely within a mature life of prayer and service.

The proposed strategy also requires congregational capacity. Pastoral counselors cannot carry the whole burden if sermons, small groups, youth ministry, and family discipleship ignore digital formation. Churches should teach digital discernment as part of catechesis: how algorithms shape attention, how secular narratives define freedom, how entertainment moralizes desire, how outrage corrodes charity, and how Christian practices cultivate a different imagination. Pew Research Center notes that religious apps and websites are already used for prayer, Scripture, learning, and online groups (Pew Research Center, 2023). This suggests that the church's digital response should not be rejection but disciplined integration. Digital media can support faith when embedded within embodied discipleship, pastoral oversight, and theological depth.

This integrated model answers the research problem by avoiding two extremes. It rejects the naive optimism that digital media is neutral and harmless. It also rejects reactionary pessimism that secular content automatically destroys faith. The pastoral task is discernment: to identify how particular digital practices shape particular persons in particular communities, and then to guide those persons toward renewed attention, truthful interpretation, and accountable belonging. The strategy is constructive because it does not merely defend the church against secular culture; it equips congregants to inhabit digital culture without surrendering Christian identity.

5. Comparison

Compared with previous research, the main contribution of this article lies in its effort to translate and integrate several bodies of scholarship into a practical pastoral counseling framework. Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria have shown that digital religion cannot be understood through a rigid separation between online and offline religious life; both domains

interact and reshape one another (Campbell, 2017; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme further demonstrates that, among millennial adults in the United States and Canada, digital religion is often connected to broader patterns of religious socialization rather than simply replacing in-person religious participation (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2022). These studies are valuable for mapping the sociological character of digital religion. This article extends their insight by asking a more pastoral question: how should churches respond when digital environments do not merely transform religious practice, but quietly weaken faith, belonging, and Christian imagination?

In relation to media psychology, this article avoids both moral panic and careless minimization. Amy Orben and Andrew K. Przybylski, Candice L. Odgers and Michaeline R. Jensen, Betul Keles, Niall McCrae, and Annmarie Grealish, and Patti M. Valkenburg, Adrian Meier, and Ine Beyens show, in different ways, that the effects of digital media are complex, uneven, and dependent on users, contexts, motivations, and patterns of use (Keles et al., 2020; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2022). The present article adopts this complexity rather than reducing faith degradation to screen time or content exposure alone. Its practical advantage is that it helps pastoral counselors examine the interaction between secular content, personal vulnerability, interpretive habits, emotional condition, and communal support. In actual counseling situations, these factors often overlap; a congregant's spiritual struggle is rarely caused by one isolated video, platform, or argument.

Compared with deconversion research, this article narrows the discussion toward pastoral intervention. Małgorzata Łysiak et al. and Sam A. Hardy et al. help explain why Movement away from faith is often relational, developmental, and gradual rather than purely intellectual (Hardy et al., 2023; Łysiak et al., 2020). Building on this insight, the article argues that pastoral counseling should not rely only on doctrinal correction or apologetic answers. It must also rebuild the relational plausibility of faith through mentoring, small groups, embodied worship, intergenerational friendship, and safe spaces for doubt. Faith weakened by secular digital content often needs to be re-embedded in a living Christian community before it can be intellectually stabilized.

Compared with the literature on spiritually integrated counseling, this article adds a more specific account of secular digital content as a formative ecology. Kenneth I. Pargament, Laura E. Captari et al., Carrie Doehring, and Mark R. McMinn provide strong foundations for integrating spirituality, theology, psychology, and pastoral care (Captari et al., 2018; Doehring, 2015; McMinn, 2011; Pargament, 2011). However, these works do not offer a detailed pastoral strategy for cases in which secular digital content gradually reshapes attention, desire, moral imagination, and religious belonging. The distinctive contribution of this article is therefore its proposal of a digital-spiritual assessment, narrative reconstruction, communal re-embedding, and digital rule of life as a coherent counseling response.

The limitation of this article is that its argument remains conceptual. It does not claim to present field data, measured intervention outcomes, or verified congregational case studies. Its framework still requires empirical testing through interviews, pastoral case analysis, congregational action research, or comparative studies across local church contexts. This is especially important for Indonesian Christian communities, where digital culture, family structures, denominational traditions, youth formation, and public religious life may shape faith degradation in ways that differ from North American or European contexts.

6. Conclusions

This article has argued that pastoral counseling for congregants experiencing faith degradation through secular digital content must be diagnostic, interpretive, relational, and formative. The main findings are threefold. First, faith degradation is a layered digital-spiritual process involving cognitive doubt, affective dryness, moral dissonance, ritual discontinuity, and communal displacement. Second, pastoral counseling should operate as interpretive accompaniment and theological reconstruction, not merely prohibition or information correction. Third, an integrated strategy is needed: digital-spiritual assessment, narrative reconstruction, communal re-embedding, and a digital rule of life.

The article answers its research objective by constructing a practical-theological model that is sensitive to digital religion studies, media psychology, religious development, and spiritually integrated counseling. The theoretical contribution is the clarification of faith degradation as a multidimensional pastoral construct situated within digital media ecology. The practical contribution is a counseling framework that local churches can adapt without inventing data or relying on moral panic. For pastors and counselors, the central task is to help

congregants discern how digital content forms desire and plausibility, and then to rebuild attention, theological imagination, and belonging within the body of Christ.

The study has limitations. It is a conceptual literature-based article and does not include field interviews, congregational observation, or quantitative measurement. It also uses international literature that may not fully capture Indonesian ecclesial dynamics, Pentecostal-charismatic spirituality, interreligious contexts, or local patterns of secular digital consumption. Future research should test and refine the proposed model through qualitative case studies, pastoral action research, youth and young adult interviews, and comparative studies across church traditions. Further work should also examine how churches can create digitally wise communities that neither withdraw from contemporary culture nor surrender discipleship to algorithmic formation.

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