

Research Article

## Pastoral Accompaniment for Congregants Experiencing Relational Crisis Due to Digital Communication

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**Abstract:** Digital communication has become part of the everyday fabric of congregational life. While it enables connection and pastoral accessibility, it also introduces relational tensions through divided attention, interpretive ambiguity, social comparison, online jealousy, concealed messaging, and the weakening of face-to-face reconciliation. This conceptual research article examines pastoral accompaniment for Christian congregants who experience relational crises caused or intensified by digital communication. The study aims to construct a pastoral framework that is theologically grounded, psychologically informed, ethically responsible, and usable in church ministry. Using an integrative literature review, the article synthesizes scholarship on digital religion, computer-mediated communication, relational conflict, phubbing, technoference, online counseling ethics, and practical theology. The synthesis indicates that digital relational crisis should not be reduced to excessive screen use. It is more accurately understood as a crisis of presence, attention, trust, boundaries, and interpretive charity. The article proposes pastoral accompaniment as a hybrid care that combines attentive presence, relational discernment, digital boundary formation, covenantal communication practices, and ethically bounded use of online media. It concludes that churches need to move beyond reactive counseling toward preventive digital discipleship that forms congregants in truthful speech, faithful presence, confidentiality, and relational accountability.

**Keywords:** Digital Communication; Digital Religion; Pastoral Accompaniment; Pastoral Care; Phubbing.

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### 1. Introduction

Digital communication is no longer an external tool added to human relationships; it is part of the ordinary ecology in which relationships are initiated, maintained, intensified, and sometimes damaged. Congregants communicate through messaging applications, social media, video calls, livestreamed worship, online small groups, and informal digital networks. These practices create new possibilities for pastoral access and mutual support, especially for people who are geographically distant, physically limited, or constrained by work schedules. At the same time, they create new pastoral problems: conflict escalation through text messages, jealousy triggered by online visibility, secrecy around private chats, emotional withdrawal in face-to-face settings, and public shaming through social media posts. The pastoral problem is therefore not merely technological. It concerns the formation of persons and communities under conditions of permanent connectivity.

The urgency of this topic is evident in the growing body of scholarship showing that digital media are not neutral instruments in human relationships. They shape attention, intimacy, trust, conflict, and the moral texture of everyday communication. The work of Joseph B. Walther has shown that computer-mediated communication should not be understood as automatically weak, superficial, or impersonal. Under certain conditions, mediated interaction may intensify disclosure, selective self-presentation, and perceived intimacy, but those same

dynamics can also heighten projection, ambiguity, and misunderstanding (Walther, 1996, pp. 3–43). In a similar direction, Nancy K. Baym argues that personal connection in digital culture is shaped not only by the technical features of platforms but also by the social meanings, expectations, and relational practices that users attach to them (Baym, 2015). This point is crucial for pastoral care because congregants rarely experience digital signs as merely technical events. A delayed reply may be felt as rejection; a public comment may be interpreted as betrayal; a hidden chat may be read as secrecy; and a phone placed on the table during conversation may communicate emotional absence even when no explicit rejection is intended.

Recent empirical studies strengthen this concern. Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein show that the mere presence of a mobile phone during face-to-face conversation can reduce perceived conversation quality and relational closeness (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013, pp. 237–246). Mariek M. P. Vanden Abeele, Marjolijn L. Antheunis, and Alexander P. Schouten likewise demonstrate that mobile messaging during conversation affects impression formation and interaction quality (Vanden Abeele, Antheunis, & Schouten, 2016, 562–569). Studies on phubbing further indicate that ignoring another person in favor of a smartphone weakens perceived communication quality, belongingness, and relationship satisfaction (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018, pp. 304–316; Roberts & David, 2016, pp. 134–141). Brandon T. McDaniel and Sarah M. Coyne describe this phenomenon as technoference, namely, technology-related interruptions in couple interaction, which is associated with lower personal and relational well-being (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016, pp. 85–98). These findings are significant for congregational ministry because relational injuries brought into pastoral counseling are increasingly intertwined with device habits, response expectations, private messaging, and the visibility of online interaction.

Nevertheless, the problem should not be framed in terms of technological panic. Large-scale and review-based scholarship warns against simplistic claims that digital technology is inherently destructive to human well-being. The relationship between digital media and well-being is often modest, heterogeneous, and context-dependent, with effects varying by mode of use, individual vulnerability, and social environment (Odgers & Jensen, 2020, pp. 336–348; Orben & Przybylski, 2019, pp. 173–182; Valkenburg, 2022, p. 101294). Digital platforms can also support relational maintenance, especially when users employ them actively, intentionally, and meaningfully rather than passively or compulsively (Billedo, Kerkhof, & Finkenauer, 2015, 152–157; Verduyn et al., 2017, pp. 274–302). The pastoral task, therefore, is not to condemn digital communication itself, but to discern how particular digital habits either serve love, truth, accountability, and presence or produce suspicion, comparison, impulsive reaction, secrecy, and emotional withdrawal.

Digital religion studies add another layer of urgency. Contemporary religious life increasingly unfolds across online and offline spaces, making pastoral care inseparable from the digital environments in which congregants communicate, worship, learn, and seek support. Heidi A. Campbell explains that networked religion reshapes religious authority, identity, community, and practice in ways that cannot be reduced to institutional adaptation or technological convenience (Campbell, 2012, pp. 64–93). Heidi A. Campbell and Giulia Evolvi further argue that digital religion should be interpreted as a lived intersection between emerging technologies and religious practice rather than as a separate virtual sphere detached from embodied life (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020, pp. 5–17). During the COVID-19 pandemic, churches in various contexts relied on virtual worship, online fellowship, and mediated pastoral contact to sustain religious life when physical gatherings were restricted (Bryson, Andres, & Davies, 2020, 360–372; Chow & Kurlberg, 2020, pp. 298–318). However, much of the discussion on digital church has concentrated on worship delivery, evangelism, institutional adaptation, and online community formation. Less sustained attention has been given to pastoral accompaniment for congregants whose ordinary relationships are wounded by digital communication.

This article addresses that gap by asking how pastoral accompaniment can be constructed for congregants who experience relational crisis caused or intensified by digital communication. More specifically, it examines how pastoral care should interpret digital relational wounds, what theological and ethical principles should guide pastoral response, and what practical framework can help congregants rebuild trust, attention, and disciplined communication. The article positions pastoral accompaniment not as quick advice about reducing device use, but as a ministry of presence, discernment, boundary formation, and relational repair.

The proposed solution is a constructive pastoral framework that understands digital relational crisis as a crisis of presence, attention, trust, boundaries, and meaning-making. This framework integrates communication studies, psychology of digital media, digital religion, online care ethics, and practical theology. The contribution of the article is threefold. First, it

translates empirical insights into pastoral categories: phubbing, technoference, social media jealousy, and digital ambiguity. Second, it clarifies ethical boundaries for hybrid pastoral care in digital environments. Third, it proposes a formative model of digital discipleship centered on attentional, interpretive, and covenantal repair. The article proceeds by reviewing the relevant literature, explaining the integrative review method, presenting three analytical findings, comparing the contribution with prior studies, and concluding with theoretical and practical implications for congregational ministry.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature relevant to this study emerges from five intersecting fields: computer-mediated communication, digital relational conflict, digital religion, pastoral theology, and the ethics of mediated care. These fields are brought together because relational crises in the digital age cannot be explained adequately through a single disciplinary lens. It involves technological affordances, psychological interpretation, embodied relationships, moral habits, ecclesial life, and pastoral responsibility.

The first field explains why digital communication can both strengthen and destabilize relationships. Joseph B. Walther develops the hyperpersonal model of computer-mediated communication, arguing that mediated interaction may become unusually intimate because senders can selectively present themselves, receivers may idealize limited cues, and asynchronous communication allows messages to be carefully composed (Walther, 1996, pp. 3–4). This model is significant because it shows that digital communication is not necessarily shallow. It may deepen disclosure and connection, yet it may also magnify projection, insecurity, fantasy, and misinterpretation. Richard L. Daft and Robert H. Lengel add another important perspective through media richness theory, which explains that communication media differ in their capacity to transmit social cues, reduce ambiguity, and handle equivocal situations (Daft & Lengel, 1986, pp. 554–571). In pastoral terms, this means that short text messages may be effective for logistical coordination but inadequate for conflict, apology, grief, confession, or reconciliation, where tone, timing, facial expression, and embodied presence matter.

The second field examines device-related relational disruption. Phubbing has become a useful concept because it names a common relational injury that often appears minor but accumulates over time. James A. Roberts and Meredith E. David show that partner phubbing is associated with conflict over smartphone use and lower relationship satisfaction (Roberts & David, 2016, pp. 134–141). Varoth Chotpitayasunondh and Karen M. Douglas demonstrate that phubbing reduces perceived communication quality, belongingness, and relational satisfaction (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018, pp. 304–316). Brandon T. McDaniel and Sarah M. Coyne describe related disruptions through the concept of technoference, referring to technology-based interruptions that interfere with couple interaction and weaken relational well-being (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016, pp. 85–98). David A. Sbarra, Julia L. Briskin, and Richard B. Slatcher further interpret smartphone use as a possible evolutionary mismatch because human bonding depends on responsiveness, attention, and embodied cues, while smartphones continuously invite partial presence (Sbarra, Briskin, & Slatcher, 2019, 596–618). For pastoral care, these findings indicate that relational crisis may arise not only from hostile words, betrayal, or explicit conflict, but also from repeated micro-injuries of distraction, neglect, and divided attention.

The third field concerns social media, jealousy, comparison, and surveillance. Digital platforms can support relational maintenance, particularly for people separated by distance. Cristina J. Billedo, Peter Kerkhof, and Catrin Finkenauer show that social networking sites may help sustain romantic relationships across geographical distance when used for meaningful relational maintenance (Billedo, Kerkhof, & Finkenauer, 2015, 152–157). However, the visibility of online interaction also creates new forms of relational stress. Rachel A. Elphinston and Patricia Noller show that Facebook intrusion is associated with romantic jealousy and relationship dissatisfaction (Elphinston & Noller, 2011, pp. 631–635). Jesse Fox and Jennifer J. Moreland identify several relational and psychological stressors linked to Facebook use, including privacy concerns, social comparison, relational tension, and the pressure to remain constantly connected (Fox & Moreland, 2015, pp. 168–176). Anita Tandon, Amandeep Dhir, and Matti Mäntymäki synthesize research on social media-induced jealousy and show that platform affordances can intensify monitoring, suspicion, comparison, and relational insecurity (Tandon, Dhir, & Mäntymäki, 2021, 1541–1582). This literature is directly relevant to congregational care because many conflicts brought to pastors now involve digital traces such

as likes, comments, hidden followers, deleted messages, private chats, screenshots, or posts perceived as public humiliation.

The fourth field concerns digital religion and digital pastoral practice. Digital religion scholarship emphasizes that contemporary religious identity and community are formed across online and offline spaces rather than within a purely physical ecclesial setting. Campbell explains that networked religion reshapes religious authority, identity, community, and practice through flexible digital networks (Campbell, 2012, pp. 64–93). Campbell and Evolvi argue that digital religion should be understood contextually as the lived intersection of emerging technologies and religious practice, rather than as a detached virtual sphere (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020, pp. 5–17). Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and Jonas Kurlberg define digital theology as theological reflection on digital culture, digital tools, and digital practices, thereby widening the theological task beyond the mere use of technology for ministry efficiency (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero, & Kurlberg, 2019, 29–43). Kirk A. Bingaman argues that pastoral and spiritual care must take digital realities seriously because anxiety, loneliness, and relational distress increasingly unfold through mediated environments (Bingaman, 2018). This body of literature legitimizes digital pastoral concern, but it also warns that online ministry cannot be reduced to technical adaptation or platform management.

The fifth field provides theological and ethical grounding. Practical theology understands pastoral care as the attentive interpretation of lived experience before God, within concrete histories, bodies, relationships, and communities. Richard R. Osmer frames practical theological reflection through descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks, offering a disciplined way to move from lived problems toward theological response and practical action (Osmer, 2008). Carrie Doehring emphasizes that pastoral care must attend to lived narratives, power, relational context, trauma, and meaning-making (Doehring, 2015). Emmanuel Y. Lartey highlights the intercultural and contextual character of pastoral care, reminding caregivers that suffering is always interpreted within particular social and cultural worlds (Lartey, 2003). Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore situates practical theology within embodied, communal, and everyday practices, which is crucial for understanding digital conflict as more than a technical communication failure (Miller-McLemore, 2012). These frameworks are important because a digital relational crisis is never merely digital. It is embedded in family histories, moral expectations, spiritual narratives, cultural norms, gendered assumptions, church authority, and power relations.

Ethical literature on online counseling and telepsychology is also relevant by analogy. Pastors are not automatically licensed counselors, yet pastoral accompaniment through digital channels raises similar concerns about confidentiality, competence, informed consent, boundaries, documentation, and crisis response. The American Psychological Association emphasizes competence, confidentiality, informed consent, and emergency planning in telepsychology (American Psychological Association, 2013, 791–800). The American Counseling Association addresses distance counseling, technology, and social media boundaries as part of responsible professional practice (American Counseling Association, 2014). Julia Stoll, Janne A. Müller, and Manuel Trachsel identify privacy, security, professional competence, technological limitations, and emergency management as central ethical issues in online psychotherapy (Stoll, Müller, & Trachsel, 2020, 993). Giovanni Nittari et al. likewise emphasize informed consent, data protection, confidentiality, and legal responsibility in telemedicine (Nittari et al., 2020, pp. 1427–1437). Churches do not need to replicate clinical protocols in full, but they should not ignore the ethical risks of informal digital care. A pastoral message sent through an ordinary application may still contain sensitive information, spiritual vulnerability, marital conflict, or psychological distress.

The gap in the literature lies in the limited integration of these fields into a constructive pastoral model. Communication and psychology studies explain the mechanisms of digital relational harm. Digital religion studies explain the hybrid character of contemporary religious life. Pastoral theology explains presence, discernment, and communal repair. The ethical counseling literature explains the risks and boundaries of mediated care. However, congregational practice still needs a framework that brings these insights together for the concrete pastoral problem of relational crisis caused or intensified by digital communication. This article responds to that gap by constructing a model of pastoral accompaniment that is diagnostic, ethical, formative, and practically applicable in local church ministry.

### 3. Proposed Method

This study employs a qualitative conceptual design, grounded in an integrative literature review. This design was selected because the problem examined in this article spans several disciplinary boundaries and cannot be adequately addressed by a single theoretical tradition. Relational crisis caused by digital communication involves communication patterns, psychological interpretation, technological mediation, pastoral responsibility, ecclesial practice, and ethical judgment. An integrative review is therefore appropriate because it enables the researcher to synthesize empirical and theoretical literature, identify conceptual patterns, and construct a new framework for scholarly and practical use (Torraco, 2016, pp. 404–428; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005, pp. 546–553). Hannah Snyder further argues that a literature review can function as a research methodology when conducted systematically, transparently, and analytically, rather than merely as a preliminary summary of previous studies (Snyder, 2019). Accordingly, this article is positioned as a conceptual research article rather than a field study. It does not present interviews, surveys, observations, statistical measurements, or congregational case data.

The review was conducted through six procedural steps. First, the research problem was formulated: congregants increasingly experience relational crisis through digital communication, yet pastoral care frameworks have not sufficiently addressed the digital mechanisms that shape and intensify such crises. Second, the relevant literature domains were mapped. These domains include computer-mediated communication theory, phubbing and technoference studies, social media jealousy and surveillance, digital religion and digital theology, pastoral care and practical theology, and the ethics of online care. Third, literature was searched using combinations of key terms, including digital communication and relationship satisfaction, phubbing, technoference, social media jealousy, digital religion, digital pastoral care, online counseling ethics, practical theology, pastoral care, and relational repair. Fourth, sources were selected according to relevance, credibility, and scholarly quality. Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2013 and 2023 were prioritized, while older works were included only when they represented foundational theories or widely recognized methodological frameworks.

Fifth, the selected literature was coded thematically through an interpretive procedure informed by the thematic analysis approach developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 77–101). The initial codes included attention fragmentation, phone presence, delayed response, phubbing, technoference, online jealousy, social comparison, surveillance, ambiguous cues, digital embodiment, pastoral presence, confidentiality, boundary violation, referral, and covenantal communication. These codes were then organized into broader analytical categories. Sixth, these categories were synthesized into a constructive pastoral framework. The purpose of the synthesis was not to produce a universal clinical protocol, but to construct a theologically responsible and ministry-oriented framework that can assist pastors, pastoral counselors, and church leaders in interpreting and responding to relational crises shaped by digital communication.

The study's validity was established through interdisciplinary triangulation. Claims concerning relational mechanisms were examined in light of communication studies and the psychology of digital media. Claims about digital church, online religious identity, and hybrid religious practice were examined through the literature on digital religion and digital theology. Claims concerning pastoral accompaniment were grounded in practical theology and pastoral care scholarship. Claims concerning digital pastoral contact were compared with professional ethical discussions in online counseling, telepsychology, and mediated care. The review also incorporated negative-case sensitivity by including studies that warn against technological determinism and moral panic. This step was necessary because the relationship between digital media and well-being is often complex, nuanced, and context-dependent, with effects varying by use, individual vulnerability, and social environment (Odgers & Jensen, 2020, pp. 336–348).

This study involved no human participants and used no private congregational data. Formal institutional ethics approval was therefore not required. Nevertheless, ethical caution guided the writing of the article. No fabricated cases are presented, no personal pastoral stories are used as evidence, and no empirical claims are made regarding the frequency of digital relational crises in any specific congregation. Future empirical research based on this framework should apply informed consent, confidentiality safeguards, clear referral procedures, and special protection for cases involving domestic violence, coercive control, self-harm, trauma, or severe psychological distress.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### Digital Relational Crisis as a Crisis of Presence, Attention, and Trust

The first analytical finding is that relational crises caused by digital communication are best understood as crises of presence, attention, and trust rather than as problems of device use alone. Pastoral care often encounters the visible symptom: a couple fighting over messages, a family member feeling ignored, a friendship broken by online comments, a ministry team divided by chat-group conflict, or a congregant humiliated by a public post. However, beneath these symptoms lies a deeper pattern. Digital communication changes how people perceive availability, faithfulness, priority, and emotional safety. It makes relational expectations immediate, visible, and measurable. Response time, online status, seen receipts, typing indicators, likes, comments, tags, and deleted messages serve as indicators of the quality of a relationship.

This finding expands the pastoral diagnosis. A conflict over a delayed reply may not be about the delay itself; it may reveal fear of rejection, unequal emotional labor, attachment insecurity, or a history of being dismissed. A conflict over a deleted message may not be about privacy alone; it may reveal unresolved mistrust. A conflict over phone use during dinner may not be about etiquette; it may reveal a longing to be prioritized. Studies on phone presence, phubbing, and technoference show that divided digital attention affects perceived relational quality (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018). Pastoral accompaniment must therefore ask not only what happened on the screen but what the screen came to symbolize within the relationship.

This study employs a qualitative conceptual design through an integrative literature review. This design was chosen because the problem addressed in this article spans several disciplinary boundaries and cannot be adequately explained by a single theoretical tradition. Relational crisis caused by digital communication involves patterns of mediated interaction, psychological interpretation, technological affordances, pastoral responsibility, ecclesial practice, and ethical judgment. An integrative review is appropriate for this kind of inquiry because it allows the synthesis of theoretical and empirical literature to identify conceptual patterns and develop a new framework for research and practice. This methodological orientation follows the work of Richard J. Torraco, Robin Whittlemore, and Kathleen Knafl, who regard integrative review as a rigorous approach for generating conceptual clarity across diverse bodies of literature (Whittlemore & Knafl, 2005, pp. 546–553). Hannah Snyder likewise argues that a literature review may function as a research methodology when conducted systematically, transparently, and analytically rather than merely as a preliminary summary of previous studies (Snyder, 2019, pp. 333–339). Accordingly, this article is positioned as a conceptual research article rather than a field study. It does not present interviews, surveys, observations, statistical measurements, or congregational case data.

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can help pastors, pastoral counselors, and church leaders interpret and respond to relational crises shaped by digital communication.

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This study involved no human participants and used no private congregational data. Formal institutional ethics approval was therefore not required. Nevertheless, ethical caution guided the writing of the article. No fabricated cases are presented, no personal pastoral stories are used as evidence, and no empirical claims are made regarding the frequency of digital relational crises in any specific congregation. Future empirical research based on this framework should apply informed consent, confidentiality safeguards, clear referral procedures, and additional protection for cases involving domestic violence, coercive control, self-harm, trauma, or severe psychological distress.

### **Hybrid Pastoral Accompaniment as Embodied and Ethically Bounded Care**

The second analytical finding is that pastoral accompaniment for digital relational crisis must be hybrid, embodied, and ethically bounded. Digital tools can extend pastoral access, but they cannot replace the deeper work of presence, discernment, confidentiality, and communal accountability. In contemporary church life, pastors often receive messages late at night, counsel through video calls, respond to conflict screenshots, and follow up through chat applications. These practices may be pastorally useful, but they also carry risks when used without ethical boundaries.

Digital religion scholarship clarifies why hybrid pastoral care has become unavoidable. Contemporary religious life no longer unfolds only within physically gathered communities; it moves across online and offline spaces that continuously shape one another. Heidi A. Campbell argues that networked religion reshapes religious authority, identity, community, and practice through flexible digital structures and participatory forms of religious life (Campbell, 2012, pp. 64–93). Heidi A. Campbell and Giulia Evolvi further insist that digital religion should be understood as a contextual interaction between emerging technologies and lived religious practice, not as a separate virtual sphere detached from embodied life (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020, pp. 5–17). The COVID-19 pandemic experience made this hybridity more visible. Virtual worship, online fellowship, and mediated pastoral contact enabled churches to sustain religious practice and communal belonging under conditions of disruption (Bryson, Andres, & Davies, 2020, 360–372; Chow & Kurlberg, 2020, pp. 298–318). Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and Jonas Kurlberg argue that digital theology must critically examine digital culture, digital tools, and digital practices as theological realities rather than merely technical instruments (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero, & Kurlberg, 2019, 29–43). Kirk A. Bingaman likewise emphasizes that pastoral and spiritual care must engage the digital age, as anxiety, loneliness, and relational distress increasingly emerge in mediated environments (Bingaman, 2018). The church, therefore, cannot respond as though pastoral care remains untouched by technology.

Hybrid pastoral accompaniment has several practical implications. First, digital media may be appropriate for initial contact, brief encouragement, logistical coordination, follow-up, and maintaining a connection with congregants who cannot easily meet in person. A short pastoral message can communicate availability. A video call can provide timely care across distance. An online small group can reduce isolation and sustain relational support. Second, pastors must recognize the limits of mediated care. Severe relational conflict, domestic violence risk, suicidal ideation, coercive control, addiction, trauma, or acute psychological distress should not be handled casually through chat-based communication. Third, pastors need to move intentionally between communication channels. Some conversations may begin online, but they should continue through a structured pastoral meeting, a referral process, or a face-to-face encounter when the issue requires deeper discernment, a safety assessment, or embodied relational repair.

Embodiment remains essential because digital conflict often disembodies the process of relational healing. Text can carry confession, apology, and explanation, but it can also conceal posture, hesitation, tears, defensiveness, sincerity, and fear. Practical theology reminds pastoral caregivers that care is directed toward embodied persons with lived histories, social locations, and concrete communal relationships. Carrie Doehring emphasizes that pastoral care must attend to lived narratives, relational contexts, trauma, power, and meaning-making (Doehring, 2015). Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore situates practical theology within embodied, communal, and everyday practices, which is crucial for understanding digital conflict as part of ordinary relational formation rather than as a merely technical problem (Miller-McLemore, 2012). Emmanuel Y. Lartey further stresses the contextual and intercultural dimensions of pastoral care. This point is especially important because digital behavior is shaped by age, culture, family structure, gender expectations, church hierarchy, and power relations (Lartey, 2003). In congregational life, a message in a family group, a public comment by a church leader, or a screenshot circulated among members may carry social consequences far beyond the original interaction. Pastoral care must therefore attend not only to the digital act itself, but also to its embodied, communal, and spiritual effects.

Ethical boundaries are equally necessary. Online pastoral accompaniment may appear informal because pastors and congregants often communicate through ordinary digital platforms. However, informality can become dangerous when sensitive information, intimate conflict, or psychological distress is discussed without clear expectations. The American Counseling Association highlights the importance of competence, confidentiality, boundaries, and responsible use of technology in distance counseling (American Counseling Association, 2014). The American Psychological Association likewise emphasizes competence, informed consent, confidentiality, identity protection, and emergency planning in telepsychology (American Psychological Association, 2013, 791–800). Julia Stoll, Janne A. Müller, and Manuel Trachsel identify privacy, security, technological limitations, professional competence, and crisis management as recurring ethical concerns in online psychotherapy (Stoll, Müller, & Trachsel, 2020, 993). Giovanni Nittari et al. similarly emphasize informed consent, data protection, confidentiality, and legal responsibility in telemedicine (Nittari et al., 2020, pp. 1427–1437). Churches do not need to reproduce clinical protocols in full, but they should not ignore the ethical risks that arise when pastoral care takes place through digital media.

Pastoral boundaries should include clear expectations about availability, response time, confidentiality, documentation, and referral. Pastors should avoid becoming permanent emergency contacts for every relational argument conducted through chat. They should not encourage congregants to send private screenshots unless there is a clear pastoral, ethical, or safety-related reason. They should avoid functioning as secret investigators for one party against another. They should not forward, store, or discuss digital evidence casually. In cases involving abuse, threats, blackmail, sexual exploitation, coercive control, self-harm, or severe psychological distress, pastors need referral protocols and must recognize the limits of their competence.

This ethical discipline is not merely administrative; it is itself a form of pastoral care. Relational crises caused by digital communication often involve boundary violations such as unauthorized sharing, surveillance, hidden conversations, public humiliation, manipulative messaging, or the careless circulation of private information. If pastoral care responds through the same careless digital habits, it risks repeating the injury it seeks to heal. Conversely, ethically bounded care models the relational integrity that pastoral accompaniment seeks to restore. It teaches congregants that trust requires truthful limits, not unlimited access. It also protects pastors from burnout, dependency dynamics, role confusion, and the moral burden of handling complex crises beyond their pastoral competence.

### **Constructive Digital Discipleship: Attentional, Interpretive, and Covenantal Repair**

The third analytical finding is that pastoral accompaniment must move from reactive crisis management toward constructive digital discipleship. Churches often become involved after conflict has already escalated: a message has been sent, a screenshot has circulated, a partner has been humiliated, or a ministry team has split into competing chat groups. Reactive care is necessary, but it is insufficient. If congregations do not form members in wise digital communication, pastors will repeatedly treat symptoms without reshaping the habits that produce them.

This article proposes a three-part framework: attentional repair, interpretive repair, and covenantal repair. Attentional repair addresses the fragmentation caused by constant connectivity. Studies on phone presence and mobile interruption show that devices can weaken

perceived attentiveness and conversation quality (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013; Vanden Abeele et al., 2016). Pastoral accompaniment should therefore help congregants practice undivided attention. This may include device-free meals, phone-free pastoral conversations, agreed-upon times for serious discussion, digital Sabbath practices, and intentional face-to-face repair after conflict. The aim is not legalistic restriction, but relational availability. In Christian terms, attention is a practice of honoring the other as a person created before God.

Interpretive repair addresses the tendency to read digital ambiguity through fear, suspicion, resentment, or fantasy. Because digital communication lacks many embodied cues, it invites assumptions. Pastors can train congregants in interpretive charity: asking before accusing, clarifying before reacting, delaying response when emotionally flooded, and refusing to treat screenshots as the whole truth. Interpretive charity is not naivety. It does not excuse betrayal, abuse, or manipulation. Rather, it disciplines the movement from perception to accusation. It teaches congregants to distinguish what they know, what they infer, what they fear, and what needs to be discussed directly.

Covenantal repair addresses the need for explicit relational agreements. Digital conflict often occurs because expectations remain implicit. Couples, families, friends, and ministry teams may never define what counts as privacy, secrecy, availability, public respect, appropriate online friendship, or responsible group communication. Pastoral accompaniment can help people develop covenantal communication practices. These may include agreements on topics that should not be discussed in text, expectations for response time, boundaries for private messaging, norms for posting about conflict, rules for confidentiality in group chats, and procedures for seeking mediation when communication breaks down.

The language of covenant is important because it frames boundaries not as control but as mutual faithfulness. A covenantal approach differs from surveillance. Surveillance asks, "How can I monitor you so that I feel safe?" Covenant asks, "How can we practice truthfulness so that trust can grow?" Surveillance often intensifies fear; covenantal communication clarifies responsibility. In pastoral care, this distinction is crucial. Some congregants may use spiritual language to justify control, demanding access to phones or accounts in the name of honesty. Others may use privacy language to protect secrecy and avoid accountability. Pastoral discernment must hold privacy and transparency together within a framework of mutual dignity, safety, and truth.

Digital discipleship also belongs in congregational teaching. Churches often teach about speech, forgiveness, marriage, sexuality, and community, but less often about the digital practices through which these are now mediated. Digital discipleship should address truthful online speech, restraint in public posting, confidentiality in messaging groups, wise response to conflict, sexual and emotional boundaries in private chats, and the spiritual danger of comparison. This teaching should not be limited to youth ministry. Digital habits also form adults, couples, parents, ministry leaders, and pastors themselves.

The proposed framework has implications for church systems. Premarital counseling can include explicit conversation about social media boundaries, pornography, private messaging, online friendships, and device use during shared time. Family ministry can teach parents and children how to negotiate availability, privacy, and respect. Small groups can establish norms for confidentiality and conflict resolution in chat groups. Church leadership teams can avoid making sensitive decisions in emotionally charged messaging threads. Pastoral care teams can develop referral protocols for cases involving abuse, coercive control, addiction, or severe mental distress. In this way, digital discipleship becomes not an additional program but a dimension of ordinary pastoral formation.

The constructive contribution of this framework is that it treats digital relational crisis as both a wound and a formation. The wound requires compassion, listening, confession, forgiveness, and repair. The formation requires teaching, discipline, boundaries, and community norms. Without this double focus, pastoral care remains reactive. It comforts people after digital communication damages trust, but does not reshape the habits that produced the damage. A constructive pastoral approach must do both: accompany the wounded and form the community in a more faithful digital presence.

## 5. Comparison

Previous studies have made important contributions to understanding digital communication and relationships. Phubbing and technoference research explains how device-related interruption can reduce communication quality and relationship satisfaction (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Roberts & David, 2016). Social

media research explains jealousy, surveillance, comparison, and privacy stress (Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Fox & Moreland, 2015; Tandon et al., 2021). Digital religion research explains the online-offline hybridity of contemporary religious life (Campbell, 2012; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Pastoral theology explains presence, care, discernment, and contextual practice (Doehring, 2015; Osmer, 2008).

This article differs by integrating those domains into a pastoral framework for congregational care. Its contribution is not a new empirical dataset but a constructive synthesis. It argues that pastoral accompaniment should interpret digital relational crisis through presence, attention, trust, boundaries, and covenantal communication. The strength of this approach is its interdisciplinarity and its practical orientation for church ministry. It avoids technological determinism by recognizing both benefits and harms of digital communication. It also avoids pastoral reductionism by treating digital habits as psychologically, relationally, ethically, and spiritually significant.

The approach gives pastors a diagnostic vocabulary beyond the vague language of “screen addiction,” clarifies ethical limits in online pastoral contact, and shifts the church from crisis response to formative discipleship. Nevertheless, the framework remains limited by its conceptual design. It has not yet been tested through congregational interviews, pastoral case studies, or action research, and it requires contextual adaptation across cultures, denominations, and age groups.

## 6. Conclusions

This article examines pastoral accompaniment for congregants experiencing relational crises arising from digital communication. The conclusion is that such crises should not be reduced to excessive technology use. They involve deeper disruptions of presence, attention, trust, boundaries, and meaning-making. Digital communication can sustain relationships, but it can also intensify ambiguity, jealousy, surveillance, comparison, emotional avoidance, and public conflict.

The objective of the article was to construct a pastoral framework through an integrative literature review. The synthesis produced three major findings. First, a digital relational crisis is a crisis of presence, attention, and trust. Second, pastoral accompaniment must be hybrid, embodied, and ethically bounded. Third, churches need constructive digital discipleship focused on attentional, interpretive, and covenantal repair. These findings address the research problem by offering a theological, interdisciplinary, and practical model for congregational ministry.

The theoretical contribution lies in connecting digital religion, communication theory, relational psychology, online ethics, and pastoral theology. The practical contribution lies in giving pastors and churches a framework for diagnosis, accompaniment, and formation. Pastors can use this model to identify digital conflict patterns, guide relational repair, teach digital boundaries, and develop ethical protocols for online pastoral contact. Churches can use it to integrate digital discipleship into premarital counseling, small-group norms, family ministry, leadership communication, and pastoral care systems.

The study is limited by its conceptual and non-empirical design. It does not provide field data from congregants or pastors. Future research should test the framework through qualitative interviews, pastoral case analysis, congregational surveys, and action research in local churches. Further studies should examine digital relational crisis among youth, married couples, church leaders, and intergenerational families. The future of pastoral care will not be less digital. The urgent task is to make digital presence more truthful, attentive, ethical, and deeply shaped by Christian love.

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